

*On This Topic*



## The Politics of Gift-Giving and Diplomatic Gifts in Traditional Korea

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### Significance of Gift Exchange in Human Relationships

Why do we exchange gifts in personal, social, and international relationships? What objects do we select for gift-giving, and why those specific ones? What functionalities do we have in mind when engaged in the gift exchange in human relationships? These are the main questions that interest me and my colleagues. The answers to these questions are expected to provide very important clues to establishing the historical significance of gift-giving. Furthermore, they will suggest some insights for a better understanding of human social behavior in general.

All human actions are in some sense interactions mediated by exchanges of objects—material or non-material. Many actions that appear to be unilateral processes in fact involve reciprocal effects. Sometimes these interactions require an immediate and direct reaction. Oftentimes, however, they accompany a delayed and indirect response, which makes the interactions appear one-sided. If an action does not initiate any response from others, it is not a social action, but that of an atomized and unencumbered individual. However, if, and only if, an individual is engaged in any kind of social relationship, this type of isolated action is functionally impossible. All actions are directed toward somebody else and expect a

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response from that other. If one does not satisfy others' expectations, he/she will fail to construct social trust in human relationships.

Satisfaction of the other's expectations creates surplus value in human interaction. As German sociologist Georg Simmel argued, an exchange is a matter of securing goods at the cost of others which one gives up, and in such a manner that the end result yields a surplus of satisfaction over what was obtained before the action (Simmel 1971, 44, 47). This implies that each party gives the other more than he/she himself/herself possesses. This is especially true when the exchange is intended to satisfy the psychological gratification of both parties.

Unlike the pure economic transaction, which aims at reaching an equality of value, exchanges for subjective satisfaction of the giver and the recipient are not based on a zero-sum assumption, and thus can create more value after the exchange than before, if both parties are happy with the result of that exchange. In this case, social exchange is considered a process of value creation.

This aspect of social interaction is specifically applicable to the exchanges of gifts between individuals, groups, and nations. Like many other actions, gift-giving is comprised of reciprocal effects, although it sometimes appears to be a unilateral process. The mutual benefit of gift exchanges naturally gave rise to their prevalence throughout human history. Since ancient times, various types of gifts were exchanged by various actors. At the most general level, gift exchanges can be classified into two categories: individual and collective. It is often argued that an individual gift is imaged as a token of a person's affection with no strong obligations to reciprocate, as it happens on the occasions of birthdays, weddings, funerals, etc., while the collective gift is part and parcel of a series of symbolic actions with wider and profound social implications. Though individual gifts are ostensibly motivated by the goodwill of the givers, they frequently include much more complicated intentions and social impacts than may be apparent. The differences between these two different types of gifts are more rhetorical than real, and more in degrees than in kind (Yan 2023, 1–2).

In contradiction to the argument for the divergence between individual and collective gift exchanges, both basically contain the same quality, which

is social and reciprocal. Marcel Mauss, a French anthropologist, was one of the great (probably the greatest) contributors who aptly pointed out the reciprocity of gift-giving. He opened a new means of understanding the gift by refuting the utilitarian motives of self-interest in the gift exchange. Aside from the gift economy, which focuses solely on the individual pursuit of utility, Mauss emphasizes how the pervasive impact of the gift reaches all aspects of society: ethical, moral, religious, social, and political. He surveys various types of gift exchange in archaic societies around the world, including Samoa, Maori, North America, Ancient Rome, Hindu, and Germanic societies, and so on.

After exploring gift exchanges in all these areas, he concludes that this economy of gift exchange fails to conform to the principles of the so-called natural economy or utilitarianism (Mauss 1967, 63, 69). Rather, he argues that objects of exchange have values that are emotional as well as material, and the emotional values involved in this exchange frequently take the form of ethics and morality. Therefore, the gift not yet repaid debases the man who accepts it, particularly if he does so without thought of reciprocity. Sometimes the recipients feel obliged to return more than they receive: the return gift is bigger and more costly. Mauss eventually extends his observation of archaic societies to the present day by suggesting that these principles of gift exchange, based on obligation, spontaneity, and reciprocity, are still valid in contemporary societies.

These principles of gift exchange are extant in a wide variety of historical and social contexts. For instance, an examination of gift-giving practices in Japan reveals that gifts, tangible or intangible, offer physical or emotional benefits, while simultaneously creating a sense of obligation (Chaiklin 2016, 5). The utmost obligation attached to the practices of gift-giving is reciprocation; that is, one is morally obligated to give a gift when custom demands it and to pay it back when one receives it. Thus conceived, the institution of gift-giving is defined in terms of reciprocity, in which the give-and-take of social relations should be fairly and rigidly balanced. In Japan, it is argued that the most important motivating force behind gift-giving is the concept of *giri* 義理, a moral imperative to perform one's duties toward other members of one's group (Befu 1968, 450). Due to the morality

of obligatory reciprocation, the gift exchange often works as a form of social insurance, helping each party, especially when they are in urgent need. In a society where a public welfare system is not well established, an individual has to rely upon a personal network to gain relief funds in the form of collective gifts when he/she needs a lot of financial resources for a wedding, medical treatment, funeral services, etc.

The principle of reciprocity espoused by Mauss was further explored by anthropologist Karl Polanyi in his seminal book, *The Great Transformation*. Like Mauss, Polanyi identifies various motives of human behavior and points out that the profit-oriented utilitarian motive is never universal in human history but can be applicable only in societies where a self-regulating market system operates. Polanyi symbolically states that an intricate time-space-person system, linking many hundreds of people with respect to thousands of individual objects, is being handled without any records or administration, but also without any motive of gain or truck. Not the propensity to barter, as Adam Smith suggests, but reciprocity in social behavior dominates human history, especially before entering the period of the modern market society (Polanyi 1957, 50).

Although the practice of gift exchange may look similar in appearance to economic transactions or trades, they are radically different from each other since the former does not purport to gain the same amount of value for both parties involved in an exchange. The fairness of economic trades is almost always evaluated by both parties in terms of objective values and expressed in numerical prices, while gift exchanges are based on the subjective valuation of the gift objects and emotional satisfaction of the giver and the recipient. It is indisputable that gift-giving and economic trade are sometimes intricately interwoven, as the former initiates the latter if the objects exchanged possess high marketable value. The real importance of the practice of gift-giving, however, should be found not in economic benefit but in its social function, especially in how it establishes social solidarity among the parties involved.

## **Functionalities of Gift-Giving in Diplomacy**

Based on the principle of reciprocity in giving, the gift exchange is highly relevant to the establishment and consolidation of amicable human relationships. This is especially the case when gift exchange is practiced in political activities, as it incurs non-material and emotional fulfillment, such as support, loyalty, trust, mutual understanding and acknowledgment, and hegemonic leadership. The gift items mediated in power relationships are frequently cultural artifacts, the monetary value of which is hard to estimate since they have much stronger symbolic power for both the giver and the recipient. In particular, the cultural significance of these items may actually have an impact on political and diplomatic relationships, which far surpasses their objective values. Gift-giving thus became widely prevalent in diplomatic relationships across various times and geographical areas.

The prevalence of diplomatic gifts testifies to their diverse utilities and effectiveness in solidifying international relationships and political order. Since diplomatic gifts implicate various intentions and consequences for the states that participated in such exchanges, they draw significant interest from scholars endeavoring to find answers to some key questions in the study of international relationships: among others, how can an international society sustain itself over time and develop a sense of solidarity among its interacting sovereigns when their constitutional politics differ drastically in kind (Mallard 2019, 2)? These scholars identified various political purposes of the states in question pursuing the exchange of diplomatic gifts, while commonly arguing for the consolidation of unity among the states.

There are some practical and symbolic functionalities of diplomatic gifts, related to the establishment and fortification of international solidarity. The practical functionalities of diplomatic gifts can be further divided into two spheres: economic interest and political security. Although gift exchange is radically different from economic trade, as I explained above, the friendship of the gift-giving can be developed into a more practical economic interest of the involved countries by giving and receiving objects of the highest quality, especially after the inception of imperialism in the early modern period.

A representative example of this kind of gift-giving is the gifts given to Japan by Commodore Perry upon his visit to the nation, which had been closed to foreigners for such a long period. Apparently, the gifts Perry delivered purported to establish friendship between the two countries; President Fillmore's letter to the Japanese emperor mentioned the gifts explicitly serve "as specimens of the articles manufactured in the United States intended as tokens of sincere and respectable friendship." These gifts, including a copper lifeboat and surfboat, numerous examples of manufactures and agricultural implements, army pistols and rifles, and muskets, are in fact better classified as marketing samples, as they were celebrations of American industry. It is reasonable to infer that Perry regarded these gifts as commercial leverage, and he threatened the Japanese leaders with force and negotiations to fulfill an imagination of international commerce and diplomacy derived from European imperial practice (Fullilove 2018, 93–96).

Another practical functionality of diplomatic gifts is concerned with the political interest of state elites. In the process of nation-building, it was paramount for political leaders to secure the position of their countries in the international order and they often tried to achieve this goal by providing generous gifts to neighboring and powerful states. Gift-giving between European countries in the medieval period was also closely related to *realpolitik*: gift exchanges became a manner of securing, or maintaining, a favorable position with a diplomatic counterpart or adversary based on the value of the gift (Aubert 2022, 2). Considering that international politics are always insecure, constantly fluctuating, and dynamically changing over time and across regions, diplomatic gifts are certainly a very effective way to stabilize relationships between countries and legitimate their political order. As Barry Lopez, a notable American writer, once fittingly verbalized in his *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*, "For many centuries, the exchange of gifts has held us together. It has made it possible to bridge the abyss where language struggles" (Lopez 1998, 48–49). This famous dictum applies not only to personal relationships, but more importantly to international politics, in which a very refined rhetoric of diplomatic discourse is supplemented by valuable gifts.

This functionality of diplomatic gifts is intimately related to the

establishment of authority in the political systems of the premodern and early modern periods. In examining the role of gifts in the political culture, administration, and state-building projects of Iranian history, Ashraf found that gifts and tributes were the backbone of the Qajar state and society. Countless references to gifts in diplomatic correspondence, letters, and chronicles revealed the political strategies behind the exchange of gifts: gift exchange constituted a significant part in administering the Iranian state (Ashraf 2016, 553–554). Gifts served as a very effective means of displaying generosity and political patronage and facilitating amicable social and political relationships, which eventually legitimated Iranian authority and overcame the limitations that Iranian leaders faced in ruling their vast territories. Likewise, the gifts given to foreign countries were also instrumental in stabilizing the position of Iran in the world order. There was a political function to diplomatic gifts and presents insofar as they were meant to build international relationships, ease tensions, and conclude agreements between Iranian rulers and foreign representatives.

The instability inherent in the international political system necessitates diplomatic gift exchanges. Authority within this system is consistently ambiguous, as the status quo is perpetually challenged, and both dominant and subordinate partners are acutely aware of the contested nature of international relationships. The practice of diplomatic gift-giving allows participants to navigate this ambiguity of political authority (Kustermans 2019, 397). When rulers of dominant states sense that their subordinate partners are no longer impressed by their displays of power, the resulting insecure authority prompts them to reaffirm and legitimize their position by demanding greater tributes from the subordinate state and offering generous gifts. This dynamic is evident in the exchange of diplomatic gifts between China and neighboring countries, including Korea. Tribute was burdensome for *vassal* states; for example, Qing authorities demanded large amounts of tribute, including human tribute. However, the Qing reciprocated by bestowing imperial gifts in response to the tribute brought by foreign guests to the emperor. Examining the nature of this *tribute* and these *gifts*, it becomes apparent that the tribute was generously compensated since the value of the gifts often exceeded that of the tribute (Kustermans 2019, 422).

In many cases, the exchange of tribute and gifts served to consolidate the dominant polity's international authority, with diplomatic gifts playing a crucial role in helping political leaders navigate uncertainty in the international order.

Beyond their practical functions, diplomatic gifts also carry significant symbolic importance. Among the various symbolic functions of diplomatic gifts, one of the most important is the *recognition* of a state's status in the world order, often expressed through cultural superiority. Diplomatic gifts are frequently intended to elevate a nation's cultural status relative to others, fostering national pride and esteem. This intention underlies much of the exchange of diplomatic gifts. In the premodern era, many diplomatic gifts exchanged between China and European countries served this purpose. Europeans, including the French, viewed China as an enlightened nation governed by an educated and benevolent emperor with the assistance of scholar-officials. They believed they had much to learn from China in the arts and sciences. King Louis XV sent an extraordinary selection of gifts to Chinese Emperor Qianlong, primarily to gain China's recognition and establish a sense of parity between their civilizations (Finlay 2019, 93). While commercial interests may have played a role in these exchanges, some gifts, such as books and maps, were undoubtedly intended to validate the cultural equivalence of the two nations.

To secure recognition of cultural superiority and equal status with other advanced countries, selecting high-quality gift objects was crucial. Diplomatic gifts for this purpose aimed to maximize the recipient's psychological satisfaction, often featuring culturally significant and scarce items with high economic value. Moreover, these objects were chosen to represent the national essence of the giving country, embodying symbols of national esteem and pride. They showcased traditional values, drew from a rich heritage of antiques, and represented cultural icons of the giver (Aubert 2022, 4). The selection of diplomatic gift objects thus functioned as a mechanism for constructing a nation's cultural identity, disseminating it to foreign countries (Guliyev 2023, 42). Sometimes, these gifts symbolized a nation's most important values, originating from the nation's particular context but universalized as they spread across the world. The Statue of



Liberty, a key symbol of the French Revolution now standing proudly in New York City, exemplifies this idea, universalizing values such as freedom, equality, and democracy worldwide.

Given the symbolic functions of diplomatic gifts, receiving countries often use them for public education. These gifts are displayed in national museums, open to the public, and celebrated to honor political leaders who received them. This serves as an effective means of educating the populace about their country's acceptance and recognition by other powerful states. The exchange of diplomatic gifts symbolizes a state's inclusion in the inner circle of the international network, with these gifts often ritually placed in sacred locations with religious implications. North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il followed this practice, displaying gifts from powerful world leaders in front of Myohyang Mountain, a popular tourist destination in North Korea. Consequently, it is common to see many North Korean people lining up in museums to witness these valuable gifts and bolster their national pride.

### **Implications of Diplomatic Gifts in East Asian Politics**

Diplomatic gifts in East Asia are no exception to the above theoretical discussions. The exchange of gifts is quite universal in East Asian countries, as in other parts of the world. The specific customs of gift-giving, however, vary somewhat depending upon the particular situations in which it is practiced. Three papers in this special issue will carefully examine how the practice of diplomatic gifts was implemented in East Asia, with special focus given to Korea in its Goryeo and Joseon periods. Written by art historians, these papers will shed light on the theoretical and empirical implications of gift exchanges, mainly focusing on the cultural artifacts and representations engaged in Sino-Korean, Japanese-Korean, and Western-Korean diplomatic relations from the 14th to the early 20th centuries.

Minkyung Ji, in her paper "Another Look at the *Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon*, a Gift of King Chungseon," investigates the political intentions of the Goryeo king Chungseon in bestowing his court official Yi Je-hyeon, a particularly

beloved subject, with a portrait of himself that had been produced by Chinese literati and painter. Ji traces the process of the king's establishing personal networks with powerful Chinese figures to secure leverage at the Yuan court and demonstrates that the king realized works of art such as paintings and poems were a very effective way for southern literati to reinforce their sense of solidarity and commonality. Thus, the gift object, although seemingly a simple cultural product, actually had an overt political functionality. The portrait was intended to foster the solidarity of the Goryeo king and his loyal official with the Chinese elites by mediating a connection between the two groups. By being included in the inner circle of the elites of China, the Goryeo king could establish and solidify his political authority not only in Korea but throughout the international politics of East Asia.

In "Displaying Global Gifts at Nikkō Tōshōgū: The Joseon King's Gift for the Tokugawa Shogun," Jungeun Lee attempts to answer some important questions about several ritual objects gifted by a Joseon king in the 17th century and now housed in Nikkō Tōshōgū, a mausoleum and place of worship for the deified spirit of the first Tokugawa shogun. In exploring the detailed process of the shogun's request for specific items, and Joseon's discussions about and attitude toward this request, Lee differentiates her paper from previous studies and approaches the gift-giving process from a more comprehensive perspective by synthesizing Japanese and Korean viewpoints. She shows how the diplomatic gift from Joseon to the Japanese ruler satisfied practical and symbolic functionalities. In practical terms, the gift of a large bell engraved with the writings of Joseon officials was used for the stabilization of international order in East Asia. Symbolically, the bell was taken as a token of recognition of the political authority of the Tokugawa shogun by the Joseon king. The practical and symbolic functionalities of the gift prompted the Japanese leaders to display it in the central part of the shrine, just next to the gifts from the Netherlands, so that it could demonstrate the ascendance of the Tokugawa regime to a position of significant power within the order of world politics.

Namwon Jang's paper, "Goryeo Celadon as a Diplomatic Gift in the Late Joseon and Modern Periods," analyzes the diplomatic practice of gifting Goryeo celadon to Western countries in the early modern period, a custom

that came to be celebrated as a national symbol of cultural superiority. By investigating the question of why and how Goryeo celadon became such a popular diplomatic gift at the Joseon court, Jang tries to understand the process through which the social memories of Goryeo celadon were created in the late Joseon era and continue to impact modern ideas about Goryeo celadon's cultural significance. She emphasizes the importance of gift objects, Goryeo celadon, and identifies how the selection of these objects implies the construction of national identity in cultural artifacts. The selection of gift objects in this sense involved the formation of traditional Korea's cultural identity. Jang also convincingly suggests how the cultural superiority of gift objects was transformed into commercial value as the items became marketable and collectible objects.

Through these investigations, these papers will elucidate both the impact of pre-modern Korean gift-giving practices on diplomatic and political relations and the tremendously diverse cultural representations of gift items selected for such practices.

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