“I would like to start a revolution”
An interview with dentist Dr Taro Okamoto about the double teeth craze in Japan

Dr Taro Okamoto (w/Photo courtesy of Pure Cure, Japan)

In almost all Western countries, crooked teeth are considered unattractive. In Japan, however, fake double teeth called tsuke-yaeba have risen to popularity, particularly among teenage girls and young women, transforming their upper canines to make them look imperfect. Dental Tribune Japan recently had the opportunity to speak with Dr Taro Okamoto, head cosmetic dentist at the Pure Cure cosmetic dental clinic in Tokyo and manager of tsuke-yaeba pop group TYB48, about the procedure and why the trend might be here to stay.

DT Japan: Tsuke-yaeba have gained widespread popularity in your country. How do you explain the appeal of having imperfect teeth?

There is a long tradition of the love of imperfect beauty in Japan. People here admire the aesthetics of asymmetry, as well as perfection. Sen no Rikyū, a sixteenth-century master of the tea ceremony, for example, praised the beauty of chipped tea bowls, which he considered a humble and simple form of the original thing. The concept of fake double teeth is largely based on this notion.

“I think the concept of ‘cool’ Japan, or the love of imperfect beauty, has had a similar influence on Tsuke-yaeba.”

Is tsuke-yaeba a permanent procedure or can it be reversed?

We currently offer a permanent option, involving the direct build-up of composite resin or the use of laminate veneers. There is also a reversible option where the fake teeth can be worn like normal dentures through the application of an adhesive. I advise my customers to maintain proper oral hygiene to avoid the development of periodontal disease, as well as to consult with us in case of any pain or discomfort associated with tsuke-yaeba.

You are one of the main providers of the tsuke-yaeba procedures in Japan. How many procedures do you perform daily at present?

Since our clinic started operating two years ago, we have performed more than 500 tsuke-yaeba procedures, with probably one procedure per day on average. The age of our customers ranges from 14 to 40 years. Most requests however are from girls in their late teens and women in their early twenties.

Why is tsuke-yaeba of particular interest to women?

Actually, girl idols (a kind of female celebrity in Japanese culture) with double teeth have enjoyed popularity since the 1870s. They are usually associated with being young, cute and coquettish, which are all features believed to give them a special charm and boost their popularity.

Women decide to wear double teeth for the same reasons they have piercings, or wear fake eyelashes or coloured contact lenses. As these items have become common fashion accessories, attention naturally moved on to teeth.

How long do you expect the tsuke-yaeba trend to continue in Japan?

Grinding down healthy teeth and covering them with ceramics is a common misconception about aesthetic dentistry in Japan. By spreading the concept of tsuke-yaeba, I would like to start a revolution in this field, so that tsuke-yaeba will not be a fad only but become popular enough to be considered an everyday cosmetic item like fake eyelashes. The technique itself is very versatile, as I can use the same direct build-up method to straighten teeth.

Trends from Japan are often not widely adopted overseas. Do you see tsuke-yaeba making it to Western dentistry soon?

Actually, I read a survey in which people from different countries were asked whether a girl idol with double teeth looked cute or dreadful. Most of the respondents considered it cute. With the concept of “Cool Japan”, Japanese fashion and values have spread all over the world. So far, I have treated customers from countries like Taiwan.

You also manage a tsuke-yaeba pop group called TYB48. How do you balance this with your work as a dentist?

Currently, there are two girls in the group, who are both students and part-time idols. We usually do a live event, have recordings or appear in the media once a month. Being the producer of the group too, I compose music when I am not working at the clinic. When I have to accompany the group for an event, I sometimes have to take a day off.

Thank you very much for the interview.