



## Money talks – but few hear

*by Eric Blair*

Every summer, the Japanese spend billions (of yen) on sending gifts to acquaintances, friends, and business contacts. The process is repeated in winter – and in both cases the department stores see sales increase as the name on the bag a gift arrives in is often as important as the gift itself.

February 14th sees almost every female in the land making or buying chocolates for the men around them – Dad, brother, boss, teacher and any other bloke she has regular contact with. Romance plays little or no role in most of the gift giving which is done more out of obligation than desire to impress a potential romantic partner. March 14th – White Day in Japan – sees men reciprocate the gift giving of a month earlier although on a less thought out, convenience store purchased scale.

With death comes the need to slide some banknotes into an envelope prior to handing it over as you enter the wake hall; funerals oftentimes being limited to immediate family and taking place the day after the actual wake. It's the same at weddings – money talks and is the preferred gift (received) while 'shopped for' gifts are rarer than the proverbial hen's teeth. In both cases, the celebrant/mourner is usually sent a 'thank

you' gift of roughly half the value of the original donation in the week(s) after the wedding or funeral in question. Everyone wins.

School graduation? Then cash congratulates. University done and dusted? Then yen is a-comin! Even a shrine or temple visit requires the gods to be appeased with a cash 'donation' PRIOR to prayers being offered. New Year – a time of annual pilgrimages to shrines and temples up and down the land on a scale unequalled the rest of the year sees millions of kids expecting a small envelope full of lovely lolly – of the BoJ variety.

The list goes on and on in modern Japan, but as cash based a society as the above implies the Land of the Rising Sun – and sinking yen – to be, few see anything beyond tradition and 'Japanese culture' in terms of oiling relationships and avoiding bad feeling in the methods touched on above.

Bid rigging in business has, since 1868 and the start of the Japanese modern-era, been seen as unavoidable in getting the job done. It rarely draws anything but the most rudimentary, required criticism from those in authority because in the process, all those bidding have AGREED ahead of

time just where the contract goes; the 'losers' winning by being assured of sub-contracts. Again – win-win. Politicians are often linked to companies through political donations and home area representation so can't kick-up too much of a fuss themselves.

Mention the Lockheed scandal to Japanese old enough to remember the influence bought / purchased / paid for in the highest political echelons of Japanese society, ask their opinions and see if you get anything above and beyond 'shoganaï' (it can't be helped).

To say that money talks in Japan is an understatement worthy of little more than a shrug of the shoulders and more mutterings of 'shoganaï'.

The yen greases palms the nation over daily. It always has. That is just the way it is today, was yesterday, and will be tomorrow; in Japan and much of Asia.

Exposing deals the West deems immoral and illegal will cause little more than a storm in a teacup. Eyes will be averted, the storm will blow itself out, the West will move onto other issues, and life will carry on as normal.

Welcome to Japan.

