

Yesterday in my English class, one of the students asked me, “Molly, please give me chocolate for Valentine’s Day!” My instinct was to say, “I don’t think so, you should be giving me chocolate,” when I remembered that Valentine’s Day is different in Japan than at home in America.

For one thing, Valentine’s Day in American isn’t a day when women give chocolates or sweets to men. It’s usually the other way around, with men giving chocolates to their wives, girlfriends, friends or kids. A woman can give chocolates or something else thoughtful to the men in her life on that day, but it is much worse if a man forgets Valentine’s Day than a woman! Every year on Valentine’s Day in Japan I am surprised to see the other (male) ALT’s desk piled with chocolates and sweets, when I only get one or two from a few very thoughtful students who included me too. I always forget that it is the girl’s responsibility to give chocolates on Valentine’s Day and promptly miss out. This year I was kindly reminded by my student, who was expecting something from me, but even so, I haven’t decided if I’ll be giving any chocolates this year

For another thing, while Valentine’s Day is supposedly a romantic holiday, it has become much more of a cultural holiday than anything else. When I was in elementary school, all the students made valentines, heart-shaped cards with love-themed messages, to give to the other students in the class. We also had heart-shaped cookies or other sweets to celebrate together. I used to always get a heart-shaped box of chocolates from my dad, and I remember that more than any sweets or cards that I got from suitors when I was growing up! In addition to these traditions, there are the seasonal sweets, like “sweethearts” (small heart-shaped candies with messages on them, see below), which will always be associated with Valentine’s Day in America.

For the most part, Valentine’s Day is a meaningless, commercial holiday. It is a day when card companies and chocolate shops make a lot of money, but it still has a lot of memories for me. Now if I could only remember to make my own chocolates by this time next year, I would be ready for the Japanese version!



Sweetheart candies