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Gift-Giving as Relationship-Building between the U.S. and Japan

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Abstract

This article will demonstrate the significance of the role of gift-giving in the *omiyage* industry in Japan. The role of gifts in the *omiyage* industry will be situated and argued as an extension of U.S.–Japan grassroots public diplomacy. The article will also serve as a truncated exploration into how gifts function to strengthen everyday political, professional, and personal relationships between the U.S. and Japan. Implications drawn in this article will seek to address why the question concerning a philosophy of gifts matters for friendship and relations between the U.S. and Japan. By exploring a position on non-reciprocity or asymmetry in the giving and receiving process, this article will offer the eventual takeaway that a true gift across cultures, specifically between the U.S. and Japan, is one with no expectation for return. The author’s experience living in Japan for two-and-a-half years will shed light on the observations and suggestions for readers to ponder when they find themselves overseas with the choice to give or not give.

Gift-Giving as Relationship-Building between the U.S. and Japan

Part of the pre-departure training for incoming participants in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program includes a series of information sessions. One of the pieces of advice that stuck out to me was the discussion of *omiyage* in Japan. *Omiyage* refers to small gifts, souvenirs, or tokens of appreciation that are routinely given in all kinds of relationships in Japan. For instance, one might prepare an *omiyage* before meeting a new boss at work, assemble numerous *omiyage* for every co-worker on a team or in a department, or purchase a gift before entering someone's home when invited. It is a meaningful, symbolic, and rewarding part of Japanese culture.

New JETs are often instructed to think about small, suitcase-sized tokens of thought. They would ideally be individually wrapped and easy to distribute among many people in the new environments where one expects to interact with key people regularly. Common suggestions include some kind of snack, sweet, or safe object that is inexpensive and signifies where a person came from. *Omiyage* from the U.S. brought by a JET's hand to Japan can represent some aspect of the JET's hometown. During my two years of living in a rural part of Hyogo prefecture, Tanba-shi, I routinely called my parents back home and asked them to assist with *omiyage* by sending packages of small gifts in the mail for me to distribute. I made sure to keep the costs reasonable due to the shipping. Regardless of price, however, the ongoing gifting process in Japan was something to look forward to whenever meeting new people. It was a form of expression, a symbol of thoughtfulness, and a consideration for the other, communicating overall respect for the present and future stages of the relationship.

As Japan is often referred to as a collectivistic culture, one that values the good of the group over the good of the individual,¹ I learned how my co-workers viewed the gesture of one office member taking vacations or small trips on the weekends. Many times, on Monday mornings, I would walk into the teacher's staff room to find a tiny individually wrapped edible treat at my computer desk. You see, it had been non-verbally communicated that one of my co-workers had taken a trip somewhere and brought back an edible item for everyone to sample. The philosophy of this small gifting gesture was akin to "I had the privilege and time to get away from our town and workplace for a while and maybe not everyone has that luxury, so here is a small token to share

¹ Geert Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, no. 2 (2006).

where I went.” Some days, there would be a *senbei* (cracker) from Hiroshima, and other days there would be a piece of *baumkuchen* (German style cake) from Kyoto.

What struck me was the combination of both non-verbal and verbal communication around the event of the gift. While few words were required to initiate and execute some gifts in Japan, the verbal component became an important signal to the giver that what was given was in fact acknowledged and appreciated. In a way, the presence of the gift simply spoke for itself. Gifts, in this sense, express what may be otherwise inexpressible.² This was especially the case when meeting the families of Japanese friends for the first time. Even though I studied Japanese at advanced levels and abroad for years during my undergraduate education, I was not a fluent native speaker and there were bound to be communication gaps when interacting with new families in their homes when invited for dinner or family celebrations. To my great fortune, I happened to be invited very often into the homes of Japanese families. What became both a crucial and fun part of my interaction and relationship-building with Japanese people was the reciprocal exchange of various gifts over the years. Whether one gives out of reciprocity or obligation depends on the kind of relationship one has with others, personal or professional. For example, one may feel a mutual and equal gesture of giving, or reciprocity, when in the more personal and private context of one’s home. In the workplace, however, one may feel obligated to give objects as a way to keep peaceful and cooperative relations among employees. In both cases, whether reciprocal or obligatory, the gifts were able to say the words that both parties did not have the verbal articulation to say. Over the years, Japanese families and I learned about each other’s cultures by way of sharing and gifting various objects from our respective locations. The objects invited the telling of stories and conversations, promoting a grassroots modality of public diplomacy.

To arrive at these Japanese households empty handed would have been an act of thoughtlessness and laziness. The contexts of another person’s home or workplace allow the non-Japanese person to learn various cultural norms, such as when, where, and how to give something. This giving goes beyond material gifts and very much incorporates action. For example, I learned very quickly how to use my body to show appreciation in Japanese households. This specifically meant using the action of my body to assist in cleaning dishes after a meal, setting and clearing tables so that people could sit somewhere, enthusiastically getting chairs for other people, or preparing vegetables for washing, cutting, and cooking. The non-verbal communication of action and gift both

² Mary J. Eberhardinger, *A Rhetoric and Philosophy of Gifts*, (Lexington Books, forthcoming).

played a simultaneous, inextricable, and dialectical role in becoming a respected guest and eventually accepted member of Japanese families.

When handed any gift at all, what also became quickly important to me was the necessity to acknowledge and express gratitude. In some ways, the outward verbal expression of gratitude was sometimes more important than the object given itself. To put it simply, one must spend at least a little time examining the gift, commenting, thanking, and then presenting it somewhere. Rhetorically, the verbal acknowledgement becomes a gift itself.³ Respecting the object is part of a trace of the Shinto belief of reverence and spirituality in objects. To do anything less would be a sign of rudeness.

One of the most challenging aspects of reassimilating back to the U.S. was reaccustoming to American ways of giving, doing, and thinking about the other. Sometimes, I wondered why people were not using their bodies as much to show gratitude or acknowledge the thoughtfulness of giving anything at all. It was important that I learned to ease up. I learned to not hold the same expectations for everyone and not overthink some of the stark differences between the cultures of the U.S. and Japan. The good news is that today, I enjoy blending things and lessons learned from Japan with customs back home in ways that honor the traditions of *omiyage* and relationship building. For example, ways that I incorporate Japanese life into my American life include finding Asian grocers, taking *ikebana* (the Japanese art of flower arranging) classes, and pursuing my research interests about Japan. This is demonstrated in an article I published about Japanese Manner Posters⁴ and more recently, a forthcoming book about the system of gifts and its implications for intercultural friendship, international cooperation, and peace. This is my way of blending Japan into my life in meaningful ways that are fulfilling, satisfying, and hopefully, educational for my readers and students. In addition, I have taught in higher education for ten years, so my teaching philosophy also incorporates Japanese themes as a way to share my passion with more people.

What *omiyage* teaches us about U.S.–Japan relations is that the non-verbal rhetorical power of the gift communicates what otherwise cannot be verbally communicated. At best, and when given with no expectations attached, the diplomacy of the gift is authentic, persuasive, and effective. The

³ Michael J. Hyde, *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgment: A Philosophical and Rhetorical Inquiry* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006).

⁴ Mary J. Eberhardinger, “A Semiotic Analysis of Iconicity in Japanese Manner Posters,” *The Southern Semiotic Review*, no. 2 (2013): 2.

soft power, or mere attraction, incurred⁵ by the gift experience just might have the rhetorical capacity to bridge differences and open dialogue. This kind of giving orients us to thinking about our responsibility to the other or being the other's keeper.⁶ It serves to maintain peaceful relations, enter intercultural friendships, make lasting impressions, and communicate goodwill. To go out of one's way in order to share one's culture with the other can sometimes be most meaningfully expressed by way of a gift. It is also possible, however, to give for the mere sake of giving and to preserve one's face. When giving takes a purely impression management role between the U.S. and Japan, some of the grassroots diplomacy becomes lost. We must remain careful to not give in order to seek praise, attention, or credit. The giving should be done as an asymmetrical responsibility⁷ to promoting goodwill, peace, friendship, and intercultural understanding between the U.S. and Japan.

⁵ Joseph Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 3.

⁷ Patricia Huntington, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity and Practical Agency: Contemporary Dilemmas of Feminist Theory in Benhabib, Young, and Kristeva," in *Political Phenomenology: Essays in Memory of Petee Jung*, eds. Lester Embree and Hwa Yol Jung (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 353-78.

Author Biography

Dr. Eberhardinger taught English in Japan as an Assistant Language Teacher on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program from 2008 to 2010 in the rural mountain town of Tanba-shi, Hyogo Prefecture. She holds a BA in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte where she also earned a minor in Japanese language and culture, an MA in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a PhD in Rhetoric from Duquesne University. She is currently a Lecturer for the Department of Communication at Central Washington University. Her book, *A Rhetoric and Philosophy of Gifts*, will be published on March 15, 2021. The author can be reached by email at mjeberhardinger@gmail.com.