

Is It Necessary to Give and Receive Souvenirs?

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ABSTRACT

Giving souvenirs (omiyage, goodies) is a custom unique to Japanese people. Westerners do not follow this custom; although other Asians share it to some degree, it is not as prevalent as it is in Japan. Souvenirs are chosen with thoughtful consideration for the recipient and are usually something from the place the person has traveled to. Originally, this custom played an important role in the expression of gratitude and proof of consideration. However, today it can simply be considered social etiquette. Choosing souvenirs can be stressful and depressing. People who have received a souvenir often feel obligated to give something in return. This custom has gradually faded, reducing opportunities for souvenir exchange. In this study, we examine the causes and prospects for the culture of gift-giving.

Keywords: Giving and receiving souvenir, social etiquette, gift, present, Omiyage

INTRODUCTION

Frequent souvenir-giving (omiyage) is a uniquely Japanese custom¹. “Souvenirs” refer to items (gifts) linked to a travel destination, typically purchased during a trip to share with friends, colleagues, or family^{2,3}. They can also be purchased for oneself. This is distinct from gifts given on birthdays, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, etc., or commemorative gifts given at events (it is not simply a present). While the westerners have no such custom at all, other Asians do follow this custom, but it is not as prevalent as in Japan¹.

Souvenirs are usually chosen with the recipient in mind and they originate from the destination visited². When given to oneself, it is usually purchased as a memento of the trip or a keepsake for later use. In recent years, people have been giving souvenirs not only to relatives or people with whom they have a personal relationship, but also to classmates, colleagues, and superiors. Originally, this custom signified an expression of gratitude and thoughtfulness. However, today it is simply considered social etiquette. To announce a business trip, some people buy sweets and other items to distribute to colleagues. But choosing souvenirs can be stressful and depressing. Consequently, even when going on exciting trips, people keep their plan a secret to avoid the obligation of giving souvenirs. People who have received souvenirs before often feel obligated to return them, and this cycle can continue indefinitely until the relationship ends, such as when they move or change jobs. Furthermore, not giving souvenirs, despite going on a trip, can lead to strained relationships.

Recently, this custom has become less formal, and opportunities to give souvenirs have decreased³. This study considers the causes and prospects for the culture of souvenir-giving.

Diverse reasons for giving souvenirs

There is a school of thought that divides gifts into formal and casual¹. Gifts that are seasonal (yearly cycles) (such as year-end gifts or Christmas presents) and those that are given at specific life stages (such as wedding gifts or birth gifts) are considered formal. On the contrary, casual gifts include those given for special occasions (such as a store opening or passing a school entrance exam) and personal gifts (such as a gift for a loved one). Formal gifts generally have a set time for delivery; therefore, many traditional gifts fall into this category¹. Casual gifts are widely adopted as a way to physically express feelings of consideration for others over a flexible timeline. Among casual gifts, personal gifts with a higher degree of freedom can be further divided into two categories. The first type is a gift given to a lover or spouse as an expression of affection. The second type includes gifts given to friends, colleagues, etc. with the aim of maintaining relationships. Here, these personal gifts fall under the category of souvenirs. The time

of the year to travel is not fixed and can be altered to personal preference. As there is a high degree of freedom, some people travel very frequently.

The French word “souvenir” is commonly used to translate the Japanese term “omiyage,” and is used throughout this article. The primary meaning of “souvenir” is something bought for oneself as a keepsake or memento, which fundamentally differs from the Japanese term “omiyage,” which primarily refers to something given to others^{4,5}. Notably, the Japanese term “omiyage” has two connotations: something to bring back memories of a trip (souvenir), and a gift as a memory or proof of the trip. While gifts were originally ones based on specific rituals or customs, “omiyage” has a more every day, casual element³. In Japan, the idea is more about letting people know that you have traveled than giving expensive gifts. This difference is thought to lead to significant differences in the nature of the souvenir product itself (price, quantity, etc.) and purchasing behavior.

There are various theories about the origin of the word “souvenir” (“omiyage” in Japanese), but the most common are the gifts given out at old shrines, the act of looking up (pronounced “miageru” in Japanese), and gifts (a reference to the origin of local products; the Japanese kanji is pronounced “dosanhin” phonetically). The words omiyage and dosanhin are used in many ancient documents from the Muromachi period (approximately 1300 A.D.). During the Edo period (circa 1700 A.D.), as visits to shrines and temples and travel became more popular, the custom of bringing back local specialties from those destinations spread, forming the foundation of today’s culture of souvenir-giving³. However, souvenirs have come to play a different role today (Table 1). The purpose of giving souvenirs was to convey gratitude, deepen relationships with others, and show courtesy, but in recent years they are being used to facilitate interactions and as good business etiquette, and their original meaning has changed slightly.

The typical recipients of souvenirs are family, friends, superiors and large groups of people in the same department at work or school⁶. Friends are classified into various levels based on whether they work at the same place, how often they see each other, whether they hang out together on weekends, and whether they are best friends. Even superiors are thought to have different levels of relationships depending on how far apart in age they are, whether they work at the same company, how often they see each other, whether they have a relationship wherein they talk on a regular basis, and whether they need to use honorific language or other forms of speech. Depending on the stage, various souvenirs are selected, as listed in the next section.

As for souvenirs, certain requirements apply: food items featuring graphics such as local scenery or logos, local specialties (specialties are items that are made in a particular region or widely known to be made in that region; they can or are made in other regions as well and are well-known), well-known or standard items, items that are easy to distribute, reasonably priced items, attractively packaged items, and delicious-looking items (Table 2). Regarding gifts to the workplace, local specialties are often given as souvenirs, and for colleagues and superiors at the workplace, items that are easy to distribute, reasonably priced, and standard are chosen^{4,6}. This is owing to the psychological pressure of giving souvenirs and to avoid any perception of strangeness by the recipients⁴. In addition to food, the items listed in Table 3 are also commonly used as souvenirs. This is because local specialties are not limited to food; items such as woodwork and cosmetics, and branded products are often given as souvenirs because they may be cheaper at the travel destinations than in Japan owing to customs duties and other reasons, or the products may be sold only overseas. Funny products are sometimes given to close friends, but they are not often used because they may be interpreted as having sexual or obscene connotations, and people at the company may question their dignity.

Changes in souvenir-giving culture

Survey results showed that people in Japan currently give gifts less frequently. Figure 1 shows the results of a survey on whether people plan to give “oseibo” (traditional Japanese gifts given at the end of the year to express gratitude to those who have helped them throughout the year). This shows that the number of people who actually give “oseibo” declines with age¹. As younger generations get older, they bring along new trends which include individualism, remote work, reduced opportunities for travel, and changing consumption styles⁵. The older generation may feel a strong sense of obligation to give gifts to maintain work or other relationships. Contrarily, younger people do not seem to have such thoughts as older people do or perhaps see no need for them. In Japan, there have been longstanding expressions such as repaying favors and fulfilling obligations, and it is believed that the foundation of souvenir-giving culture is a strong sense of gratitude or a strong sense of obligation to repay¹. This is a widespread belief among older people. However, younger people tend to be less concerned about such behaviors (ties). The burden of having to be considered by the giver and the fatigue of having to react by the receiver are also thought to contribute to this decline. However, gifts today are very diverse, and not all are given out of a sense of obligation. It cannot be said that all young people have stopped giving souvenirs. Rather than the typical souvenirs listed in Table 3, people sometimes give memorable souvenirs such as photos or email messages via smartphones, even if they have lesser tangible value. However, this has not been explored in detail. It has long been known that anything that can be taken home can be used as a souvenir, regardless of whether the person is young—such as a piece of rock found on a trip, a seashell picked up on the beach, or an admission ticket to a tourist attraction⁷. Younger generations may prioritize experiences over material things and seek other ways to share their travel experiences, such as sharing stories of fun

experiences⁵). Gifts that emphasize experiences and empathy, such as going to an amusement park together on anniversaries or giving paid items in online games, are becoming increasingly common, especially among younger generations, and it seems that souvenirs from travels are becoming similar.

Let us consider the example of chocolate giving on Valentine's Day, February 14¹). When the culture of giving chocolate on Valentine's Day first spread in Japan, it was primarily a personal gesture of affection, with women giving chocolate to men they liked. In recent years, the practice of same-gender friends giving chocolate to each other has increased, whereas the practice of obligatory chocolate giving to men, even if there is no love between them, has declined. Although people continue to give chocolate to loved ones as an expression of affection, the custom of giving it to coworkers and friends is declining. These trends combine various elements of relationship maintenance that influence one's environment, leading to a shift from giving chocolate to the opposite gender to giving it to close same-gender friends. This change may reflect younger generations' desire to communicate more casually through gifts, or the sense that maintaining uniform communication with everyone is unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I explain what "omiyage" (gifts) are, why they are exchanged in Japan, and why this behavior has been declining in recent years. The formal customs of ochugen (summer gifts given to relatives and those who have helped to express gratitude) and omiyage are declining, but this is not a one-sided decline; it could also be seen as an update to a more rational and considerate style⁵). It is not that the former role of souvenirs is invalid or replaced, but rather that the relationships of love and friendship that were previously maintained broadly and shallowly through souvenirs have become more narrowly and deeply perceived. Because the traditional method of giving souvenirs (such as food) has changed to less tangible forms (such as electronic data), it may appear that the number of souvenirs has decreased as it has become difficult for others to understand the trends. Whether in the past or present, human interaction is necessary, and gifts such as souvenirs play a mediating role. Thus, it is imperative to carefully consider why souvenirs are given and how best to please the recipient. Even as times change, it is safe to say that a souvenir-giving culture that values connections between people will persist in different forms⁵).

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Table 1 Meaning of giving souvenirs

Major purpose category	Sub-purpose category	Explanation
Traditional cultural meaning	Expressing gratitude	Souvenirs is a way of expressing gratitude to people who looked after your home while you were away or who waited for you at home.
	Deepening bonds	Souvenirs allow you to share your travel experiences and deepen your relationships with others.
	Positioning as courtesy and good manners	In Japanese society, giving souvenirs is an established form of etiquette. It is particularly customary to distribute souvenirs after a trip or business trip, especially in the workplace or among relatives.
Modern role	Communication tool	Souvenirs are not simply an exchange of goods; they serve as a topic of conversation and facilitate smooth interactions.
	Use in business situations	Bringing souvenirs back from a business trip is also considered good business etiquette. It may also contribute to building trust.

Based on the contents of reference 3).

Table 2 Reasons for choosing food souvenirs such as sweets

Type	Description
Items with regional graphics	The destination is easily recognizable because it displays a logo or has a photo or picture.
Regional specialties	Fruit, or something that is abundantly harvested or sold in the area. They suggest something the giver ate while traveling.
Famous or classic items	Even sweets that are sold nationwide have a special taste that makes them almost like local specialties. Senbei (rice cracker), cookies, and Manju (steamed bun) are ubiquitous, yet almost no one dislikes them.
Easy to give away	When distributing to workplaces, etc., it is important to have a large number and variety of items that will be accepted by everyone.
Reasonably priced	If you need to purchase a large quantity, the unit price is low.
Nice-looking packaging	It features photos of delicious looking food and designs of famous characters.
Delicious-looking items	The packaging is designed in bright colors, and the contents are also in those colors.

Based on the contents of references 4) and 6).

Table 3 Types of popular souvenirs

Type	Specific examples
Confectionery	Regionally famous sweets, general sweets, national brand local sweets
Foods other than confectionery	Regional agricultural and marine products, regional agricultural and marine products, alcoholic beverages
Funny products and unique items (food)	Comedy items, giant-sized items, counterfeit/copy products, sexually themed products
Funny products and unique items (non-food)	Comedy items, giant-sized items, counterfeit/copy products, sexually themed products
Crafts and miscellaneous goods	Regional traditional crafts, key chains, figurines/miniatures, stationery, character goods, postcards/photos/posters/books, amulets (items representing people's wishes for protection from evil spirits, good fortune (good luck), protection), power stones, etc.
Clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry	Clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, brand-name goods

Based on data from references 2), 4), and 7).

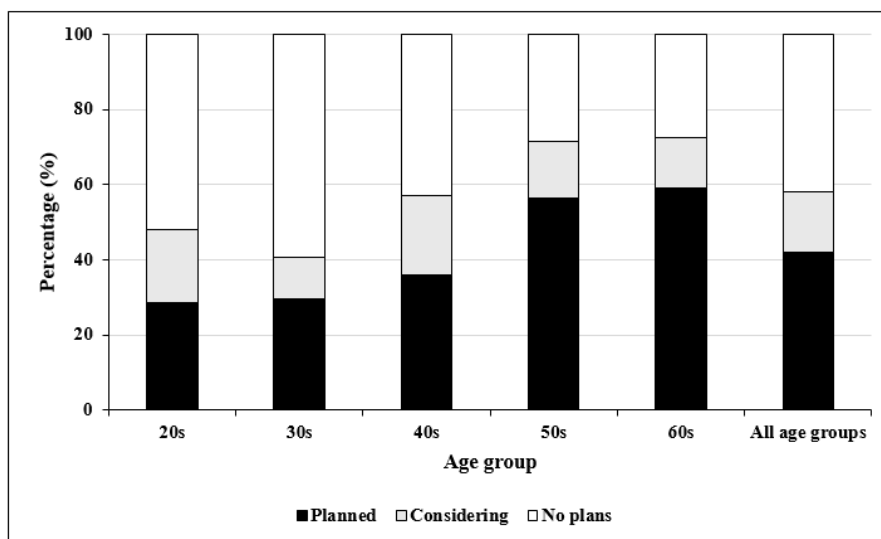


Figure 1 Whether or not people plan to give year-end gifts

Based on a survey conducted in 2012.

Based on data from reference 1).

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