

When I went home a few weeks ago, one thing I noticed is how much my habits have changed since living in Japan. One of the reasons I thought I would do well in Japan is that I'm very adaptable. My way of talking with people and doing just about anything else in my daily routine has changed. I almost always carry a towel around with me in Japan, and I tie one around my neck when I play tennis. My American friends think I'm crazy because this is not the way we do things at home. I think it's fun to try and do things the Japanese way, but I'm sure that I get a lot of things wrong and end sticking out anyways. The funny thing is that when I went home, I realized that I don't fit American norms anymore either. It's like being stuck between two cultures!

A good example of this is omiyage. In Japan, sometimes it seems like omiyage is the most important part of travel. Airports, train stations and tourist spots are full of specialty sweets and snacks, and I am always surprised to see the quantity and variety of options! The first two times I came to Japan, I have to be honest—I thought all that omiyage was a little bit ridiculous. But now that I live here, I can't help but take part, too! Especially because I have been traveling a lot lately, I like to bring back a little something for the people that I work with. It's so easy in Japan to find a box of something nice from just about any town. In America, it's impossible to find a unique gift because the idea of regional specialties is almost dead. Most big cities have all the same stores, all the same foods, and all the same brands as every other city in the country. This makes bringing omiyage back from America so hard! Whereas in Japan, I could easily pick up a few boxes of omiyage at the airport, I spent a lot of my time at home thinking and searching far and wide to find those unique gifts to bring back with me. It was such a relief when I found all the omiyage I was looking for!

What it hard to get used to for me is the obligation to bring omiyage. I have never liked to buy a gift just because I felt like I had to. Fathers' Day, Mothers' Day, birthdays, Christmas... there are so many gift-giving holidays in America that I get tired of searching for a gift just because I should. In my opinion, giving a gift is so much more meaningful when I find something that makes me think of a friend and I send it to them out of the blue, and not for a set occasion.

So maybe I've been in Japan too long, but over the course of the year before I went home to visit, I picked up some small omiyage for my family and friends. Especially because I live in a country where most of my family and friends will never visit, I wanted to bring them some interesting gifts to share with them a little part of my life here. When I finally started to pack to go home, I pulled out all the omiyage and realized that it almost filled my suitcase! That's when it hit me. I have definitely adopted the Japanese omiyage-giving style. My parents teased me when I came into the living room on my first night at home with a big bag full of gifts. When my brother's host family visited in the past and brought those big bags of gifts, we all rolled our eyes. But now I was the one bringing all the gifts. I had to laugh about it a little bit, but I feel good knowing that I only brought meaningful gifts for my parents that I knew they would like. And now I won't feel like I have to get them a Christmas present if I don't see something special.