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Landscapes of Matcha: Cultural Semiotics in Japan and Taiwan

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Abstract

This presentation explores the linguistic and visual landscapes of matcha in cafés and shops in Japan and Taiwan. The analysis is based on about forty photographs of signage, menus, and product labels collected during research visits between 2022 and 2024. The presenters, who conducted extended fieldwork in Taiwan, examine how matcha is linguistically and culturally represented across both countries.

Originally a ceremonial and prestigious beverage in Japan, matcha has been transformed into a popular flavor for sweets and drinks. Once linked mainly to the tea ceremony, it is now found in convenience stores and drugstores in products such as KitKat, cream puffs, and parfaits. This shift reflects both the popularization of a high-culture taste and the commodification of cultural symbols in everyday consumption.

Taiwanese tea culture is highly differentiated, with green tea (unfermented), white tea (lightly fermented), yellow tea (post-fermented), oolong (semi-fermented), black tea (fully fermented), and dark tea (after-fermented). Even in ordinary cafés, customers are asked to choose sugar levels from 0% to 100%, a question that surprises Japanese visitors used to unsweetened tea. In this context, matcha is understood as a type of green tea but is marketed under names such as “Japanese Kyoto Matcha” or “Japanese-style Matcha Milk,” reflecting creative localization.

In Japan, certain expressions rarely seen abroad - usucha (thin tea) and koicha (thick tea) - remain integral to cultural discourse. The matcha most people imagine corresponds to usucha, while koicha uses two to three times more powdered tea and is reserved for formal occasions. Phrases such as “koicha no” (“rich matcha-flavored”) convey luxury and authenticity. The spelling matcha itself marks linguistic innovation: unlike the traditional maccha (Hepburn) or mattya (Kunrei), matcha has become a globally recognizable hybrid form signifying

new international identity. Photographs show that Taiwanese cafés and dessert shops often draw on Japanese regional imagery. Names such as Kyoto, Uji, and Shizuoka - major tea regions - appear in shop titles and labels, revealing both admiration for and familiarity with Japan. Global brands like Starbucks reinforce this framing by listing origins such as Kagoshima, Shizuoka, Mie, Nara, Kyoto, and Fukuoka. Meanwhile, hojicha (roasted green tea), now popular internationally and known in Taiwan as Fukichi-cha, is promoted as a specialty from Kyoto and Nara. Alongside these authenticity-oriented examples, creative fusions such as matcha pistachio desserts are common in Taiwan, though many Japanese find the combination overpowering. In Japan, matcha ramen and matcha curry udon from Uji exemplify playful experimentation within traditional cuisine. Together, these examples show how matcha functions as a semiotic bridge between Japan and Taiwan—symbolizing both tradition and innovation. Through these images, the presentation illustrates how the linguistic landscapes of matcha express national identity and intercultural adaptation, revealing the global recirculation and recontextualization of Japanese taste and language.