

The *Senbetsu-Omiyage* Relationship: Traditional Reciprocity among Japanese Tourists

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Introduction

One of the many traditional customs of Japan is the giving of *senbetsu* to people who are going on trips. *Senbetsu* is a gift, usually money, given by friends and relatives. The giving of *senbetsu* always ends up in the receiving of *omiyage*, or souvenirs. There is an unwritten law that obliges tourists to bring back souvenirs to those who have given them *senbetsu*. This traditional custom of Japan has definite functions in Japanese society. In this paper, the historical background of the *senbetsu-omiyage* relationship and the continuing function of this tradition in Japanese society are discussed.

The History of Japanese Tourism and the *Senbetsu-Omiyage* Relationship

The Chinese character that now means “travel” originally meant “army.” Between the sixth and seventeenth centuries A.D., most of the travel occurring in ancient Japan had political or military implications. Travel was often for the conquest of enemy territory. Whether travel was offensive or defensive, it ended in battle. In battle, whether one lived or died was a matter of statistical probabilities and luck. Thus, life during travel was never assured.

As with military travel, other forms of traveling in ancient Japan involved great risk and many hardships. Travelers had to contend with nature, including unknown trails and weather conditions. Procuring food was another problem. It was difficult to carry food, but virtually impossible to obtain food in villages or towns where travelers might pass through. Villagers disliked strangers entering their villages and avoided associating with them. There was no way that a traveler could find a place to sleep inside a village residence. Although sleeping outside meant risking one’s life, travelers had no other choice. Bandits sought travelers’ money and property and would kill when necessary. Thus, travelers had to protect their own lives.

As a consequence of these dangerous traveling conditions, people tended to travel in groups. Indeed, from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries A.D., this was the exclusive form of travel in Japan. Travelers learned that there was power in numbers, because, when they moved in groups, bandits tended to leave them alone.

In the eighteenth century, an upsurge in group travel occurred. In the Edo period (1600-1867) (so named when the capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo, which is now Tokyo), which lasted until the Meiji Restoration, the Tokaido, or the road connecting these capitals, became the most heavily traveled route in the country. The famous book, *Tokaido-hiza-kurige* [*Foot Travel on the Tokaido*], published in the early 1700s, became a guide for ordinary travelers. It described the adventures of two people traveling the route with its renowned fifty-three “stations,” and, in highlighting the typical dangers and delights of tourism, it reinforced the idea that group travel was a mechanism for insuring the traveler’s safety. In addition, during this period, members of the Japanese aristocracy were known to travel with hundreds of people accompanying them. Thus, among the nobility, large-scale group tourism was the norm.

Despite the risk involved in traveling during this period, travelers were motivated to undertake journeys in order to participate in religious events. During the tenth century A.D., pilgrimages to religious shrines and temples

began to occur among the aristocracy, eventually spreading as a custom among the lower classes. The monetary contributions made by pilgrims were the major source of income for these religious institutions. Temples and shrines in such major centers as Kyoto did not have much difficulty in attracting pilgrims, but those in more distant settings did. Eventually, some of these institutions established organizations to help people to travel to the shrine or the temple. These organizations provided food and sleeping accommodations for pilgrims and led the way to the shrine.

Specially qualified people, called *sendatsu*, worked as organizers. They were somewhat comparable to today's travel agents and travel guides and were responsible for assuring that travelers made it to their destination safely. Another group, called *oshi*, were comparable to today's hotel managers. Their job was to look after travelers who had reached their destination. Both groups were affiliated with temples and shrines and divided up the potential travel market into nonoverlapping local territories, called *kasumi*. *Sendatsu* and *oshi* worked together to facilitate group tourism. Through this organized system of *sendatsu* and *oshi*, the number of group tours to temples and shrines increased, and these religious institutions benefited greatly.

With the development of the *sendatsu-oshi* system, many *ko* were organized in villages and towns. A *ko* was a group of individuals, often the entire village, who belonged to the same sect of Buddhism or Shintoism. The *ko* worked as a mutual assistance organization. People in a *ko* helped others in times of need and also rallied together to get things done. Another development was the system of *daisan-ko*, the purpose of which was to send a representative from a *ko* to the temple or shrine to which his *ko* members belonged. This system developed because most of the villagers could not afford to make the pilgrimage themselves. However, by each contributing a small amount of money, the villagers could afford to send one *ko* member, who would represent his fellow *ko* members there. This representative was responsible for traveling safely to the temple or shrine with the money he was given, and then praying for each member of the *ko* that he represented. He also was expected to buy *omamori*, or good luck charms, for each member of the *ko* at the temple or shrine. At that time, these good luck charms were the only form of souvenir available.

The relationship between the traveler and the members of his or her social group was remembered and ritually marked not only by the traveler, but by the family members left at home. In traditional times, when travel was dangerous, those back home observed taboos and carried out practices to insure the safety of the traveler. For instance, they continued to prepare a meal, called *kagezen* ("hidden meal"), for the absent person, and they were forbidden to comb their hair, kill lice, or indulge in unusual levity. People prayed for the traveler's safe return, and they believed that by having a hard time at home, they would insure that the traveler had an easy time on the road.

The *senbetsu-omiyage* relationship described in this paper derives from this early money-giving/souvenir-buying tradition. Whereas the Chinese character that now designates "souvenir" or "present" in the Japanese language means "products of the land," the original Chinese character meant "sacred charm," of the type attainable at early shrines and temples (Kato 1976:174). Thus, it appears that, over time, the meaning of "souvenir" broadened from the more narrow definition of a sacred charm obtainable in a particular temple or shrine to any products produced for sale in that area.

Hypotheses

My first hypothesis is that the historical implications of the giving of *senbetsu* and the reciprocal receiving of souvenirs are still valid in modern times. In the history of Japanese tourism, the *senbetsu-omiyage* relationship provided the way for an entire group to participate in travel indirectly. *Senbetsu* was a form of symbolic participation in travel for those *ko* members who could not afford to make the trip, as well as a symbolic tie for those travelers who were sent as representatives to their home *ko* group. Thus, this touristic practice served to reinforce group identity.

As Japan became modernized and the number of people who could afford to travel without the support of other *ko* members increased, the *ko* system began to lose its meaning and the number of *ko* groups dwindled. However, the *senbetsu-omiyage* custom remained and does so until today. As this paper will show, this traditional form of reciprocity still functions as a reinforcement of group consciousness.

In Japan today, the primary groups to which individuals belong involve family, school, and occupation. Although demands for souvenirs are never explicit, group members who offer *senbetsu* to the traveler have an implicit expectation that a souvenir will be given in return. When buying souvenirs, the traveler considers the characteristics of the group to which each recipient belongs. Much time is spent worrying and pondering over which souvenirs to buy for which group members. Even though the act of traveling entails the temporary desertion of the group, the group and its members are almost constantly in the thoughts of the Japanese tourist.

Therefore, I argue that the *senbetsu-omiyage* relationship is the manifestation of the individual tourist's ties to groups "back home" and is an indicator of the powerful influence each group has over the individual.

My second hypothesis is that the amount of money given as *senbetsu* and spent on souvenirs is carefully calculated by both the giving and receiving parties and is a reflection of many different factors. How much money is given as *senbetsu* depends on the traveler's status in the group and how far and how long the traveler will be away. How much money is spent on souvenirs depends on the recipient's relationship with the traveler. Calculation of the amount given and spent is not considered penurious. Rather, it is considered important to do so in order to give something "appropriate."

Methods

For this study, a questionnaire was administered to a group of Japanese visitors to the US, who were studying English in Berkeley, California. Basic demographic data were gathered from study subjects (e.g., age, occupation, purpose of travel, and length of stay in America), as was specific information regarding *senbetsu* and *omiyage* (e.g., Who gave you *senbetsu*? What is your relationship to those persons? What have you bought or are you planning to buy as souvenirs for those persons? How much do you intend to spend on souvenirs?). In addition, informal interviews were conducted with study subjects.

All subjects lived in a dormitory owned by the institution in which they were studying English. Everyone living in this dormitory was Japanese and interacted almost exclusively with other Japanese. These subjects spent their mornings in school and their afternoons shopping or sightseeing. Thus, they were substantially different from those Japanese tourists who come to the US to shop and sightsee only. On the other hand, from my own experience, I found no difference between study subjects and "normal" tourists with respect to *senbetsu* and souvenirs.¹

The subjects' ages ranged from twenty-one to twenty-nine. Most of the subjects were currently unemployed. Fifteen of the eighteen subjects were women. The average length of stay in America was one month.

Study Findings

The content of *senbetsu* consisted mostly of money. Nonmonetary *senbetsu* consisted of objects that a tourist might use on a trip (Table 1). Both types of *senbetsu* were intended for the support of the traveler on his or her journey, in accord with the historical implications of the custom.

People who gave *senbetsu* could be classified into three groups: relatives (including family members), former classmates, and friends from work (Table 2). These three groups are the primary ones to which the average Japanese youth who has finished college belongs. Interestingly, the lack of a neighborhood *senbetsu*-giving social group among Japanese young people is typical today. However, when the *ko* group was still an active form of social organization, the neighborhood group was primary, and *senbetsu*, therefore, was given mostly by neighbors.

The content of *omiyage* varied a great deal (Table 3). Souvenirs bought for relatives consisted primarily of whiskey for men and decorative objects for women. Whiskey is a popular souvenir among Japanese, because it is much cheaper in the US and can also be purchased duty free. The primary relatives for whom souvenirs were bought included parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers, and uncles and aunts. (Interestingly, no cousins were included.) Presumably, the age of most of these individuals, with the exception of brothers and sisters, was fifty years or older. In Japan, most older people have never visited the US, and their images about the country are

Table 1

Forms of Nonmonetary *Senbetsu*

Item	Number of Subjects Receiving
camera	3
candy	1
cassettes	1
clock	1
handkerchief	2
stuffed animal	1

Table 2

Groups Giving *Senbetsu*

Group	Number of Individuals Giving
relatives	43
former classmates	34
friends at work	7
neighbors	1

Table 3

Types of Souvenirs Bought for *Senbetsu*-Givers

<i>Senbetsu</i> -Giver	Souvenirs
father	whiskey; necktie
mother	watch; decorative objects
uncle	whiskey; pen
aunt	decorative objects; pen; chocolate
sister	perfume; decorative objects
brother	whiskey; chocolate
grandparents	decorative objects
former classmate	T-shirts; accessories; perfume
friend at work	watch; key holder; cosmetics; pen; accessories
neighbor	chocolate

gained only through the mass media and literature. For them, whiskey and decorative objects, such as paintings of American scenery or miniatures of famous buildings, are representative of America in general and are expected. Tourists recognize this fact and try to buy souvenirs to meet these expectations.

The most common souvenir purchased for former classmates was T-shirts with the words "Berkeley" or "University of California" on them. Former classmates, who are mostly in their twenties, expect souvenirs relating to the specific location of their friend's visit, rather than to the US as a whole. Also, T-shirts are an "informal" souvenir, which is indicative of the relationship between tourists and their former classmates, who are usually friends. T-shirts are representative of the way friends interact, which is casual and informal.

Relationships with friends from work are somewhat different from relationships with former classmates, and the souvenirs given to these friends are a manifestation of this difference. These souvenirs tend to be more expensive (e.g., watches, perfumes) and less casual. This is because relationships with working friends are recognized as being between two adults, who earn their living together and are *shakaijin*, or "society people." *Shakaijin* can no longer behave the way they did in school. Also, friends acquired through working may be older or in positions of seniority. If so, it is considered inappropriate to buy something cheap, because it may indirectly affect one's chances for advancement. As a result, buying souvenirs for friends at work poses the most difficult problems, according to study subjects.

The ratio of *senbetsu* spent for souvenirs to total *senbetsu* received did not vary according to the various *senbetsu*-giving groups (Table 4). The average amount spent for souvenirs was half of the amount received as *senbetsu*. Furthermore, people tended to spend less on people of their own age. For example, the average amount of *senbetsu* spent on former school friends or for sisters and brothers was only 30 to 40 percent of that received from them. Perhaps this is because expense is less important among this group than the uniqueness of the object received and its unavailability in Japan.

In Japan, unwritten laws govern the percentage of money that should be spent for souvenirs. Because most Japanese abide by these cultural rules, souvenir buyers need not worry about this aspect of *omiyage*, and souvenir recipients need not feel as though they were cheated by the tourist.

Among study subjects, each individual had a list of names of *senbetsu*-givers and a tally of the amount of *senbetsu* received. When study subjects went shopping for souvenirs, they took the list with them and shopped accordingly.

Conclusion

Japanese tourism developed as group tourism, and this form of tourism has never changed. The group orientation of Japanese tourism can be seen as a reflection of the nature of Japanese society. To wit, all tourists are members of various groups in Japan, and traveling functions to reinforce group identity. This occurs through the giving of pretravel gifts, or *senbetsu*, to the traveler by group members, which is, in turn, used by the traveler to buy suitable and carefully selected souvenirs, or *omiyage*, for those who have given *senbetsu*. As the evidence from this study shows, the relationship between the tourist and the *senbetsu*-giver, as well as the *senbetsu*-giver's souvenir expectations, are both important factors in the selection of *omiyage*. The touristic practice of *senbetsu*-giving/*omiyage*-receiving functions to secure individuals' relationships with other members of the group.

Thus, it can be seen that, with the weight of *senbetsu* in the Japanese tourist's pocket, the people left behind will never be forgotten. Until the day when *senbetsu* is no longer given, Japanese tourists will spend more time, money, and energy in tourist gift shops than anywhere else.

Table 4
Percentage of *Senbetsu* Used for Buying Souvenirs

	Percentage				
	100-80%	79-60%	59-40%	39-10%	9-0%
parents			3		
uncle, aunt	1		3	2	1
sister, brother	1		2	4	
grandparents	1		3	1	
former classmates	1		3	4	
friends at work	1	1	2	1	
neighbors					1

Notes

1. I took a group of study subjects to Yosemite National Park. Most of them spent their time taking pictures and buying souvenirs, just like "normal" tourists.

References Cited

Kato, Hidetoshi

1976 "Ryoko" Nihonjin no Seikatsu. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.