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## Japanese Mothers and *Obentō*: The Lunch Box as Ideological State Apparatus

Japanese nursery school children, going off to school for the first time, carry with them a boxed lunch (*obentō*) prepared by their mothers at home. Customarily these *obentō* are highly crafted elaborations: a multitude of miniporitions artistically designed and precisely arranged in a container that is sturdy and cute. Mothers tend to expend inordinate time and attention on these *obentō* in efforts both to please their children and to affirm that they are good mothers. Children at nursery school are taught they must consume their entire meal according to school rituals.

Packing food in an *obentō* is an everyday practice of Japanese. *Obentō* are sold at train stations, catered for special meals, carried to work, and sold as fast food. Adoption of the *obentō* at the nursery school level may seem only natural to Japanese and unremarkable to outsiders, but I argue in this chapter that the *obentō* is invested with a gendered state ideology. Overseen by the authorities of the nursery school institution, which is linked to, if not directly monitored by, the state, the practice of the *obentō* situates the producer as a woman and mother and the consumer as a child of a mother and a student of a school. Food in this context is neither casual nor arbitrary. Eaten quickly in its entirety by the student, the *obentō* must be fashioned by the mother so as to expedite this chore for the child. Both mother and child are being watched, judged, and constructed; and it is only through their joint effort that the goal can be accomplished.

I use Louis Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatuses (1971) to frame my argument, briefly describing how food is coded as a cultural and aesthetic apparatus in Japan and what authority the state holds over schools in Japanese society. Thus situating the parameters within which the *obentō* is regulated and structured in the nursery school setting, I will examine the practice both of making and eating *obentō* within the context of one nursery school in Tokyo. As an anthropologist and mother of a child who attended this school for fifteen

months, I base my analysis on my observations, discussions with other mothers; daily conversations and an interview with my son's teacher; examination of *obento* magazines and cookbooks; participation in school rituals, outings, and Mother's Association meetings; and the multifarious experiences of my son and myself as we faced the *obento* process every day.

Although *obento*s as a routine, task, and art form of nursery school culture are embedded with ideological and gendered meanings that the state indirectly manipulates, the manipulation is neither total nor totally coercive. Pleasure and creativity for both mother and child are also products of the *obento* process.

### Cultural Ritual and State Ideology

As anthropologists have long understood, not only are the worlds we inhabit symbolically constructed, but also our cultural symbols are endowed with, or have the potential for, power. How we see reality, in other words, is how we live it. So the conventions by which we recognize our universe are also those by which all of us assume our place and behavior within that universe. Culture is, in this sense, doubly constructive: constructing both the world for people and people for specific worlds.

The fact that culture is not necessarily innocent and power, not necessarily transparent has been revealed by much theoretical work conducted both inside and outside the discipline of anthropology. The scholarship of the neo-Marxist Louis Althusser (1971), for example, has encouraged the conceptualization of power as a force that operates in ways that are subtle, disguised, and accepted as everyday social practice. Althusser differentiated between two major structures of power in modern capitalist societies. The first he called (repressive) state apparatuses (SAs), institutions, such as the law and police, that are sanctioned by a repressive state to wield and manage power through the threat of force (1971:143–145).

Contrasted with this is a second structure of power—the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). These are institutions that have some overt function other than political or administrative: mass media, education, health and welfare, for example. More numerous, disparate, and functionally polymorphous than the SAs, the ISAs exert power not primarily through repression but through ideology. Designed and accepted as having another purpose—to educate (the school system), entertain (film industry), or inform (news media)—the ISA serve not only their stated objective but also an unstated one, that of indoctrinating people into seeing the world a certain way and accepting certain identities as their own within that world (Althusser 1971:143–147).

Although both structures of power operate simultaneously and in complementarity, the ISAs, according to Althusser, are the more influential of the two in cap-

italist societies. Disguised and screened by another operation, the power of ideology in an ISA can be both more far reaching and insidious than an SA's power of coercion. Hidden in the movies we watch, the music we hear, the liquor we drink, the textbooks we read, the ISA is overlooked because it is protected, and its protection—or its alibi (Barthes 1972:109–111)—allows the terms and relations of ideology to spill into and infiltrate our everyday lives.

A world of commodities, gender inequalities, and power differentials is seen, therefore, as the natural environment, one that makes sense because it has become our experience to live it and accept it. This commonsense acceptance of a particular world is the work of ideology, and it works by concealing the coercive and repressive elements of our everyday routines but also by making those routines of the everyday familiar, desirable, and simply our own. This is the critical element of Althusser's notion of ideological power: Ideology is so potent because it becomes not only ours but us—the terms and machinery by which we structure ourselves and identify who we are.

### Japanese Food as Cultural Myth

The author in one *obento* magazine, the type of medium-sized publication that, filled with glossy pictures of *obento* and ideas and recipes for successfully recreating them, sells in the bookstores across Japan, declares: "The making of the *obento* is the one most worrisome concern facing the mother of a child going off to school for the first time" (Shufunotomo 1980: inside cover).

Another *obento* journal, this one heftier and packaged in the encyclopedic series of the prolific women's publishing firm Shufunotomo, articulates the same social fact: "First-time *obento*s are a strain on both parent and child" ("*Hajime no obento wa, oya mo ko mo kinchōshimasu*") (Shufunotomo 1981:55).

Any outside observer might ask, What is the real source of worry over *obento*? Is it the food itself or the entrance of the young child into school for the first time? Yet as one looks at a typical child's *obento*—a small box packaged with a five- or six-course miniaturized meal whose pieces and parts are artistically and neatly arranged and perfectly cut (see Figures 4.1, 4.2)—would immediately reveal, no food is "just" food in Japan. What is not so immediately apparent, however, is why a small child with limited appetite and perhaps scant interest in food is the recipient of a meal as elaborate and as elaborately prepared as any made for an entire family or invited guests?

Certainly in Japan, much attention is focused on the *obento*. It is invested with a significance far beyond that of the merely pragmatic, functional one of sustaining a child with nutritional foodstuffs. Since this investment beyond the pragmatic is

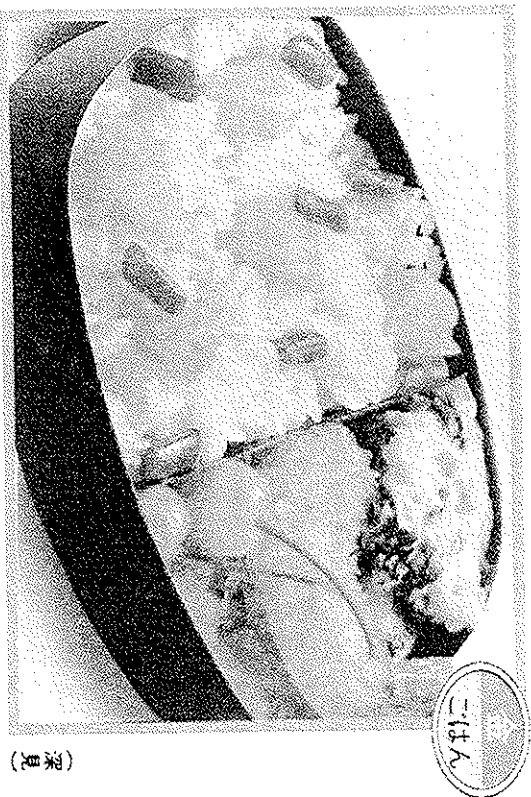


FIGURE 4.1 Example of *obentos*, signs of maternal love and labor.  
SOURCE: 365 *nichi no obentō hyakka* (Encyclopedia of lunch box for 365 days), 1981 (Tokyo: Shufunotomoshia), p. 83

true of any food prepared in Japan, it is helpful to examine culinary codes for food preparation that operate generally in the society before focusing on children's *obentō*.

As has been remarked often about Japanese food, the key element is appearance. Food must be organized and reorganized, arranged and rearranged, stylized and restylized, to appear in a design that is visually attractive. Presentation is critical not to the extent that taste and nutrition are displaced, as has been sometimes argued, but to the degree that how food looks is at least as important as how it tastes and how good and sustaining it is for one's body.

As Donald Richie points out in his eloquent and informative book *A Taste of Japan* (1985), presentational style is the guiding principle by which food is prepared in Japan, and the style is conditioned by a number of codes. One code is for smallness, separation, and fragmentation. Nothing large is allowed, so all portions are cut to be bite sized and served in tiny individual dishes.<sup>1</sup> There is no one big dinner plate with three large portions of vegetable, starch, and meat, as in American cuisine. Consequently, the eye is pulled not toward one totalizing center but away to a multiplicity of decentered parts.<sup>2</sup>

Visually, food is presented according to a structural principle not only of segmentation but also of opposition. Foods are broken up or cut up to make contrasts of color, texture, and shape. Foods are meant to oppose one another and

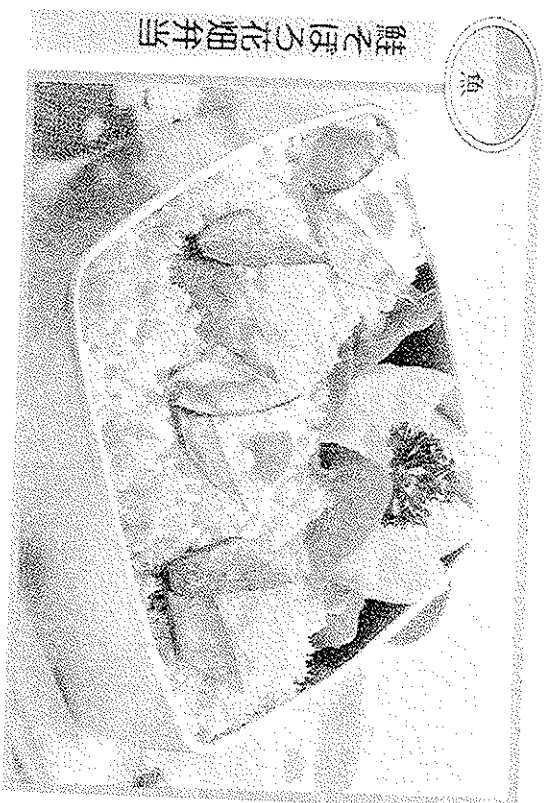


FIGURE 4.2 An *obentō* cookbook lists suggestions for the month of January. This lunch is made out of dried salmon flakes, vegetables, fruit, and rice and is constructed to look like a flower patch.

SOURCE: 365 *nichi no obentō hyakka* (Encyclopedia of lunch box for 365 days), 1981 (Tokyo: Shufunotomoshia), p. 103

clash: pink against green, roundish foods against angular ones, smooth substances next to rough ones. This oppositional code operates not only within and between the foods themselves but also between the food and the containers in which they are placed: a circular mound in a square dish, a bland-colored food set against a bright plate, a translucent sweet in a heavily textured bowl (Richie 1985:40–41).

The container is as important as what is contained, but it is really the containment that is stressed, that is, how food has been (re)constructed and (re)arranged from nature to appear, in both beauty and freshness, perfectly natural. This styling of nature is a third code by which presentation is directed; the injunction is not only to retain, as much as possible, the innate naturalness of the ingredients—by shopping daily so food is fresh and leaving much of it either raw or only minimally cooked—but also to recreate in prepared food the promise and appearance of the “natural.” As Richie writes, “The emphasis is on presentation of the natural rather than the natural itself. It is not what nature has wrought that excites admiration but what man has wrought with what nature has wrought” (1985:11).

This naturalization of food is rendered in primarily two ways. First, nature is constantly hinted at and appropriated through decorations that serve as seasonal reminders, such as a maple leaf in the fall or a flower in the spring; through

the food itself, such as in-season fruits and vegetables; and through season-coordinated dishes such as glassware in the summer and heavy pottery in the winter. The other device, to some degree the inverse of the first, is to accentuate and perfect the preparation process to such an extent that the food appears not only to be natural but more nearly perfect than nature ever could be. This is nature made artificial. Thus, by naturalization, nature is not only taken in by Japanese cuisine but taken over.

It is this ability both to appropriate "real" nature (the maple leaf on the tray) and to stamp the human reconstruction of that nature as "natural" that lends Japanese food its potential for cultural and ideological manipulation. It is what Barthes calls a second-order myth (1972:114-117). A second-order myth is created when a practice, or "language" in Barthes's terms, is taken over by some interest or agenda in order to serve a different end. For example, people commonly send roses to lovers and consume wine with dinner; a mother makes a practice of cleaning up after her child. These practices serve individual, pragmatic ends. They constitute a "first order of language," or a "language-object," again in Barthes's terms. A second order of language (or a "metalinguage" or "second-order semiological system") is created when the florist who sells roses, the liquor companies who market wine, or conservative politicians who campaign for a gendered division of labor with women kept at home promote such practices for their own ends. Thus what is practical or individual becomes politicized. As Barthes points out, the primary meaning is never lost. Rather, it remains and stands as an alibi, the cover under which the second, politicized meaning can now hide. Roses sell better, for example, when lovers view them as a vehicle to express love rather than as the means by which a company stays in business.

At one level, food is just food in Japan—the medium by which humans sustain their nature and health. Yet Japanese cuisine carries other meanings that in Barthes's terms are mythological. One of these is national identity: Food is appropriated as a sign of the culture. To be Japanese is to eat Japanese food, as so many Japanese confirm when they travel to other countries and cite the greatest problem they encounter as the absence of "real" Japanese food. Stated the other way around, rice is so symbolically central to Japanese culture that many Japanese say they can never feel full until they have consumed their rice at a particular meal or at least once during the day.<sup>3</sup>

Embedded within this insistence on eating Japanese food, thereby reconfirming and reidentifying one as a member of the culture, are the principles by which Japanese food is customarily prepared: perfection, labor, small distinguishable parts, opposing segments, beauty, and the stamp of nature. Overarching all these more detailed codings are two that guide the making and ideological appropriation of the nursery school *obento* most directly: (1) there is an order to the food, a

right way to do things with everything in its place and each place coordinated with every other, and (2) the one who prepares the food takes on the responsibility of producing food to the standards of perfection and exactness that Japanese cuisine demands. Food may not be casual, in other words, and the producer may not be casual in preparing it. In these two rules is a message both about social order and the role gender plays in sustaining and nourishing that order.

### School, State, and Subjectivity

In addition to first- and second-order meanings (food as pragmatic and food as culturally coded), the rituals and routines surrounding *obentos* in Japanese nursery schools present, I suggest, a third order, manipulation. This order is installed by the school system to socialize children as well as their mothers into the gendered roles and subjectivities they are expected to assume in a political order desired and directed by the state.

In modern capitalist societies such as Japan, the school, according to Althusser, assumes the primary role of ideological state apparatus. A greater segment of the population spends longer hours and more years here than in previous historical periods. Also, education has now taken over from other institutions such as religion the pedagogical function of being the major shaper and inculcator of knowledge for the society. Concurrently, as Althusser has pointed out for capitalist modernism (1971:152,156), repression has gradually been replaced by ideology as the prime mechanism for behavior enforcement. We are influenced less by the threat of force and more by the devices that present and inform us of the world we live in and the subjectivities that world demands; thus knowledge and ideology become fused and education emerges as the apparatus for pedagogical and ideological indoctrination.

In practice, as school teaches children how and what to think, it also shapes them for the roles and positions they will later assume as adult members of the society. How the social order is organized according to gender, power, labor, and class, in other words, not only is as important as the basics of reading and writing but is transmitted through and embedded in those classroom lessons. Thus knowledge is not only socially constructed but also differentially acquired according to who one is or will be in the political society one will enter in later years. Precisely what society requires in the way of workers, citizens, and parents will be the condition determining or influencing instruction in the schools.

This latter equation, of course, depends on two factors: (1) the agreement or disagreement among different interests concerning what subject positions are desirable and (2) the power any particular interest, including the state, has in exerting

its desires on or through the system of education. In Japan's case, the state wields enormous control over the systematization of education. Through its Ministry of Education (Monbushō), education is centralized and managed by a state bureaucracy that regulates almost every aspect of the educational process. On any given day, for example, what is taught in every public school follows the same curriculum, adheres to the same structure, and is informed by textbooks from the prescribed list. Teachers are nationally screened, school boards uniformly appointed (rather than elected), and students institutionally exhorted to obey teachers given their legal authority (changing in some prefectures these days), for example, to write secret reports (*naishinsho*) that may obstruct a student's entrance into high school.<sup>4</sup>

The role of the state in Japanese education is not limited, however, to the extensive power granted to the Ministry of Education. Even more powerful is the principle of the *gakureki shakai* (literally, academic-record society) by which careers of adults are determined by the schools they attend as youth. A reflection and construction of the new economic order of postwar Japan,<sup>5</sup> school attendance has become the single most important determinant in who will achieve the most desirable positions in industry, government, and the professions. School admission is itself based on a single criterion—a system of entrance exams that determines entrance selection—and it is to the end of preparation for exams that school, even at the nursery school level, is increasingly oriented. Learning to follow directions, doing as one is told, and *ganbaru* (or working hard, never giving up; Asanuma 1987) are social imperatives that are sanctioned by the state and taught in the schools.

### Nursery School and Ideological Appropriation of the Obento

The nursery school stands outside the structure of compulsory education in Japan. Most nursery schools are private, and although attendance is not compulsory, a greater proportion of the three- to six-year-old population of Japan attends preschool than in any other industrialized nation (Tobin 1989; Hendry 1986; Boocock 1989).

Differentiated from the *hoikuen*, a preschool institution with longer hours and more like day care than school,<sup>6</sup> the *yōchien* (nursery school) is widely perceived as instructional, not necessarily in a formal curriculum but more in indoctrination to attitudes and structures of Japanese schooling. Children learn less about reading and writing than they do about how to become a Japanese student and both parts of this formula—Japanese and student—are equally stressed. As Rohlen has written, the "social order is generated" in the nursery school, first and

foremost, by a system of routines (1989:10, 21). Educational routines and rituals are therefore of heightened importance in *yōchien*, for whereas these routines and rituals may be the format through which subjects are taught in higher grades, they are both form and subject in the *yōchien*.

Although the state (through Monbushō) has no direct mandate over attendance at nursery schools, its influence at this level is nevertheless significant. First, authority over how the *yōchien* is run is in the hands of the Ministry of Education. Second, most parents and teachers see the *yōchien* as the first step to the system of compulsory education that starts in the first grade and is closely controlled by Monbushō. The principal of the *yōchien* my son attended, for example, stated that he saw his main duty as preparing children to enter more easily the rigors of public education soon to come. Third, the rules and patterns of group living (*shūdan seikatsu*), a Japanese social ideal that is reiterated nationwide by political leaders, corporate management, and educators, is first introduced to the child in nursery school.<sup>7</sup>

The entry into nursery school marks a transition both away from home and into the "real world," which is generally judged to be difficult, even traumatic, for the Japanese child (Peak 1989). The *obento* is intended to ease a child's discomfort and to allow a child's mother to manufacture something of herself and the home to accompany the child as she or he moves into the potentially threatening outside world. Japanese use the cultural categories of *soto* and *uchi*. *Soto* connotes the outside, which in being distanced and other is cold and hostile; and *uchi* identifies as warm and comfortable what is inside and familiar. The school falls initially, and to some degree perpetually, into a category of *soto*. What is ultimately the definition and location of *uchi*, by contrast, is the home, where family and mother reside.<sup>8</sup> By producing something from the home, a mother both girds and goads her child to face what is inevitable in the world that lies beyond. This is the mother's role and her gift, by giving of herself and the home (which she both symbolically represents and in reality manages<sup>9</sup>), she makes the *soto* of the school more bearable.

The *obento* comes to be filled with the meaning of mother and home in a number of ways. The first is by sheer labor. Women spend what seems to be an inordinate amount of time on the production of this one item. As an experienced *obento* maker myself, I can attest to the intense attention and energy devoted to this one chore. On the average, mothers spend twenty-five to forty-five minutes every morning cooking, preparing, and assembling the contents of one *obento* for one nursery school child. In addition, the previous day they have planned, shopped, and often organized a supper meal with leftovers in mind for the next day's *obento*. Frequently women<sup>10</sup> discuss *obento* ideas with other mothers, scan *obento* cookbooks or magazines for recipes, buy or make objects with which to



decorate or contain (part of) the *obento*, and perhaps make small food portions to freeze and retrieve for future *obentos*.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, effort alone does not necessarily produce a successful *obento*. But apart from the results, casualness is never indulged, and even mothers with children who would eat anything prepared *obentos* as elaborate as anyone else's. Such labor is intended for the child but also the mother: It is a sign of a woman's commitment as a mother and her inspiring her child to being similarly committed as a student. The *obento* is thus a representation of what the mother is and what the child should become. A model for school is inherent to what is a gift and reminder from home.

This equation is spelled out more precisely in a nursery school rule: All of the *obento* must be eaten. Though on the face of it, this rule is petty and mundane, it is taken very seriously by nursery school teachers and is one not easily conformed to by very small children. The logic is that it is time for the child to meet certain expectations. One of the main agendas of the nursery school, after all, is to introduce and indoctrinate children into the patterns and rigors of Japanese education (Rohlen 1989; Sano 1989; Lewis 1989). And Japanese education, by all accounts, is not about fun (Duke 1986).

Learning is hard work with few choices or pleasures. Even *obentos* from home stop once the child enters first grade.<sup>12</sup> The meals there are institutional, largely bland, unappealing, and prepared with only nutrition in mind. To ease a youngster into these upcoming (educational, social, disciplinary, culinary) routines, *obentos* at *yōchien* are designed to be pleasing and personal. The *obento* is also designed, however, as a test for the child. And the double meaning is not unintentional. A structure already filled with a signification of mother and home is then emptied to provide a new form, one now also written with the ideological demands of being a member of Japanese culture and a viable and successful Japanese in the realms of school and later work.

The exhortation to consume one's entire *obento*<sup>13</sup> is articulated and enforced by the nursery school teacher. The meal can be made into high drama by, for example, singing a song: collectively thanking Buddha (in the case of Buddhist nursery schools), one's mother for making the *obento*, and one's father for providing the means to make the *obento*; having two assigned class helpers pour the tea, and eating together until everyone has finished. Also, the teacher examines the children's *obentos*, making sure the food is all consumed and encouraging, sometimes scolding, children who are taking too long. Slow eaters do not fare well in this ritual because they hold up the other students, who as a peer group also monitor a child's eating. My son often complained about a child whose slowness over food meant that the others were kept inside (rather than being allowed to play on the playground) for much of the lunch period.

Ultimately and officially it is the teacher, however, whose role and authority it is to surveil food consumption and to judge the person consuming food. Her sur-

veillance covers both the student and the mother, who in the matter of the *obento* must work together. The child's job is to eat the food and the mother's, to prepare it. Hence, the responsibility and execution of one's task is not only shared but conditioned by the other. My son's teacher would talk with me daily about the progress he was making finishing his *obentos*. Although the overt subject of discussion was my child, most of what was said was directed to me and entailed what I could do in order to get David to consume his lunch more easily.

The intensity of these talks struck me at the time as curious. We had just settled in Japan and David, a highly verbal child, was attending a foreign school in a foreign language he had not yet mastered; he was the only non-Japanese child in the school. Many of his behaviors during this time were disruptive: For example, he went up and down the line of children during morning exercises, hitting each child on the head. Hamada-sensei, however, chose to discuss the *obentos*. I thought that surely David's survival in and adjustment to this environment depended much more on other factors, such as learning Japanese. Yet it was the *obento* that was discussed with such detail ("David ate all his peas today, but not a single carrot until I asked him to do so three times") and seriousness that I assumed her attention was being misplaced. The manifest reference was to box lunches, but wasn't the latent reference to something else?<sup>14</sup>

Of course, there was another message for me and my child. It was an injunction to follow directions, obey rules, and accept the authority structures of the school system. And all of these practices were embedded in and inculcated through certain rituals: In the nursery school (as in any school except such nonconventional ones as Waldorf and Montessori) and practically any social or institutional practice in Japan, activity was so heavily ritualized and ritualistic that the very form of ritual took on a meaning and value in and of itself (Rohlen 1989:21, 27-28). Both the school day and school year of the nursery school were organized by these rituals. The day, apart from two free periods, for example, was broken by definite routines—morning exercises, arts and crafts, gym instruction, singing—most of which were named and scheduled. The school year was also segmented into and marked by three annual events—Sports Day (Undōkai) in fall, the Win-Odorī in summer. Energy was galvanized by these rituals, which demanded a degree of order as well as a discipline and self-control that non-Japanese would find remarkable.

Significantly, David's teacher marked his successful integration into the school system by his mastery not of the language or other cultural skills but of the school's daily routines—walking in line, brushing his teeth after eating, arriving at school early, eagerly participating in greeting and departure ceremonies, and completing all of his *obento* on time. Not only had he adjusted to the school structure but he had also become accepted by the other children as a member of the

group. Or restated, what once had been externally enforced now became ideologically desirable; the everyday practices had moved from being alien to familiar to him, that is, from being someone else's to being his own. My American child had to become, in some sense, Japanese, and where his teacher recognized this Japanese-ness was in the daily routines such as finishing his *obento*. The lesson learned early, which David learned as well, is that not adhering to routines such as completing one's *obento* on time leads to not only admonishment from the teacher but, more importantly, rejection from the other students.

The nursery school system differentiates between the child who does and the child who does not manage the multifarious and constant rituals of nursery school. And for those who don't manage, there is a penalty the child learns to either avoid or wish to avoid. Seeking the acceptance of his peers, the student develops the aptitude, willingness, and, in the case of my son—whose outspokenness and individuality were the characteristics most noted in this culture—even the desire to conform to the highly ordered and structured practices of nursery school life. As Althusser (1971) wrote about ideology, the mechanism works when and because ideas about the world and particular roles in that world that serve other (social, political, economic, state) agendas become familiar and one's own.

Rohlen makes a similar point, that what is taught and learned in nursery school is social order. Called *shūdan seikatsu*, or group life, it means organization into a group where a person's role is determined by group membership and not "the assumption of choice and rational self-interest" (1989:30). A child learns, in nursery school, to be with others, think like others, and act in tandem with others. This lesson is taught primarily through the precision and constancy of basic routines: "Order is shaped gradually by the repeated practice of selected daily tasks . . . that socialize the children to high degrees of neatness and uniformity" (Rohlen 1989:21). Yet a feeling of coerciveness is rarely experienced by the child when three principles of nursery school instruction are in place: (1) school routines are made "desirable and pleasant" (30), (2) the teacher disguises her authority by trying to make the group the voice and unit of authority, and (3) the regimentation of the school is maintained through an attitude of "intimacy" with the students on the part of the teachers and administrators (30). In short, when the desires and routines of the school are made into the desires and routines of the child, they are made acceptable.

### Mothering as Gendered Ideological State Apparatus

The rituals surrounding the *obento*'s consumption in the school determine what ideological meanings the *obento* transmits to the child. The process of production within the home, by contrast, organizes its somewhat different ideological pack-

age for the mother. The two sets of meanings are intertwined, but the mother is faced with different expectations in the preparation of the *obento* than the child is in its consumption. At a pragmatic level, the child must simply eat the lunch, whereas the mother's job is far more complicated. The onus for her is getting the child to consume what she has made, and the general attitude is that this is far more the mother's responsibility at this transitional stage than the child's.

Much of what is written, advised, and discussed about the *obento* has the explicit aim of helping the mother prepare food that the child will eat. One magazine advises: "The first day of taking *obento* is a worrisome thing for both mother and *boku* [child]."<sup>15</sup> Put in easy-to-eat foods that your child likes and is already used to, and prepare this food in small portions" (Shufunotomo 1980:28). Filled with recipes, pictures, and ideas, the magazine heads each page with "helpful" hints:

- Easy-to-eat is step one.
- Next is being able to consume the *obento* without leaving anything behind.
- Make it in such a way that the child can become proficient in the use of chopsticks.
- Decorate and fill it with cute dreams (*kawaiinashi yume*).
- For older classes (*nenchōgumi*), make *obento* filled with variety.
- Once they've become used to it, balance foods your child likes with those they dislike.
- For kids who hate vegetables . . .
- For kids who hate fish . . .
- For kids who hate meat . . . (Shufunotomo: 28–53).

A number of principles are laced throughout cookbooks and other magazines devoted to *obento*, the *obento* guidelines issued by the school and sent home in the school flit every two weeks, and the words of Japanese mothers and teachers discussing *obento*: (1) food should be cut for easy manipulation with fingers or chopsticks, (child-size) spoons and forks, skewers, or toothpicks; (2) portions should be kept small so the *obento* can be consumed quickly and without any leftovers; (3) food that a child does not yet like should be eventually added so as to remove fussiness (*sukikini*) in food habits; (4) the *obento* should be pretty, cute, and visually changeable by presenting the food attractively and by adding non-food objects such as silver paper, foil, toothpick flags, paper napkins, cute handkerchiefs, and variously shaped containers for portions and sauces (see Figure 4.3); and (5) *obentos* should contain related items made as much as possible by the mother's own hands, including the *obento* bag (*obentobukuro*) in which the *obento* is contained.

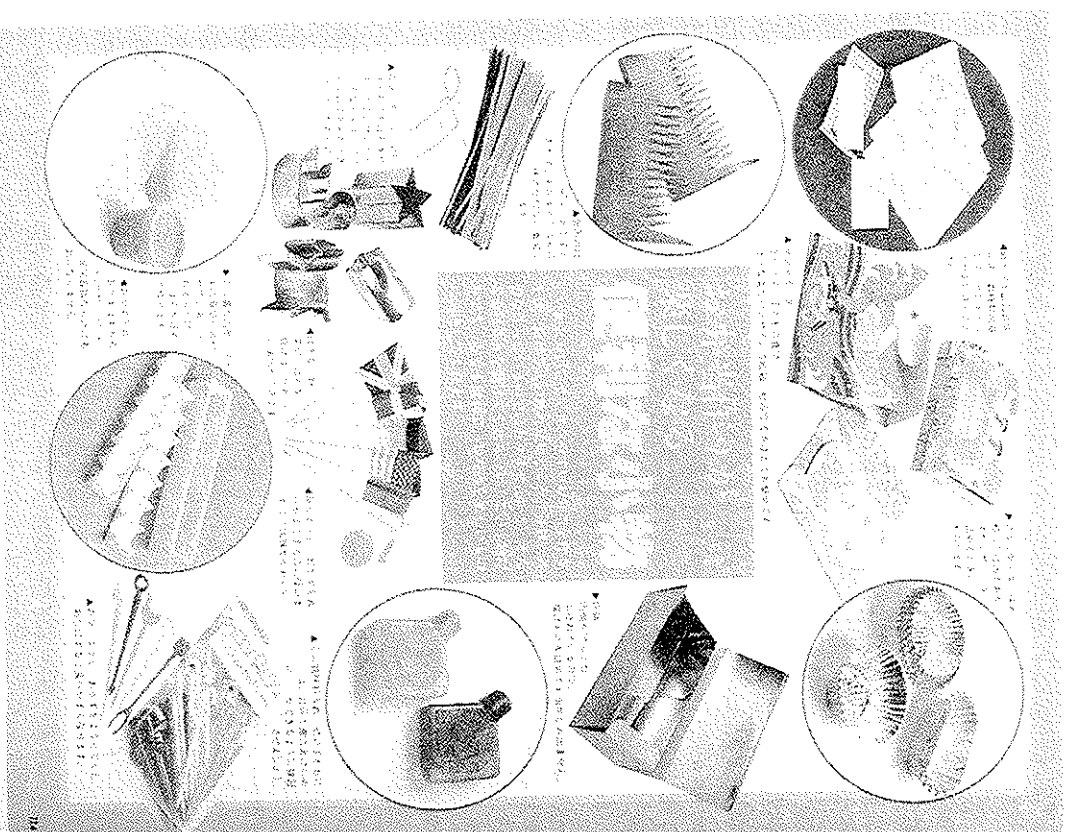


FIGURE 4.3 Stores sell a wide range of *obento* paraphernalia.  
 source: 365 *nichi no obento hyakka* (Encyclopedia of lunch box for 365 days), 1981  
 (Tokyo: Shufunotomoshia), p. 114

The strictures propounded by publications seem to be endless. In practice, I found that visual appeal was stressed by the mothers. By contrast, the directive to use *obento* as a training process—adding new foods and getting older children to use chopsticks and learn to tie the *furoshiki*<sup>16</sup>—was emphasized by those judging the *obento* at the school. Where these two sets of concerns met was, of course, in

the child's success or failure in finishing the *obento*. In my experience, the *obento* was ultimately judged based on this outcome and the mother's role in it.

The aestheticization of the *obento* is by far its most intriguing aspect for a cultural anthropologist. Aesthetic categories and codes that operate generally for Japanese cuisine are applied, though adjusted, to the nursery school format. Substances are many but petite, kept segmented and opposed, and manipulated intensively to achieve an appearance that often changes or disguises the food. Subtlety to achieve an appearance that often changes or disguises the food. As a mother insisted to me, the creation of a bear out of miniature hamburgers and rice or a flower from an apple or peach is meant to sustain a child's interest in the underlying food. Yet my child, at least, rarely noticed or appreciated the art I had so laboriously contrived. As for other children, I observed that even for those who ate with no obvious "fussinesses," mothers' efforts to create food as style continued all year long.

Thus much of a woman's labor over *obento* stems from some agenda other than that of getting the child to eat an entire lunch. The latter is certainly a consideration, and it is the rationale as well as cover for women being scrutinized by the school's authority figure—the teacher. Yet two other factors are important. One is that the *obento* is but one aspect of the far more expansive and continuous commitment a mother is expected to make for and to her child. *Kyōiku mama* (education mother) is the term given to a mother who executes her responsibility to oversee and manage the education of her children with excessive vigor. And yet this excess is not only demanded by the state even at the level of the nursery school; it is conventionally practiced by mothers. Mothers who manage the home and children, often in virtual absence of a husband and father, are considered the factor that may make or break a child as she or he advances toward that pivotal point, the entrance examinations.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, just as the *obento* is meant as a device to assist a child in the struggles of first adjusting to school, the mother is generally perceived as being the support, goad, and cushion for the child. She will perform endless and multiple tasks to assist in her child's study: sharpen pencils and make midnight snacks as the child studies; study in order to better verse herself in subjects her child is weak in, make inquiries as to what school is most appropriate for her child, and consult with her child's teachers. If the child succeeds, a mother is complimented; if the child fails, a mother feels guilty.

Thus at the nursery school level, the mother starts her own preparation for this upcoming role. Yet the jobs and energies demanded of a nursery school mother are, in themselves, surprisingly consuming. Just as the mother of an entering student is given a book listing all the preentry tasks she must complete—for example, making various bags and containers, affixing labels to all clothes in precisely the right place and with the size exactly right—she will be continually expected thereafter to attend Mother's Association meetings, accompany children on field



trips, wash the indoor clothes and shoes of her child every week, add required items to a child's bag on a day's notice, and be generally available. Few mothers at the school my son attended could afford to work even part-time or temporary jobs. Those women who did tended either to keep their outside work a secret or to be reprimanded by a teacher for insufficient devotion to their child. (See Figure 4.4.) Motherhood, in other words, is institutionalized through the child's school and such routines as making the *obento* as a full-time, stay-at-home job.<sup>18</sup>

The second factor in a woman's devotion to overelaborating her child's lunchbox is that her experience in doing thus becomes a part of her and a statement, in some sense, of who she is. Marx writes that labor is the most "essential" aspect of our species and that we are defined by what we produce (Marx and Engels 1970:71–76). An *obento*, therefore, is not only a gift or test for a child but a representation and product of the woman herself. Of course, these ideologically con- verge, as has been stated already, but I would also suggest that there is a potential disjoining. I sensed that the women were laboring for themselves apart from the school agenda regarding the *obento*. Or stated alternatively, in the role of domestic manager, mother, and wife that females in Japan are highly pressured and encouraged to assume there is, besides the endless and onerous responsibilities, also an opportunity for play. Significantly, women find play and creativity not outside their social roles but within them.

Saying this is not to deny the constraints and surveillance under which Japanese women labor at their *obentos*. Like their children at school, they are watched by not only the teacher but each other and perfect what they create, partially at least, so as to be confirmed as good and dutiful mothers in the eyes of other mothers. The enthusiasm with which they absorb this task, then, is like my son's acceptance and internalization of the nursery school routines; no longer enforced from outside, the task becomes adopted as one's own.

The making of the *obento* is, I would thus argue, a double-edged sword for women. By relishing its creation (for all the intense labor expended, only once or twice did I hear a mother voice any complaint about this task), a woman is endorsing herself in the ritualization and subjectivity (subjectation) of being a mother in Japan. She is alienated in the sense that others dictate, surveil, and manage her work. On the flip side, however, it is precisely through this work that the woman expresses, identifies, and constitutes herself. As Althusser pointed out, ideology can never be totally abolished (1971:170), which is true in the elaborations that women work on "natural" food, producing an *obento* that is creative and, to some degree, a fulfilling and personal statement.

Minami-san, an informant, revealed how both restrictive and pleasurable the daily rituals of motherhood can be. The mother of two children—one aged three and one a nursery school student—Minami-san had been a professional opera

いつも一緒に、かわいいキユーピー。

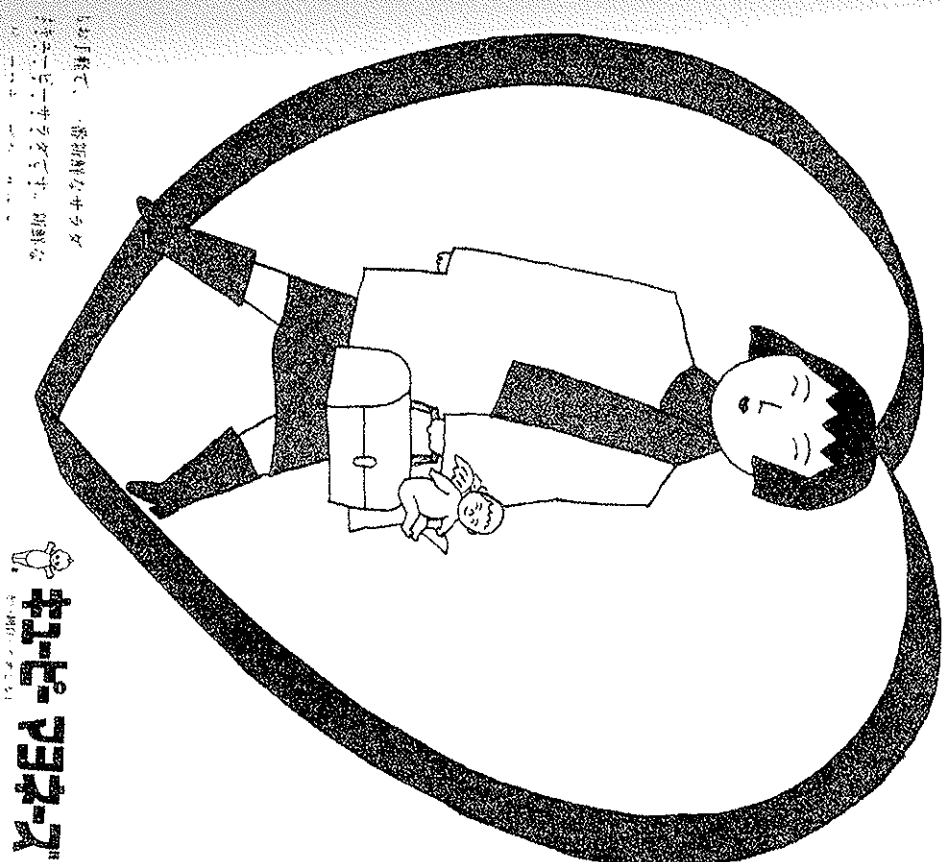


FIGURE 4.4 An ad for Kewpie mayonnaise that reads, "Always together, cute Kewpie." The image is of a working woman who should be carrying a "cute" child with her. Thus her role as mother continues even into the workplace. This ideology of the continuous mother is also expressed in children who "carry" their mothers everywhere, for example, to school with the mother-prepared *obento*.

SOURCE: 365 *nichi no obento hyakka* (Encyclopedia of lunch box for 365 days), 1981 [Tokyo: Shufunotomoshia], back cover

singer before marrying at the relatively late age of thirty-two. Now her daily schedule was organized by routines associated with her child's nursery school—for example, making the *obento*, taking her daughter to school and picking her up, attending Mother's Association meetings, arranging daily play dates, and keeping the school uniform clean. Minami-san wished to return to singing if only on a part-time basis, but she said that the demands of motherhood, particularly those imposed by her child's attendance at nursery school, frustrated this desire. Secretly only minutes out of any day to practice, Minami-san missed singing and told me that being a mother in Japan means being a mother to the exclusion of almost anything else.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this frustration, however, Minami-san did not behave like a frustrated woman. Rather she devoted to her mothering an energy, creativity, and intelligence I found to be standard in the Japanese mothers I knew. She planned special outings for her children at least two or three times a week, organized games that she knew they would like and that would teach them cognitive skills, created her own stories and designed costumes for afternoon play, and shopped daily for the meals she prepared with her children's favorite foods in mind. Minami-san told me often that she wished she could sing more, but never did she complain about her children, the chores of child-raising, or being a mother. And her attentiveness was exemplified most fully in her *obentos*. No two were ever alike, each had at least four or five portions, and she kept trying out new ideas for both new foods and new designs. She took pride as well as pleasure in her *obento* handicraft, but although Minami-san's *obento* creativity was impressive, it wasn't unusual.

Examples of such *obento* creations from an *obento* magazine include (1) donut *obento*: two donuts, two wieners cut to look like a worm, two cut pieces of apple, two small cheese rolls, one hard-boiled egg made to look like a rabbit with leaf ears and pickle eyes and set in an aluminum muffin tin, cute paper napkin added; (2) wiener doll *obento*: a bed of rice with two doll creations made out of wiener parts (each doll consists of eight pieces for hat, hair, head, arms, body, legs), a line of pink ginger, a line of green parsley, paper flag of France added; (3) vegetable flower and tulip *obento*: a bed of rice laced with chopped hard-boiled egg, three tulip flowers made out of cut wieners with spinach precisely arranged as stem and leaves, a fruit salad with two raisins, three cooked peaches, three pieces of cooked apple; (4) sweetheart doll *obento*: in a two-sectioned *obento* box there are four rice balls on one side, each with a different center, on the other side are two dolls made of quail's eggs for heads, eyes and mouth added, bodies of cucumber, arranged as if lying down with two raw carrots for the pillow, covers made of one flower—cut cooked carrot, two pieces of ham, pieces of cooked spinach, and with different colored plastic skewers holding the dolls together (Shunfunotomo 1980:27, 30). (See Figure 4.5 for more examples of creative *obentos*.)

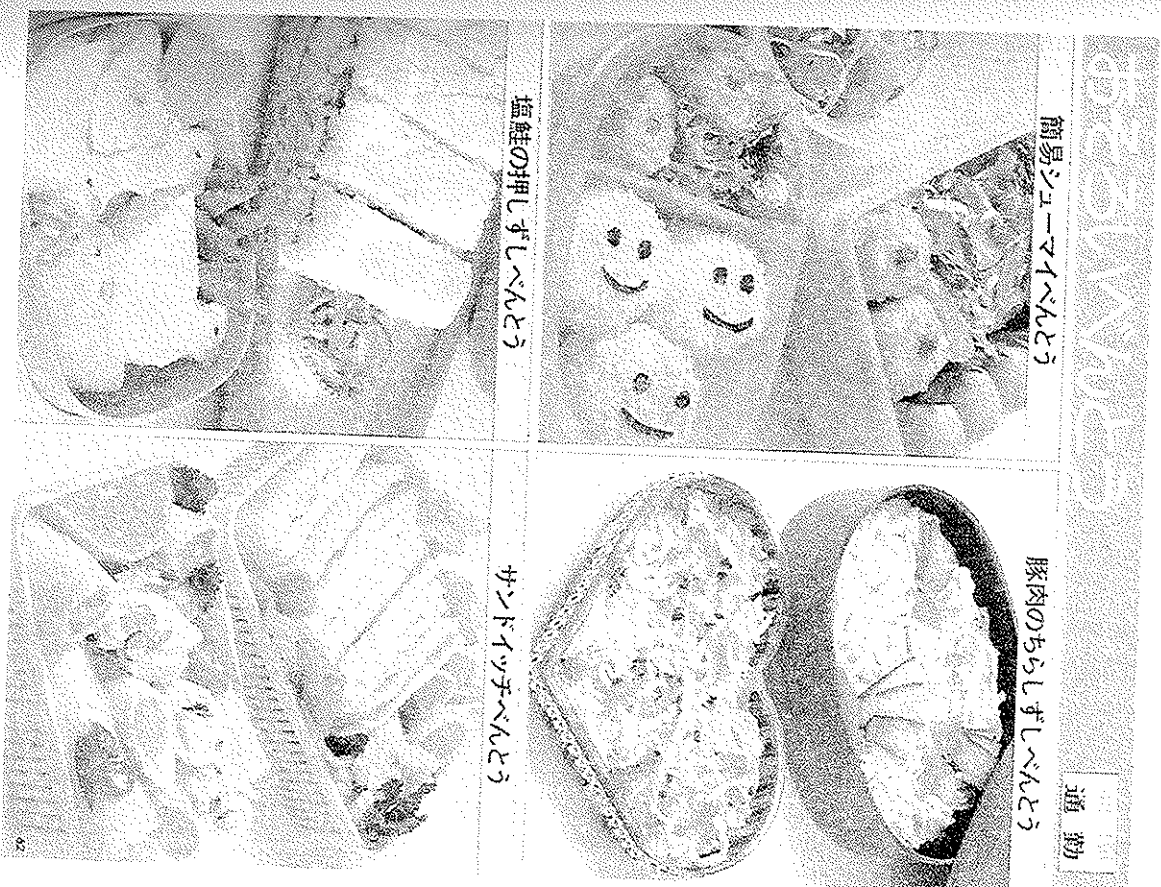


FIGURE 4.5 This page from an *obento* magazine shows four ideas for making *obentos* that appeal to kids.

SOURCE: *Obento 500 sen* (500 selections of lunch box), 1987 (Tokyo: Shunfunotomoshia), p. 63

The impulse to work and rework nature in these *obento*s is most obvious perhaps in the strategies used to transform, shape, and disguise foods. Every mother I knew came up with her own repertoire of such techniques, and every *obento* magazine or cookbook I examined offered a special section on these devices (see Figure 4.6). It is important to keep in mind that these are treated as only embellishments added to parts of an *obento* composed of many parts. The following is a list from one magazine: lemon pieces made into butterflies, hard-boiled eggs made into *daruma* (popular Japanese legendary figure of a monk without his eyes; eyes are added to *daruma* figures when a person reaches her or his goal), sausage cut into flowers, a hard-boiled egg decorated as a baby, an apple piece cut into a leaf, a radish flaked into a flower, a cucumber cut like a flower, *mikan* (nectarine orange) pieces arranged into a basket, a boat with a sail made from a cucumber, skewered sausage, radish shaped like a mushroom, a quail egg flaked into a cherry, twisted *mikan* piece, sausage cut to become a crab, a patterned cucumber, a ribboned carrot, a flowered tomato, cabbage leaf flower, a potato cut to be a worm, a carrot designed as a red shoe, an apple cut to simulate a pineapple (Shufunotomo 1980: 57-60).

37-60). Nature is not only transformed but also supplemented by store-bought or mother-made objects that are precisely arranged in the *obento*. The former come from an entire industry and commodification of the *obento* process: complete racks or sections in stores selling *obento* boxes, additional small containers, *obento* bags, cups, chopstick and utensil containers (all these with various cute characters or designs on the front), cloth and paper napkins, foil, aluminum tins, colored ribbon or string, plastic skewers, toothpicks with paper flags, and paper dividers. Mothers are encouraged and praised for making some of these themselves: *obento* bags, napkins, and handkerchiefs with applied designs or the child's name embroidered. These supplements to the food, the arrangement of the food, and the *obento* box's dividing walls (removable and adjustable) furnish the order of the *obento*. Everything appears crisp and neat with each part kept in its own place: two tiny hamburgers set firmly atop a bed of rice, vegetables in a separate compartment in the box, fruit arranged in a muffin tin.

How the specific forms of *obento* artistry—for example, a wiener cut to look like a worm and set within a muffin tin—are encoded symbolically is a fascinating subject. Limited here by space, however, I will only offer initial suggestions. Arranging food into a scene recognizable by the child was an ideal mentioned by many mothers and cookbooks. Animals, human beings, and other food forms (making a pineapple out of an apple, for example) predominate, perhaps for no other reason than that they are familiar to children and easily produced by mothers. Mothers I knew created animals and faces in supper meals and *obento* made for other outings, yet their impulse to do this seemed not only heightened in the

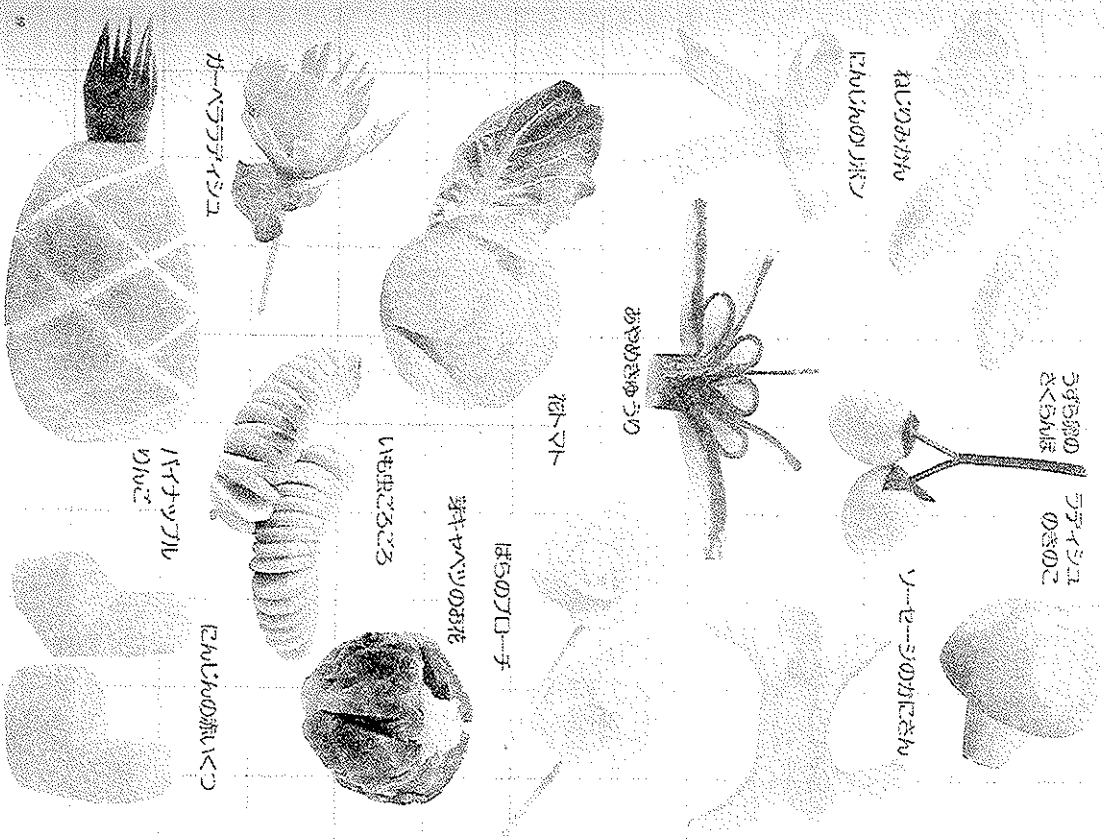


FIGURE 4. 6 An *obento* cookbook shows strategies for reimagining food: ribboned carrots, sausages made into crabs or worms, an apple designed into a pineapple, a flower-tomato, carrots converted into a pair of shoes.

SOURCE: *Obento 500 sen* (500 selections of lunch box), 1987 (Tokyo: Shufunotomoshia), p. 59.

*obento* that were sent to school but also played down in food prepared for other age groups.

Consistent in Japanese cooking generally, as stated earlier, are the dual principles of manipulation and order. Food is manipulated into some other form than what it assumes either naturally or upon being cooked: Lines are put into mashed potatoes, carrots are flaked, wieners are twisted and sliced. Also, food is ordered by human rather than by natural principles; everything must have neat boundaries and be placed precisely so those boundaries do not merge. These two structures are the ones most important in shaping the nursery school *obento* as well, and the realistic imagery is primarily a means by which the codes of manipulation and order are learned by and made pleasurable for the child. The simulacrum of a pineapple recreated from an apple is therefore less about seeing the pineapple in an apple (a particular form) and more about reconstructing the apple into something else (the process of transformation).

The intense labor, management, commodification, and attentiveness that goes into the making of an *obento* lace it, however, with many and various meanings. Overarching all is the potential to aestheticize a certain social order, a social order that is coded (in cultural and culinary terms) as Japanese. Not only is a mother making food more palatable to her nursery school child, she is creating food as a more aesthetic and pleasing social structure. The *obento*'s message, then, is that the world is constructed very precisely and that the role of any single Japanese in that world must be carried out with the same degree of precision. Production is demanding; and the producer must both keep within the borders of her or his role and work hard.

The message is also that women, not men, both sustain a child through food and constitute the ideological support of the culture that this food embeds. No Japanese man I spoke with had or desired the experience of making a nursery school *obento* even once, and few were more than peripherally engaged in their children's education. The male is assigned a position in the outside world where he labors at a job for money and is expected to be primarily identified by and committed to his place of work.<sup>20</sup> Helping in the management of the home and in raising children has not become an obvious male concern or interest in Japan, even as more and more women enter what was previously the male domain of work. Females have remained as the center of the home, and this message too is explicitly transmitted in both the production and consumption of entirely female produced *obento*.

The state accrues benefits from this arrangement. Children depend to a high degree on the labor women devote to their mothering, and women are pressured to perform as well as take pleasure in such routine maternal tasks as making the *obento*. Both effects are encouraged and promoted by institutional features of the

educational system, heavily state run and at least ideologically guided at even the nursery school level. Thus a gendered division of labor is firmly set in place. Labor from males, socialized to be compliant and hard working, is more extractable when they have wives to rely on for almost all domestic and familial management. And females become a source of cheap labor (they are increasingly forced to enter the labor market to pay domestic costs, including those vast sums incurred in educating children) because their domestic duties keep them from taking any but low paying, part-time jobs.

Hence not only do females, as mothers, operate within the ideological state apparatus of Japan's school system that starts semiofficially with the nursery school, they also operate as an ideological state apparatus unto themselves. Motherhood is state ideology working through children at home and school and through mother-imprinted labor, such as the *obento*, that a child carries from home to school. Hence the post-World War II conception of Japanese education as being egalitarian and democratic with no agenda of gender differentiation does not, in practice, stand up. Concealed within such cultural practices as culinary style and child-focused mothering is a worldview in which what position and behavior an adult will assume has everything to do with the anatomy she or he was born with.

At the end, however, I am left with one question. If motherhood is not only surveilled and manipulated by the state but made by it into a conduit for ideological indoctrination, could not women subvert the political order by redesigning *obento*? I asked this question of a Japanese friend who, upon reading this chapter, recalled her own experiences. Though her mother had been conventional in most other respects, she had made her children *obento* that did not conform to the prevailing conventions. Sawa noted that the basic, simple, and rarely artistic lines of these *obento* resembled the principles by which she was generally raised. She was treated as a person, not "just as a girl," and was allowed a margin to think for herself. Today she is an exceptionally independent woman who has created a life for herself in the United States, away from her homeland and parents. She loves Japanese food, but she is newly appreciative of the plain *obento* her mother made for her as a child. The *obento* fed her but did not keep her culturally or ideologically attached. For this, Sawa says today, she is glad.

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# *P*ermitted and Prohibited Desires

Mothers, Comics, and  
Censorship in Japan



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