

BOOK REVIEW

Mediated by Gifts: Politics and Society in Japan, 1350–1850

Edited by Martha Chaiklin

Brill, 2017
xiv + 252 pages.



Reviewed by Karen M. GERHART

A compilation of essays examining historical gift-giving practices in Japan, *Mediated by Gifts: Politics and Society in Japan, 1350–1850* presents seven case studies in chronological order. In her introduction, Martha Chaiklin discusses contributions of earlier scholars, notably Befu, Gudeman, and Mauss, and offers examples of a wide variety of material objects and nonmaterial exchanges discussed here as “gifts.” Chaiklin suggests that what comprises a gift is based largely on how an object or action of exchange is perceived; she proposes that gifts can be “tangible or intangible, offer physical or emotional benefit, or they may merely create an obligation” (p. 5). The essays make full use of the elasticity of this definition. The strength of the volume, therefore, rests on how the individual essays expand the boundaries of that term through their discoveries of a wide variety of exchanges in the prescribed time period. All of the details are hard-won, excavated as they are from difficult-to-read and under-utilized primary sources, and a boon for researchers.

In chapter 1, “Unexpected Paths: Gift-Giving and the Nara Excursions of the Muromachi Shoguns,” Hiraku Kaneko examines gifts exchanged between shoguns Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Yoshinori, and Yoshimasa, and important temples and shrines in Nara from the late fourteenth to the late fifteenth century. Kaneko’s analysis creates a nuanced picture of exchange relationships that effectively facilitated upkeep and reconstruction at several important religious institutions, including Kōfukuji and Kasuga Shrine. The many gifts (armor, swords, and money) presented to the shoguns as tribute by religious institutions were ultimately returned to them as donations for repair projects. This arrangement satisfied both parties, creating a venue for the shoguns to display their munificence and benevolence and allowing the shrines and temples to rely on shogunal protection and favors in return.

Lee Butler’s essay, “Gifts for the Emperor: Signposts of Continuity and Change in Japan’s Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries,” examines entries in *Oyudononoue no nikki*, written by female palace officials between 1477 and 1826. Butler’s chapter, which focuses on gifts presented to the emperor in 1488 and 1500, reveals for example that in 1488 imperial family members male and female, male and female courtiers, monks and nuns (also temples and shrines), and warriors presented to the emperor an estimated 457 gifts—fresh and prepared food and drink, rare plants or animals, handicrafts, and religious artifacts (pp. 52–53). Butler’s main interest lies in the warrior givers of gifts. Using data for 1488 and

1500, he tracks how the quality and quantity of gift interactions with the emperor reflect important changes in the political motivations and shifting attitudes among warrior groups and individuals. The chapter is a rich mine of information.

In chapter 3, “Physician Yamashina Tokitsune’s Healing Gifts,” Andrew Goble examines *Tokitsune kyōki*, the diary of Kyoto aristocrat and physician, Yamashina Tokitsune (1543–1611). Tokitsune interacted with of all sorts of patients, and recorded names, ages, residences, occupations, parents, children, births, illnesses, and medicines. Goble’s essay provides an unparalleled look at gift-giving patterns and practices in an urban society, and demonstrates the importance of gift giving in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Goble has done yeoman’s work in bringing individual lives to our attention. Although not the focus of the essay, the information he provides on gifts offered by women patients and acquaintances—seasonal fruits, silver coins, paper and brushes, bolts of cloth, and ceramics—is remarkable and should strengthen our understanding of the economic and social standing of women in this period.

In “Tokugawa Tsunayoshi and the Formation of Edo Castle Rituals of Giving,” Cecilia Segawa Seigle first examines the development of Tokugawa gift-giving practices and, more specifically, the strict rules formulated for gift exchanges by the fifth shogun Tsunayoshi (r. 1680–1709). She then looks at the impact of his gift-giving protocols on the women of the Ōoku, namely his wives and concubines and other women related to the shogun, who were required to both give and receive gifts according to a strict code of reciprocity that reflected the current social and biological hierarchy at Edo Castle. The remainder of the chapter examines Tsunayoshi’s precedents for amassing wedding trousseaus for his daughters and his demands that all daimyo contribute to them, even obliging women of the Ōoku to give presents. Seigle concludes that Ōoku gift-giving practices offered women little power to exercise free will and resulted in “routine fossilized rituals by the end of the Edo period” (p. 160).

Emiko Ozawa’s chapter 5, “Mitsui Echigoya’s Gifts to the Tokugawa Shogunate,” examines how Mitsui Echigoya merchants used gifts in the eighteenth century to negotiate and define their relationship with the Tokugawa shoguns and with other officials in the government’s financial and commercial bureaus. By utilizing the Mitsui Bunko, Ozawa demonstrates the significant difference in quantity, quality, and rationale between the gifts Mitsui merchants presented to the shoguns and those they gave to members of the Bureau of Exchange. The former were not particularly valuable, given at certain annual celebrations, and intended to express the merchants’ appreciation for the shogun’s support and subservience. Bureau members, on the other hand, were treated as colleagues, with gifts to them given without regard to work requirements or events of the calendar. There is also evidence that at least some of their “gifts” to Exchange Bureau officials were intended to influence policy.

Chapter 6, “Travel and Gift Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Japan,” by Laura Nenzi, elucidates how gifts given and received at various stages of travel served as a mirror of new social relationships developing in early modern Japan. By examining gifts given by family and friends as farewell presents (*senbetsu*) and souvenirs (*miyage*) brought back by the traveler, Nenzi seeks to understand how travel-related gifts came to ease the fears of separation and death long associated with movement and separation. She demonstrates that extant lists of gifts purchased by travelers can be read as “social maps” to shed light on a

broad range of networks—personal, professional, religious, ideological, and political—that were active in the nineteenth century (p. 210). Nenzi also provides numerous examples of the role of women in gift giving, thereby broadening our understanding of the economics of travel for women at this time.

The focus of the final chapter, “Gift Exchange and Reciprocity: Understanding Antiquarian/Ethnographic Communities Within and Beyond Tokugawa Borders,” by Margarita Winkel does not examine gifts themselves, but rather the exchange relationships that developed among Japanese intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Winkel acknowledges that collectors and connoisseurs exchanged both information and objects (p. 220), but focuses her essay on “the *role* played by gifts ... in Tokugawa antiquarian life” (p. 221). Her discussion of exchange relationships among the members of the well-known circle of “curiosity lovers” called Tankikai, which included notables such as Tani Bunchō, Yamazaki Yoshinari, and Takizawa Bakin, provides pockets of fascinating details, such as the documented efforts of Suzuki Bokushi to publish his book on Echigo snow stories by working his connections with famous artists and literati in Edo and Kyoto. Through such examples, Winkel exposes how exchange relationships depended on the currying of favors among like-minded individuals who highly valued face-to-face communications. Winkel also creates a picture of the “delicate exchanges of concrete gifts, knowledge, and acknowledgments” that played an important role in Japanese interactions with scholars and collectors from Europe and Southeast Asia (via the Dutch East India Company), and led eventually to Japanese individuals becoming known abroad and being included in foreign publications and foreign societies (p. 231).

Mediated by Gifts covers gift giving across a span of five hundred years in the most useful way possible: by focusing on the details extracted from primary sources through painstaking research. If the essays are sometimes short on analysis and contextualization, it is perhaps because they provide so much information that it is impossible to do justice to all of it in one chapter. The book provides an essential foundation for further research on a myriad of questions, many of them relevant to studies of gender, economics, and politics.