

Gift-giving: Warming Social Ties and the Economy

By Patricia Massy

A few years ago Matsuya, a department store in Tokyo's fashionable Ginza shopping district, needing a banner theme for the last months of the year, came up with the slogan GIFTING. Although it may sound strange to native speakers of English, this slogan produced out of a dictionary actually fits perfectly the context for which it was chosen.

The giving of gifts in Japan is an institution unto itself. It can be divided into three major categories, as possibly gifts in all societies can: those that are given out of the pure desire to bring happiness to the giftee, those that are given out of gratitude, and those that are given out of a desire to receive some reciprocation. The last two in particular are what Matsuya's GIFTING was describing.

There are two times of the year when "gift-giving" is de rigueur: mid-summer when it is called *o-chugen* and year-end when it is called *o-seibo*. Note that the honorific "o" is added to these gift-giving seasons. A whole floor of a department store will be set aside for the display of gifts. Customers need only to browse through the aisles and pick up cards printed with the code numbers of the gifts they have selected. Next, the customer fills out an order form with the name, address, and telephone number of each person who is destined to receive a gift. Shoppers can also order directly from gift catalogs published by the department store. Smaller stores, too, make sure that their clientele are supplied with pamphlets describing their own gift packages.

Who might these giftees be? On a personal level, anyone who has performed or is performing some special favor may be the recipient of a gift. This could include tutors, flower arrangement teachers, professors at private universities, lawyers, doctors,



Both perfectly presented, a popular actress in kimono advertises a year-end gift of an expensive seaweed called nori

or the landlady. As can be seen, the fact that these people are also being paid for their services does not eliminate the need to show one's gratitude. Seldom-met relatives sometimes are also remembered. In some cases, old friends will send seasonal gifts out of pure affection. On a business level, office employees might send a gift to the person directly above them, such as the section chief. As the duty of sending out these gifts usually falls on the wife, who also takes care of the children's private tutor, etc., etc., the majority of gift shoppers happen to be women.

Companies send out gifts to the presidents and directors of other companies, to advisors, auditors, and

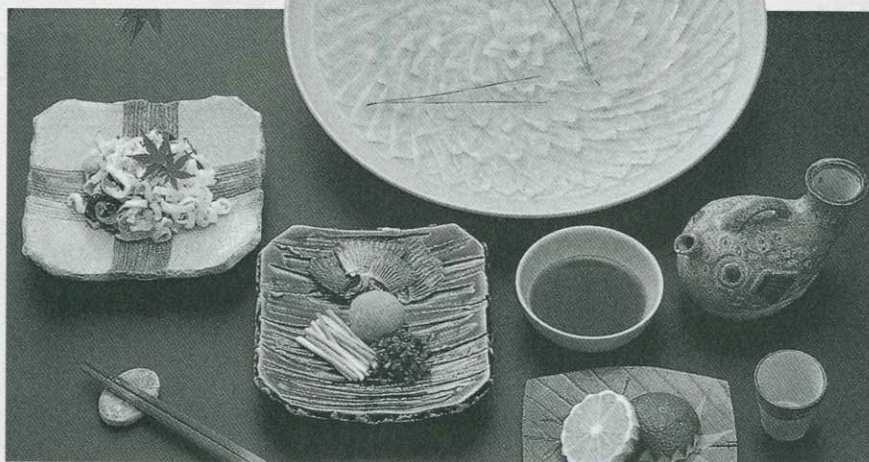
to any other people with whom they wish to keep on good terms. To receive a gift from a company, therefore, means that you are valued for some reason or another. Conversely, when the usual *o-seibo* gift fails to appear before the end of December, you could assume that your services are no longer needed, or that the company is not thriving. Aware that companies will be sending out a large volume of gifts, department stores will have a representative visit the company with a catalog and take the orders from the section in charge of gift-giving.

And what might the gifts be? Emphasis is placed on practicality: things for the house and things to eat.

Photo: Yamamoto Norien Co., Ltd.

These are packaged in sets starting at ¥1,000 and moving up by ¥500 increments to ¥10,000 or so. In a reinterpretation of the Bible, "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required," the greater the gift, the more is the worth that is expected from the recipient. This writer's seems to be somewhere between ¥1,000 and ¥1,500 because the packages that arrive by *takkyubin* delivery service usually contain something like two small tins of Twinings tea, 10 bars of rose-scented soap (in good years the soap is aloe), or a set containing two bars of processed cheese, two rounds of cheese triangles and two tins of Hokkaido butter.

On the other hand, fortune is on my side in the form of a friend whose husband owns a business with contacts established several generations back. From this source I receive the overflow of seaweed, bonito shavings, *yokan* (blocks of sweet bean jelly) and green tea, all gifts in the ¥5,000 range. At the end of the year, I have been allowed to share in a whole salted salmon, fresh oysters in the shell, and sliced beef preserved in *miso*. Once I



Even casserole dinners like this one of sliced blowfish are packaged as gifts

was invited over to eat blowfish. Even my much-gifted friend was astonished by this gift. The paper-thin slices of blowfish were to be dunked in a hot casserole heated at the table, and the set came accompanied with not only the dipping sauce but also the condiments, including green onions already neatly chopped.

Most households, however, receive something like a set of cooking oil, which often is combined with seasoned

sausages from the same producer. In the summer a set of canned juices or a box of thin *somen* noodles (with dipping sauce) fits the average budget. Although luxury brands like Fauchon run up high sales during the gifting seasons, in general practical items are chosen. In former days practicality sometimes went to extremes, such as three kilos of sugar packed in a plastic bucket.

Unfortunately what is one person's idea of practicality often turns out to be the other person's predicament. What to do with 10 boxes of bath salts?

The problem of multiples of needless gifts is exacerbated by the many other occasions when gifts obligatory. Wedding guests need not necessarily send a wedding gift, but they must arrive at the wedding reception with a proper amount of clean new notes nicely presented in special envelopes decorated in red or gold. The money is to defray the cost of the reception and to help the young couple get started in their new life. A return gift, however, is now required of the newlyweds — or rather of their families who are footing the bill. It is not uncommon to see on the subway a man or woman dressed in formal wear and carrying a huge shopping bag or two. They have been to a wedding reception. When they get home and unpack the bags, they will find a tiny



Practical gifts are a set of oil and seasonings, a set of cheese and butter items, and sliced beef preserved in miso

Photo: Isetan Company Limited

box with a square of wedding cake and likely one or two of the following: a set of dinner plates, a teapot with 5 teacups, a lacquered tray or bowl, a set of bath towels, a "husband and wife" set of lacquered soup bowls, or two sheets.

Dying is as problematic as getting married for the family involved — and the aftermath as bothersome for the guests. Again guests pay their respects with envelopes of money, this time in subdued black and gray.

The family repays their kindness with a gift sent out after the 49th day. This time possible presents are green tea, a set of towels, a blanket, a "towelket" (a terrycloth blanket), or a lightweight summer comforter. After attending a wedding or two and several funerals, a person has accumulated more towels and sheets, plates and trays than can ever be used in one family. And more gifts keep coming in as monetary gifts for births, graduations, entering adulthood, and first jobs are acknowledged.

As if there were not enough occasions for giving gifts already, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, and Valentine's Day have become a social necessity. Stores are now even promoting gifts at Halloween. In Japan, Valentine's Day has taken on a different meaning: women give chocolates to men. This is especially strange as most Japanese men dislike chocolate. Not only are boyfriends on the receiving end. Mothers give chocolates to their sons and "OL" (office ladies) feel required to give chocolates to their superior, who then must return the favor with white chocolate on "White Day." The poor man, he has already had foisted upon him numerous socks and ties and handkerchiefs all requiring a return gift.

Finally the Japanese must not forget to return home from a trip with presents for the family, the office, friends, and neighbors. Even an overnight at a hot spring will trigger the "I-have-to-take-something-to-the-office" reflex. In this way the economy of many a remote village is



In Japan the newly-weds are the ones who give the china

sustained by the local *meibutsu* (famous products) it is able to sell to visitors. Food is a major take-home present, and the variety of sweets, pickles, and other local specialties is as fascinating as it is limitless.

The giving and receiving of presents thus takes up a large part of the Japanese life, and a person's budget. Not only upon visiting a friend's house, but even when calling on an office, a visitor should appear with a box of cakes. It would seem that all this obligatory gifting would diminish the wish to give except when absolutely necessary. On the contrary, the Japanese love to give. Local specialties keep arriving at odd times of the year out of pure generosity. Selections are even provided by the post office, all packaged and ready to go: sun-dried saurel, salmon roe, locally produced ham, apples, peaches, mushrooms, noodles, and even eggs. Perishable products are kept under refrigeration until the moment they arrive at the door. A friend in Nagano sends me luscious Muscat grapes, a neighbor brings over a large, juicy apple-pear, an acquaintance crochets a bookmark, another brings over freshly baked bread, and still another makes me a hand-dyed T-shirt.

What makes these gifts particularly endearing is the words with which they are presented: "If you would accept

this trifle, you would give me much pleasure." Although the phrasing is conventional, the underlying thought that the giftee is doing the gifter a favor removes the ugliness of egotism from the way the Japanese give gifts. The Japanese long ago discovered what Nietzsche wrote at the other side of the globe: "Should not the giver be thankful that the receiver received? Is not giving a need? Receiving a mercy?"

They also discovered that needless spending makes for a richer life. At the time of the 8th Shogun Yoshimune, a number of anti-luxury edicts were imposed in order to resolve the financial crisis facing the shogunate. In the Tokugawa family seat of Nagoya, however, the daimyo Tokugawa Muneharu encouraged spending by himself ordering extravagant items from the local tradesmen. As a result, the Nagoya area was the only place in Japan at the time to enjoy a booming economy, much to the annoyance and bewilderment of the shogunate. **JJI**

Patricia Massy has a degree in fine arts from the University of North Carolina. She teaches at Kanto Gakuin University and writes and lectures on traditional crafts.