



LIVES: A WEIGHTY MATTER

Coming to terms with apparent insults in Japan.

BY DANIEL KRIEGER

A few months ago in Osaka, a Japanese friend I hadn't seen for a while asked if I had put on weight. After considering a variety of responses, I did what any 40-year-old narcissist would do — I denied it.

"Are you sure?" she said in Japanese, with a smile. "You look fatter."

"What do you mean, 'fatter'? I'm the same."

"But your face, it looks fatter. I'm sure. Your arms, too."

Honestly, I couldn't say if this was true because I always put monitoring my weight on a bathroom scale in the same category as getting a perm and plucking my eyebrows. I noticed that some of my pants were getting a bit snug, but that can happen after many washings. If my belly protruded a tad more than usual, that could easily be attributed to water retention caused by the high-sodium Japanese diet. But two weeks later, another acquaintance, also Japanese and female, said almost exactly the same thing: "*Chotto futtota?*" (Have you become a little fatter?)

This was getting tiresome. Since coming to Japan earlier this year to teach English, I found that certain features of my appearance attracted more attention than they did back home. In a land of (what some Japanese disparagingly call) big faces, small noses, boring black hair, little eyes and short legs, my "small face," "tall nose," wavy brown hair, round blue eyes and long legs made me quite the exotic specimen. I was single and an active participant in the dating market, but this obsession with my gut was throwing me off my game.

A week later my concern escalated to alarm. "Did you gain your weight?" asked a student with a grin, much to the delight of her classmates — all women. I sucked in my stomach and offered my best *nigawarai*, a "bitter smile" used to mask a negative reaction while you consider your options.

"Well, uh, I don't think so," I said, glancing at my navel. "How many of you think I've gained weight? Can I see a show of hands?" It was unanimous.

I always thought of myself as blessed with slenderness despite minimal exercise and frequent trips to the

top tier of the food pyramid, the realm of sweets and fats. Now I could no longer deny that something had changed. That night, after borrowing a Winnie-the-Pooh scale from a neighbor under the pretext of weighing "something," I stood facing my bathroom's full-length mirror and mounted it. Above Pooh-san's serene, smiling face and the overflowing honey pot he held in his paws, the red digits on the scale's display climbed and flashed and finally settled. I was 21 pounds over my "official" weight. No wonder I felt fatigued recently: I was lugging around the equivalent of three healthy newborns.

But I was still bewildered by the fact that three women had made a show of informing me of this. It didn't jibe with my sense of how the Japanese typically communicate: calibrating their language to avoid offense and bending over backward to take the feelings of others into account. So I called George, an American friend and a veteran of Japanese culture who seemed blissfully unconcerned about his own protruding belly.

"Oh, yeah," he said, "when I first came to Japan I couldn't believe how women teased me about being chubby, poking me and whatnot." But he said he figured out that it wasn't a put-down or an insult but actually more of a playful thing. "When they say a man has gained weight, it implies he's got someone new in his life," he said. "Some woman is feeding him and making him feel comfortable enough to let himself go a little. It makes him look healthy, because he's happy."

My Japanese tutor later told me that there's even a term for this — *shiwase butori*, "happily plump."

It took me a while to get used to the concept, but over the next few weeks I began to think of my augmentation not as fat but as the stateliness of a bon vivant who defiantly shows the world he can suck the marrow — and the fatty tuna — out of life without fretting about caloric content.

And when the adorable cashier I always chatted up at the Mister Donut in Namba inquired about my girth, with a sweet smile and a little nudge to the area in question, I was ready: "*Kanashii butori kanojo inai kara.*" (I'm sadly plump because I've got no girlfriend.)

She laughed and said that was bound to change very soon. So I suggested we get together sometime. I would bring the wine if she supplied the red-bean doughnuts. ♦

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