Allison (2008) Japanese Mothers and Obentos

Allison, Anne.


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In this article, Allison discusses the significance and culture of the Japanese obento. Anne Allison spent a year making obentos for her preschool age son while living in Japan, and through this process learned much about Japanese social structure and rules. An obento is a small boxed lunch made daily by Japanese mothers for their preschool age children. It is made precisely, with creativity and variety. Japanese mothers put immense amounts of care and very often artistic elements into these lunches for their children. In a society where structure and obedience are given the utmost importance, the obento is carefully scrutinized by each child’s teacher, and often his or her success in school depends largely on their ability to finish their obento quickly and cleanly. Each obento is to be constructed exactly, with each part separate from the rest, and with balance. For example, each compartment shape should be opposite to the shape of the food in the compartment: round pieces in square compartments, square pieces in round compartments, rough with smooth, bland color with bright. (Allison, 197) (incorrect in-text citation style) This emphasis of opposites illustrates the presence of nature in the food. Much of the food is kept raw in order to keep it “natural”. The obentos are often decorated with seasonal objects to further emphasize nature such as a colorful leaf in autumn, or a flower in spring. The types of dishes can also be influenced by the season. In the winter, heavy crocks are used to hold the different compartments contrasting with light glassware in the summer. This care taken in the obento even with the dishes is an excellent illustration of the Japanese culture’s effort to stay as close to nature as possible, with nothing standing out. (Allison, 197.)

But why are the obentos so important? Why do mothers spend 30 to 45 minutes each morning making them? In a world and culture where the occupation and success of the man is of utmost importance, it is essential that each Japanese child performs well on a series of tests in school. The first of these tests begins shortly after the end of the first nursery school year. It is the mother’s sole responsibility to ensure that her child performs on that test, and the best way to do that is in creating the obento with precision and finesse. The obento illustrates the importance of order in Japanese society, and gets the child used to that order before they have to perform it on the most crucial tests of their lives. The purpose of the preschool year is not to immediately begin learning academically, but to begin learning culturally.

I found this article to be very interesting and had great insight into Japanese culture. It astonished me the amount of time and effort Japanese mothers put into making these obentos for children who were barely old enough to appreciate the attention put towards them. The culture and importance of these lunches is so different from the American viewpoint that it caused me to think in a different mindset. The article gave me a great start on my study of Japanese food culture.