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The calculus of the gift: Money and social relationships in Japan

Katherine Rupp

Examination of Japanese gift practices leads to a deeper exploration of networks and social relationships in Japanese society, and, at the same time, to a more detailed understanding of processes of borrowing and transformation in the history of Asian cultural interchange. The study of Japanese gift-giving necessarily also engages with an established empirical and theoretical tradition in anthropology, a tradition that often appears unable to escape from certain assumptions generated by the peculiar place of gifts in European and American popular ideologies of social life.

Gifts vs. commodities

Gifts, according to American and European conceptions, exist in a special realm outside the marketplace. Emerson, in his essay “Gifts,” writes:

The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me ... I fear to breathe any treason against the majesty of love, which is the genius and god of gifts, and to whom we must not affect to prescribe. Let him give kingdoms or flower leaves indifferently. (Emerson, 1983: 94–96)

According to this interpretation, the gift is a part of the donor. The gift stands in opposition to the commodity, which circulates in the world of commercial transactions, where value is calculated based on price, and objects are not exchanged to create relationships between people but rather to turn a profit.

In Japan, gifts and commodities are not two neat, separate categories. In fact, they are almost al-

ways mixed up. Many, many gifts are made with cash, the prototypical commodity form. Even when gifts are objects other than cash, in numerous instances it is prescribed that they should be as impersonal as possible. The giving of gifts is subject to a calculus of value based on monetary price, for precise attention to monetary cost is integral to the negotiation of certain relationships. When you receive a gift from a department store, for example, there is a code printed on it, and this tells you how much the gift cost. I was even informed in an interview with a florist that when he delivers flowers to people, they ask him how much the flowers are worth. The reason why the receiver is so concerned with the price of the gift is that in many cases, a return gift is necessary, and to make the appropriate type of return gift, it is essential to know the cost of the original gift.

In my work on specific Japanese gift-giving practices, I have found the anthropological tendency to see gifts and commodities as mutually exclusive to be problematic, whether as forms of interaction in themselves or as forms of interaction taken to characterize whole societies or types of society. Models based on static or essentialist notions of the Japanese sense of self, or models that presume that the gift is a part or extension of the person of the giver, or models of whole societies as gift societies or commodity societies are not very helpful to me because they say little about the complex details and variations across the many different transactional forms I encountered in my research. I am seeking a more dynamic understanding of self and other, of subject and object, of giving person and given object.

Examples from fieldwork

Let me illustrate the direction in which I am moving with some concrete examples from my fieldwork. These were told to me by a woman whom I will call Mrs. Ueda, a housewife in her mid-fifties. She and her husband, a company employee, live in an upper middle-class neighborhood near central Tokyo. Her son and daughter both married within a short time of each other, and her discussions of the gifts that I am about to describe emerged as she was teaching me about the exchanges connected to her children's weddings. I will begin with an example about money given to the guests at her daughter's wedding.

Guests who had come from far away were given *kurumadai*, envelopes of money to help cover the cost of transportation to and from the wedding. Many guests came from Osaka (the Ueda family had lived in Osaka when the children were growing up, and many of their relatives continued to live there).

They each received 30,000 yen, because the trip from Osaka to Niigata, where the wedding was held, is expensive.

Kurumadai was offered to all guests who traveled a great distance. Some close family members made it clear before the wedding that they did not wish to receive *kurumadai*. There were also two instances at Mrs. Ueda's daughter's wedding in which *kurumadai* was returned. Mrs. Ueda was full of praise for the manner in which one of the guests returned the *kurumadai*; she did not care for the method used by the other guest. In the latter case, a seventy-year-old woman who had been the high school teacher of Mrs. Ueda's daughter sent a wallet, worth half the 30,000 yen she had been given by the Ueda family for *kurumadai*. Accompanying the wallet was a letter saying she could not accept so much reimbursement for transportation, as she had gotten a senior citizen discount on her train ticket. In the former case, an eighty-year-old man who was a friend of Mrs. Ueda's parents returned the unopened envelope containing the money with a letter saying that he did not want it, as he had come as a representative of the dead grandparents of the bride.

Mrs. Ueda spoke at some length about the reasons for her favorable assessment of the man's action and her unfavorable assessment of the woman's action. Because the man was connected with Mrs. Ueda's parents and the woman was connected with Mrs. Ueda's daughter, she did not know either one very well. But based on the way in which they returned the gifts of *kurumadai*, she made strict judgments about their characters. The man returned the envelope without even breaking its seal. She used the word *isagiyo* (pure, righteous, manly; evokes image of feudal warrior) to describe his action. "It is human nature to want to look into the envelope," she stated. "But he did not. If you wanted the money even a little bit, you would open the envelope, and then think about it, and then maybe decide to give half back." Mrs. Ueda did not like the calculating behavior of the woman. I asked Mrs. Ueda why she thought it was that the woman didn't return all the money. Mrs. Ueda pointed out that it is usually rude to return the value of any gift in its entirety; this can cause consternation to the person to whom the gift is returned. Especially when making a return gift for a gift of cash, etiquette dictates that the form of the gift must be changed, so that one does not appear to be giving back exactly what one had received. But in this case, a partial return by changing the form of the initial gift was much worse than a complete and total return of the cash, and worse than no return at all would have been.

Mrs. Ueda called this woman *ogatai*. This word describes a person who is especially rigid. It is related to another word, *girikatai* (having a strong sense of duty). People who are scrupulous in upholding their social obligations in giving and receiving are those who, among other things, always make return gifts.

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These people uphold *giri*. *Giri* is variously translated as "duty, integrity, justice, morality, righteousness, social courtesy." *Girikatai* has both positive and negative connotations. *Katai* means "hard, solid, stiff, rigid, tough." It can be used to say, for example, that a tight pair of shoes is uncomfortable. It can also describe a building's firm, sound foundations. *Girikatai* can refer to the social actions of an honest, upright, solid person; it can also describe someone who is rigid, to the extent of being unfeeling. When Mrs. Ueda used the polite prefix "o" and attached it to the word "katai," she implied the woman was too strict in her calculations. She was strict to the point of being selfish or petty.

In this case, the return of the gift object is not a sign or representation of the giver, but of the way the giver relates to others, in this case, to Mrs. Ueda's daughter and her family. It is the social act that is important, not the concrete object. And in both instances, the manner in which these two people returned the *kurumadai* affected their relationships with Mrs. Ueda and her family. The Ueda family's friendship with the woman is now strained, but the connection with the man is stronger than before.

As for the gift/commodity dichotomy, these two examples illustrate how complex that relationship is. Even though many gifts in Japan are made in cash, there is a strong ambivalence about money and about the calculations that gift-giving entails. If you receive a gift of money, the return gift should never be made with money. In fact, Mrs. Ueda told me the story of an occasion when she made a present of cash and received a return gift in the form of gift certificates, and she was really horrified; she considered the possibility that the givers wanted to cut their relationship with her. You cannot return money with money; to do so would be too calculating. To make a return gift of a gift of cash by changing its form and giving an object is

supposed to soften the gift somehow and make it less calculating; even though price codes are printed on boxes containing gifts, these objects are still a step removed from money. What is so interesting about this case is that even though the woman did everything in strict accordance with standard rules – she did not send back money, but rather an object – Mrs. Ueda was offended. It was the man who refused all contact with the money; who returned the envelope unopened; who said “I am here as the representative of the dead grandparents of the bride, and as their representative, please treat me as kin; therefore, do not give me *kuru-madai*” whom Mrs. Ueda admired.

The last two examples I wish to discuss shed some light on why there is such an ambivalence about money. Mrs. Ueda explained these instances of giving to me when she told me about the wedding of her son, a twenty-eight-year-old male upper middle class company employee. Mrs. Ueda was very pleased with one, a gift to the go-between, but very displeased with the other, a gift to the minister who performed the marriage ceremony.

Let us first examine the gift exchanges with the go-between. A marriage is made possible through go-betweens, a husband and wife. In the past, go-betweens may have played a role in arranging the marriage, although this is less often the case in present-day Japan. Their names appear on the wedding invitation, and at the wedding reception, they sit on either side of the newly married couple at a long table at the front of the room, while the parents of the bride and groom sit at the very back of the wedding hall.

Usually, the male go-between will be in a position to help the groom in his career. Mrs. Ueda's son had asked the vice-president of his company to serve as go-between. On an auspicious day before the marriage, the vice-president and his wife came to Mrs. Ueda's home and presented an elaborately decorated envelope of the requisite amount of 100,000 yen to the son and his wife-to-be.

Several weeks after the wedding, the bride and groom gave the go-betweens an odd number of Gucci plates they had purchased on their honeymoon in Hawaii, and the parents of the bride and groom gave the go-betweens 300,000 yen. Mrs. Ueda stressed that this money was not made with the direct intent to help her son get ahead in his company; rather, it was to show their gratitude to a busy man of high social standing who had kindly done them the favor of associating with them for this private matter of their son's wedding. In addition, she was sure that in the future her son would become indebted to him at the company, and all they wanted was for their son to be promoted regularly and normally. At this point, her voice wavered a little; she said hesitantly that she was not sure

how to express herself; it was probably the case, she said, that embedded in their gift to the go-between was a request to him to take care of their son. Mrs. Ueda had been sending gifts every winter and every summer to this vice-president who came to serve as the go-between, because he had been instrumental in helping her son get a job at his company. The first gift-giving season after the wedding, Mrs. Ueda sent the vice-president an Alaskan king crab worth 7,000 yen.

Auspiciousness, encompassment, and alignment

From one point of view, the cash given at these exchanges has nothing to do with buying and selling. Rather, it is connected to notions of auspiciousness, encompassment, and alignment. Giving related to weddings often emphasizes units of odd numbers. Even sums of cash that are technically even – such as 10,000 yen or 100,000 yen – are considered to be odd-numbered units of one. The cords used to tie the envelopes are made from odd numbers of strands; the cord with the highest number of strands – nine – is appropriate for a very auspicious event, such as a wedding. The envelopes that contain the money are folded in such a way that left is placed over right and top is placed over bottom. These practices stem from the philosophy of *yin* and *yang*. In terms of position, top and left are *yang*, bottom and right are *yin*. Regarding numbers, odd is *yang*, even is *yin*. Every odd number greater than one contains within it both an even number and an odd number (for example, $3 = 1 + 2$). Odd numbers are preferred to even numbers because a hierarchical principle is at work, in which “the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole” (Dumont 1980: 66). The inferior becomes a member of the superior, the even is subsumed within the odd. In philosophical discourse, the relationship between *yin* and *yang* is not represented as hierarchical, but in many forms of practice, the flourishing of the natural and social worlds is accomplished only when disorder (*yin*) submits to order (*yang*).

The number of strands in the cord that ties the envelope, the odd-numbered units of bills the envelope contains, and the way the envelope is folded are all material embodiments of the encompassment of *yin* by *yang*, of female by male, and the life that flows from that hierarchical ordering. Precise measurement, in terms of both the emphasis on odd units of bills and on the cash value given, enables and underscores this encompassment. Gifts to male employees are of considerably higher cash value than gifts to female em-

ployees. Unequal treatment of male and female itself underscores the importance of reproduction, because within this symbolic system, it is through the combination of male and female in unequal relationships that life is believed to be created and sustained. This is why, for example, that in the giving of ceramic bowls to a married couple, it is important that they be a pair of two unequal parts, with the bowl for the husband larger than the bowl for the wife.

Like the gifts from the go-between to the couple, those from the couple to the go-between indicate alignment with a system based on relationships of domination and subordination that includes and extends beyond the individuals giving and receiving.

Annual gifts to superiors are made in accordance with a seasonal cycle external to giver and receiver. At summer and winter – when nature is, respectively, at its fullest and its most dead – gifts marked with appropriate seasonal symbols are presented to superiors. These gifts are objects that lend themselves to precise measurement, such as cans of oil, soap, seaweed, beer, gift certificates, and so forth. Most objects are marked clearly with a code that tells the receiver the price. The giver must not only take care to align himself and his family, or, more usually, herself and her family, with the cycle of seasons, but also with the hierarchical order of society. The cash amounts of these gifts are calculated in accordance with intersecting factors, such as strength of relationship, gratitude, and hierarchy. The gift to the go-between of 300,000 yen and the Gucci plates, as well as the first seasonal gift after the marriage of Alaskan king crab from a famous department store, are examples of alignment with this larger system. First, the odd-numbered units of cash, the odd number of plates, and the crab worth odd-numbered units of yen represent encompassment of *yin* by *yang*. Second, these gifts reflect and reinforce the hierarchical relationship between vice-president and company employee; the vice-president, in this case, because of his high status, receives more than he gives. Third, they express alignment with established hierarchies of department stores, specialty items, and name-brand goods, giving this high-ranking person goods from the top of these hierarchies.

The gifts of cash are qualitatively unique entities. The 300,000 yen given to the go-between is a unit of three, just as the 100,000 yen gift from the go-between to the couple was a unit of one. The fact that the generic, quantitative character of money can be subordinated to the unity of a single odd number is what makes gifts of cash useful for alignment. The same is true for gifts such as the Alaskan king crab, whose price is readily apparent from the code on the box and is invariably an odd-numbered unit.

The importance of money

What happens when a gift that should be money is not? Let us turn now to the gift to the minister who performed the marriage ceremony, as well as the gift received from the minister. Mr. and Mrs. Ueda gave the minister 100,000 yen for performing the wedding ceremony. In return, the minister gave a book on Christianity that he himself had written. Mrs. Ueda was extremely upset, first, because the minister accepted the money from her, and second, because he gave an object other than money in return. Mrs. Ueda and her family belong to the small minority of Japanese who are Christian, and she and her husband are extremely active in their church. When she gave the minister the 100,000 yen for himself and 150,000 yen for the church, she felt sure that the minister would take the money for the church but refuse the money for himself, saying “I really can’t accept, after all the work you do to help me and the church.” Mrs. Ueda expressed anger that the church, which should be like a family, was instead being used to make money. She was especially irritated that the minister was so intent on getting as much money for himself as possible that he gave a book he had written, which cost him nothing, rather than making a proper gift of cash. Mrs. Ueda would have viewed cash as more sincere than his gift of his book. Mrs. Ueda saw the book not only as an example of the minister’s trying to give as little money as possible, but also as lacking in consideration for the couple. Cash placed in odd-numbered units, properly folded and tied in an envelope, connotes alignment with a larger order, and this is evidence of interest in a good marriage for the bride and groom. There is a sense that if all is not properly aligned, something bad might happen, such as divorce. A book one has written oneself is thus doubly inappropriate. It neither gives something up nor shows concern for the bridal pair.

In some ways, the qualities of money are used for symbolic purposes that have nothing to do with buying and selling. Money is a manifestation at a material level of a larger sense of order in which maintenance or enhancement of life is predicated on relationships of encompassment. At key points in life cycles and seasonal cycles, people align themselves with this larger order by giving precise amounts of money. Gifts of money are therefore seen as outward-oriented, as the dissolving of particularity and lining up with a larger system. It was partly because the minister gave a book he himself had written, a gift oriented inwards to himself rather than outwards to a more general system, that his gift was not well received.

In other ways, money is valued as a commodity. It represents all the things that could be bought if it

were not given away. The gift of the book the minister wrote himself was seen not only as narcissistic, but as stingy and calculating, as if the minister were trying to make a profit. If people fail to conform to their proper roles in the process of exchange, and are perceived as greedy or arrogant, they may be resented as superiors taking advantage of their positions. But as long as superiors align themselves to their proper roles and give the right amount in the right way, their actions are usually interpreted as proper, and the giving of large sums of money to them is viewed as appropriate. Mrs. Ueda's gifts to her son's superior were to ensure a good future for her son. Even though she suggested that the large amounts of cash given to the go-between were because of his high social standing and his busy schedule, there were other people attending the wedding who occupied similarly high social positions and who were also strapped for time. But those people did not stand in direct relationships of power to Mrs. Ueda's son, and thus they did not receive such large amounts of money. So, while practices of gift exchange use money for their own symbolic purposes, exchangers of gifts use these practices of giving in order to benefit themselves and those close to them. As long as these practices conform to a larger order of reproduction predicated on encompassment, people are extremely reluctant to criticize these gifts to superiors, whereas they express anger over relationships of giving and receiving with superiors that do not conform to this larger order.

Complaints about giving and receiving fall into two categories: criticisms of people for not fulfilling their appropriate roles within the larger system, and criticisms of the larger system itself. Many people expressed resentment towards forms of giving and receiving deemed to be more concerned with immediate individual profit rather than with social relationships and proper cosmic alignment. But only a minority of the people who participated in my research refused to give and receive because of the relations of encompassment underlying these practices. Those who did refuse on these grounds to participate in this system were subject to harsh criticism.

From one point of view, the cash given in these exchanges has nothing to do with buying and selling. The number of strands in the cord that ties the envelope, the odd-numbered units of bills the envelope contains, and the way the envelope is folded represent proper alignment with a larger cosmic order that enables reproduction.

From another point of view, these exchanges are very much connected with the world of buying and selling. Many of these transactions are in cash, and those that are not are usually mediated through department stores. Giving is often between people in

the workplace to enhance chances for advancement or cultivate business connections. Exchangers of gifts use practices of giving to benefit themselves and those close to them, but as long as these practices conform to a larger system, for the most part they are condoned. Hierarchical ordering is believed to create and sustain life, and refusal to synchronize one's giving and receiving with this larger system is considered inward-looking and selfish. The strong pressure to conform is probably related to certain Chinese-derived beliefs that human moral action consists of alignment with the cosmic order; a lack of such thereof results in disorder in the realms of both nature and society. This may be why so many individual Japanese people devote so much time, energy, and money to giving and receiving, and feel pressure to perform "correctly." Performing correctly means taking each particular instance of giving and linking it up to something more general and abstract, such as cycles of seasons, frameworks of specialty items from faraway places, and hierarchical orderings of human beings, department stores, or numbers. In this context, monetary and quasi-monetary signs are important for giving in that they are apprehended as specific quantities that are auspicious because they align with a greater process.

Measurement and calculation for the benefit of others

It is for this reason that at important rites of passage, such as weddings, objects may be viewed as less sincere than money would have been. Even when money was not used in giving to the extent it is today, in most parts of Japan, goods such as sake, sugar, and rice were given instead, all of which lend themselves to precise measurement. Measurement and calculation are extremely important in giving. For the gift to be perceived as sincere, proper, from the heart, it must be measured and calculated for the benefit of the recipient; it must be oriented outward rather than inward to oneself.

The wallet the teacher sent and the book the minister gave did not meet these requirements. The teacher may have thought that her long letter of explanation about her senior citizen discount conveyed how careful and conscientious she was, as a greedy person would have simply kept all the money, even though only half had been used for transportation to and from the wedding. But from Mrs. Ueda's point of view, the teacher came across as making calculations for her own benefit, as trying to call attention to herself with her many words. The minister's book on

Christianity was also full of his own pronouncements. This gift was seen as selfish, inward-oriented, as avoiding giving up money that would have been both a material sacrifice and a symbol of orientation to the outside and therefore respect and concern for the bride and groom.

Conclusion

Through my experience of listening to the ways in which people actually talk about giving and receiving, I have been led to think of the relationship between gifts and commodities in more fluid and dialectical terms. In thinking about giving as an interactional form, I am attempting to incorporate a more dynamic model of self, other, and the larger world, and espe-

cially of the complex configurations of these terms that arise in particular types of transactions. It is not primarily that the gift as an object embodies the giver's identity, but rather that the gift object signifies the act of giving itself. The object, like both giver and receiver, exists in a social and even cosmic context. As a material object, the gift signifies the whole context, and especially it makes tangible what is otherwise intangible: the relationship between the giver, the receiver, and the larger world. Finally, although the gift act may appear as if it has been determined by prior circumstances, by its appearance it also projects outward and backward; it situates people, it changes statuses, it builds relationships. There is a certain element of risk in giving. People seek to construct themselves and their relationships with others in particular ways, and sometimes they succeed and sometimes they fail.

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