[R]eciprocity is one way of groping with uncertainty at the limits of a community: making a gift secures, probes, and expands the borders of a group.

STEPHEN GUDEMAN

As he was making the rounds on New Year’s Day, 1825, the head (shōya 庄屋) of Muramatsu 村松 village (in Echigo 越後 Province) could not help but notice the voluminous amount of gifts that visitors and residents exchanged. At the height of the Bunka-Bunsei 文化文政 eras (1804–1829), during which a degree of prosperity had spread to the rural areas as well, the practice of offering and receiving material objects should not have struck the shōya as extravagant or even noteworthy, but it did, and he took action. While he acknowledged the popularity of leisurely travel and of trips to hot springs resorts, he also called for a moratorium on the exchange of gifts between travelers and home-based peers. With his request, the Muramatsu village head failed to see (or did he? More on this below) that gifts were more than just inert objects with a price tag: they were material manifestations, and reminders, of bonds between individuals.

Scholars have long posited that the exchange of presents marks transitional moments in a person’s life cycle and have made a case for the symbolic meaning of a gift as a mirror of social relations. For example, Morita Toyoko 森田登代子 has used records pertaining to gifts exchanged on festive and sad occasions (births, marriages, funerals, memorial services, visits to shrines) by the members of one family of medicine wholesalers in Kyoto, from the late


eighteenth century to the early Meiji period, to examine patterns of interaction between relatives by blood and by marriage. Across cultures, the offering of presents accompanies such rites of passage as weddings, funerals, the birth of a child, the changing of the seasons, and even groundbreaking ceremonies for the construction of new buildings. Travel is arguably one such transitional occasion. Although Victor Turner’s postulation that (religious) travel constitutes an extra-normative and ‘liminal’ experience has been long reassessed, anthropologists still treat travel as a phenomenon in its own right. Additionally, historians have argued that certain journeys served as acts of self-discovery and as coming-of-age ceremonies for young adults.

This chapter makes two points. First, it contends that, as a rite associated with the various stages of travel, the exchange of gifts in early modern Japan was part and parcel of a complex choreography aimed at easing a transition—from inside to outside, from outside to back inside, from near to far, and vice versa—and at protecting personal connections that distance and separation threatened to destabilize, all the while weaving new patterns of social relations along the way. Farewell presents (senbetsu 餞別) not only functioned as reminders of bonds compromised by the imminent departure, but also alleviated the pain of separation by allowing travelers to bring a “piece of home” on their journeys. They were, in other words, threads of continuity. So were the gifts exchanged on the road, as they enabled travelers to connect (or reconnect) with distant friends, fellow wayfarers, or members of professional networks—creating pockets of familiarity in the midst of the unfamiliar. And last, souvenirs shared upon return (miyage 土産) facilitated the reintegration of

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