

RESEARCH

# 'Stingy, Stingy, Stingy Government': Mixed Responses to the Introduction of the Plastic Carrier Bag Levy in Japan

Brigitte Steger

Since 1 July 2020, all retail businesses in Japan have been required by law to charge customers for plastic carrier bags in order to reduce the use of single-use plastic and to encourage consumers to change their lifestyles. This has resulted in more shoppers using their own bags, but has also drawn more emotional responses. This article analyses reactions to the plastic carrier bag levy in *konbini* (convenience stores) and discusses how it has changed customer service and shopping routines, at the same time as affecting notions of convenience, generosity, and propriety. The levy is also challenging consumers' notions of cleanliness and pollution, as the plastic bag is changing from something that can both protect its contents from dirt and pollution (as a carrier bag) and protect the environment from its dirty contents (as a waste bag) to something that in itself pollutes the environment.

**Keywords:** plastic carrier bag levy; cleanliness; *mottainai* (wastefulness); propriety; generosity; nakedness; *konbini*

## Japan—A Reluctant Latecomer in Introducing Plastic Waste Reduction Policies

In May 2019, in preparation for the G20 summit in Osaka, the Japanese government published its 'Plastic Resource Recycling Strategy' (*Purasuchikku shigen junkan senryaku*), which established a ten-year target for reducing single-use plastic and increasing reuse and recycling.<sup>1</sup> Key components were the introduction of a compulsory minimum 1 yen (0.8 euro cent/1 dollar cent) plastic carrier bag levy for all retail businesses from 1 July 2020 and support for the development of alternative materials to replace plastics.

Until now, Japan's environmental credentials have been mixed. Although the Japanese have an effective waste management system and are admired for their cleanliness and tidiness, according to the UN Environment Programme Japanese consumers bought on average 31kg of plastic packaging with their shopping in 2017, which contributed to Japan being ranked as the world's second largest generator of plastic packaging waste on a per capita basis after the US. In addition, Japan and the US were the only two countries that did not sign the Ocean Plastics Charter at the G7 Summit in Canada in 2018 aimed at reducing the use of disposable plastic products (UNEP 2018: 5, 24–35). However, China's ban on the import of plastic waste in 2018 meant that Japan, along with other countries, lost its main destination for exporting much of its recyclable waste. At the same time, mainstream media began to raise

the issue of plastic pollution in the ocean as an environmental concern (see NHK 2018) and teaching about UN Sustainable Development Goals has now become part of the school curriculum. With its long coastline, Japan relies heavily on the sea for food, and demanding standards for food safety by consumers have meant that reports of plastic in fish have received considerable attention.

With its new strategy for reducing plastic waste, Japan is trying to present itself as a reliable partner on the global stage for tackling environmental issues and the climate crisis in the run-up to the Olympic Games that were originally planned for 2020 in Tokyo. The plastic bag levy was presented as a first step taken by the government to protect the environment. While the policy may show that the government is taking sustainability goals seriously, given the lateness of this measure compared with other countries and its undemanding nature, it can also be seen as a means of avoiding more profound changes (see Nielsen et al. 2019: 434).

Japan's central government's lacklustre policy towards plastic waste does not necessarily reflect the situation on the ground. It is the municipalities that are in charge of waste management, and many local authorities have had stricter measures in place and are now making renewed efforts to surpass the government's policy. In February 2020, Koike Yuriko, the Governor of Tokyo, announced financial support for Tokyo municipalities to enable them to collect all types of plastic containers and packaging separately from other waste (Nagano 2020). Already in 2006, during her tenure as Minister of the Environment, Koike had proposed the introduction of a charge for

plastic carrier bags in retail outlets. Her initiative had met with considerable resistance, not least from her own party. Consumer groups supported such a move, but unions and supermarkets opposed it, fearing that they might lose customers and that some businesses would gain an unfair advantage by non-compliance if it was a voluntary agreement (Ohtomo and Ohnuma 2014: 64).

Other municipalities have also introduced initiatives to tackle plastic waste. In March 2020, Kameoka City in Kyoto Prefecture became the first municipality in Japan to adopt legislation to ban retailers from offering plastic carrier bags (both free and for a charge) to be implemented from 1 January 2021 (Yagura 2020). Many shops and retail chains—in particular supermarkets—have for a long time implemented a charge for plastic carrier bags, mainly in the form of a rebate for those who use their own bags, known as 'eco-bag' or 'my-bag' in Japan.

Private initiatives demonstrate that the population—or at least parts of it—is perhaps more willing to make an effort to reduce plastic waste than the government has dared to believe. People have introduced umbrella rental schemes, donated money from carrier bag charges to environmental groups and experimented with plastic-free packaging for takeaways and deliveries.<sup>2</sup> One such example is Sakakibara Katsuhiko, the managing director of the confectionery firm Marushige Seika in Aichi Prefecture,



**Figure 1:** Sakakibara Katsuhiko presents his edible plates and chopsticks.<sup>3</sup>

who often appears in the media to present his initiatives for reducing plastic waste in the oceans. He has developed edible plates, cups, and chopsticks. As can be seen in the picture, however, each item is individually wrapped in clear plastic and, as with all edible products, a sachet of dehumidifier is included to ensure it does not degrade in Japan's humid climate. Although Sakakibara has spared no effort in devising a technical solution to the problem of plastic waste, his self-declared aim is undermined by the packaging required to meet Japan's demanding standards of hygiene and customer service which demonstrates some of the diverse and contesting requirements surrounding the use of plastic.

In this article, reactions to the introduction of the plastic carrier bag levy by consumers are analysed and the role the bags play in interactions between retailers and customers—focusing on convenience stores—is examined. The objective is to understand how plastic carrier bags are used and perceived, and how people's tacit cultural knowledge informs their approach when dealing with the problem of plastic waste. The levy is also challenging consumers' notions of cleanliness and pollution, as the plastic bag is changing from something that can both protect its contents from dirt and pollution (as a carrier bag) and protect the environment from its dirty contents (as a waste bag) to something that in itself pollutes the environment. This study will argue that (free) plastic bags are markers of social generosity and propriety.

The article has arisen from the project 'Cleanliness, Convenience and Good Citizenship: Plastic and Waste in Everyday Life' based at the University of Cambridge (see Introduction to this special collection) and is a qualitative analysis of data derived from policy documents, participant observation, and interviews. Fieldwork was conducted in summer 2014 and autumn 2018 on waste disposal and community as well as plastic use in many parts of Japan. Interviewees were recruited through many different channels, as the desire was to hear from a wide range of adults of different ages, geographical locations, social background, and living situations. Professionals in waste management, as well as those dealing with plastic and waste in their everyday lives were included. For this article, those who referred to plastic carrier bags and convenience stores in their responses were selected. Due to the travel restrictions in 2020, further interviews were conducted by e-mail and Zoom or by a research assistant, Shiota Nanase. While some informants have agreed to use their names, for others pseudonyms have been used. Japanese names are presented in Japanese order, family name before given name. In addition, media reports—specifically on the introduction of the levy and commentary on these in social media—have been analysed. As Borg et al. (2020: 2) have pointed out, 'monitoring and understanding how social media users react to news about the introduction of a new policy' can lead to more informed decisions by policy makers. It also reveals how social norms, as well as fundamental notions about convenience, cleanliness, and propriety, interrelate with such policies. Usernames are displayed as on the platforms.

### Plastic Carrier Bags, Convenience, and the *konbini* Lifestyle

On 31 July 2020, one month after the introduction of the charge, the Yahoo platform re-published a short article from *Asahi Digital*,<sup>4</sup> which reported that the number of people refusing a carrier bag at convenience stores had risen from about 30 percent before the introduction of the levy to about 75 percent in July. 58.1 percent customers were now using their own 'eco-bag' (bag for life), 24.8 percent were buying carrier bags and 10.8 percent were going to shops that were still giving out bags for free. The remaining customers either did not give a clear answer or were receiving home deliveries. By 8 August, this short article had elicited 7,379 comments on the Yahoo platform, with more than 1,000 during the first six hours, revealing how emotional many people felt about this topic.

Although the quantitative representativeness of these anonymous comments cannot be verified, they echoed arguments encountered during fieldwork. Since the article itself merely summarised statistics, it allowed commentators to contextualise freely. Although some people welcomed the introduction of the charge, many more were critical. They complained that the charge had made their lives more complicated and inconvenient, and that retailers had used it as an opportunity to get additional income. This was especially problematic at a time when many people were experiencing financial difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the virus made others wonder whether now was the right time to promote reusable bags. Many commentators observed that the charge entailed more work for sales staff and decreased turnover in shops. Quite a few commented that they had heard that shoplifting had increased.

In 2019, Japan had 56,502 convenience stores—known as *konbini*—that are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with a combined turnover of 12,184 billion yen (99.2 billion euros) (METI 2020). *Konbini* are much more than just small shops—they are regarded as essential lifelines and are an integral part of contemporary life. They can be found on nearly every street corner, in hotels, stations, and office buildings; not only in urban areas but also in the countryside. Many people visit them at least once a day; for some it has become a place to hang out. They offer ready-made food for immediate consumption, cup noodles, snacks, basic food items, drinks, toiletries, magazines, umbrellas. Also offered are various services, such as machines to transfer money, buy tickets, scan or photocopy documents, and print out photos. They provide a nationwide delivery service for luggage and parcels. Food items are delivered fresh to the stores several times a day (Whitelaw 2016), and each chain has its own specialities. The choice of food ranges from cold staples like sandwiches, *onigiri* (rice balls), salads, and *bentō* boxes (lunch boxes) to dishes that are either kept warm or can be heated up in the *konbini*'s microwave ovens. Bottled drinks, as well as hot and cold coffee, are also very popular.

The instant food and takeaway culture of the *konbini* is closely linked to the development of plastic packaging, as since the 1960s, polyethylene, polystyrene, PET, and other

plastics have enabled mass consumption of pre-prepared meals, along with drinks in plastic bottles (Endō 2000: 104–117). With the widespread adoption of microwave ovens in Japan in the 1980s, plastic packaging suitable for warming up food turned out to be the material of choice for providing convenient and affordable meals. Consumers no longer had to go to a number of speciality shops to buy ingredients to cook themselves, and this reduced not only shopping and dinner preparation time but also the need for planning meals and washing up. Polystyrene trays and plastic film wrapping made it possible to bring a large range of portioned and prepared food from the producers via supermarkets and *konbini* to consumers. Such packaging ensured freshness, hygiene, portability, and durability—all at an affordable price (Endō 2000: 133). Although the majority of basic household shopping takes place at supermarkets and speciality stores, *konbini* cater to the needs of workers during office hours and those who lack the facilities, skills, or time to cook. Single men, in particular, sometimes live almost entirely on *konbini* food. The store provides everything that is needed to eat the food and to take it to wherever it will be consumed.

For decades, handing out free carrier bags has been an intrinsic part of customer service in Japan. It has signified generosity and consideration on the part of retailers and an awareness of their customers' need for convenience in acknowledgment of their busy lifestyles. Sales staff have always carefully packed customers' newly purchased items into these carrier bags, making sure that nothing will be damaged. Warm and cold items are placed in separate bags, and those items that can break open and leak or require extra protection are wrapped individually in another plastic bag beforehand. Items that are easily squashed or broken are already cushioned and wrapped in layers of plastic. Free single-use cups, cutlery, chopsticks, and napkins are automatically provided. At busy times, *konbini* staff are able to process a large number of customers and avoid queues even though many ask for their meals to be warmed up. It is much quicker for staff to automatically place everything in a carrier bag and put a plastic lid on hot coffee than asking customers what they need.

*Konbini* were also a key issue when Endō Tetsuo, a local government official in charge of the Minamisoma City incineration facility, was asked about waste management and recycling. He began his explanation by relating that the recycling rate in Fukushima Prefecture is comparatively low. It was low even before 2011, but since the nuclear disaster and the contamination problem, lifestyles have changed and there is even more rubbish to deal with. He added, 'Many people just go to the *konbini* and buy things there, and it's all wrapped in plastic.' Sasaki Shūzō, his head of department and a guide, explained that now there are many workers living in the area around the hazardous plants involved in decontamination and reconstruction work who are single, live in dormitories, and do not cook. 'They go to the *konbini*, buy things wrapped in plastic, eat them and throw the rubbish away [in the store bins] there and then.' (Interview 10 October 2018). In fact, the only shop in Namie, the town closest to the power plant, is a *konbini*.

Areas that were close to the nuclear disaster may be particularly geared to the *konbini* lifestyle, but such workers are by no means exceptional. 35-year-old Maekawa Hidemaro, a company owner-director in Tokyo (Interview 18 August 2020), says that he goes to the *konbini* religiously at least once a day, sometimes just to buy a PET bottle of cold jasmine tea, which he carries home in a free bag. Since the introduction of the levy, he carries his purchases in his hands—unless they are too many—in which case he buys a bag. Similarly, Amemiya Emi, who is in her 30s and works at a large company in Tokyo, used to go to the *konbini* at least once a day before the pandemic: 'Going to the *konbini* wasn't just a way of saving time. When I had a few minutes break, I'd often think, "I'll go and buy a snack", and then I'd grab a coffee too. It was more about taking a short break from work' (Interview 10 August 2020). Although she keeps an eco-bag in her handbag for grocery shopping at the supermarket, she does not use it at the *konbini*.

Anthropologist Gavin Whitelaw, who studied *konbini* for his PhD, kept a waste diary when he experimented by living exclusively on food from *konbini* in Tokyo in 2005:

In the course of just the first week, I had amassed 28 plastic bags, 6 plastic straws, 13 chopsticks, 11 plastic spoons of various sizes, a few plastic forks, and two 10-litre bin bags of plastic plates, covers, cellophane wrapping, and PET bottles. [...] plastic waste was indeed a significant by-product of the *konbini*. (Whitelaw 2018: 82–83)

The smooth flow of work at the check-out and the relationship between the sales staff and the customer has made it difficult for customers to proactively refuse bags and other single-use items, partly because of the awkwardness involved in refusing a free gift, but mainly because it interrupts a well-rehearsed and efficient process and potentially keeps other customers waiting. The following commentator (bti\*\*\*\*\* [anonymised by Yahoo]; 31 July 2020, 21:23) on the Yahoo platform describing a conversation between a sales assistant at a *konbini* and a customer expresses exasperation at customer-shop assistant routines that have become more protracted since the introduction of the levy.

Carrier bag:

Do you need one?

Do you not need one?

And then you explain various things about the bag sizes.

You don't know whether everything will fit in without actually trying it.

When it turns out that you need a second bag, it's difficult to say so.

Loyalty card?

Do you have one?

Do you not have one?

*Bentō*:

Shall I warm it up?

Do you want it as it is?

How do you want to pay?

These are the bare minimum of questions that you have to ask a customer.

And then because of the facemask filter, you can't hear. I do my best.

Please don't get angry. (°ω°) [kaomoji expressing crying].

In recent years, most supermarkets have introduced changes to the checkout process. It is now usual for the cashier to place purchased items into a second basket after scanning and for the customer to pack everything into a bag at a separate counter at their own pace. This bag may be one they have brought themselves or one they have received or purchased at the checkout. At *konbini*, however, most customers still expect the quick and efficient turnaround provided by sales staff packing their goods, and there is no space provided for customers to pack their own items at leisure, something several commentators on Yahoo complain about.

The introduction of the plastic bag levy has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore, issues of hygiene and potential contamination were frequently discussed on Yahoo. Even though the virus may survive on plastic as long as or longer than other materials, with single-use packaging people feel reassured that no-one has used or touched it before.

Isn't this going to help the corona virus spread? Isn't there a real risk of being contaminated? (virus disappear; 31 July 2020, 21:10)

It's good for the environment to change to eco-bags, but with the corona disaster the situation is a bit tricky. Many customers don't pack their own bags but let the cashier do it. Some of the bags are so dirty that the handles are almost black or they are sweaty or smelly, so you are taken aback when they hand them over to you. With elderly customers it's difficult to refuse, but I believe there's a real risk of infection. (tjjpgkoy; 31 July 2020, 21:11)

While the policy of reusing carrier bags is meant to protect the environment from pollution and ultimately keep people safe and healthy, these comments reveal contesting notions of cleanliness, health, and safety. Plastic bags and plastic packaging have long been established as items that can protect from contagious germs, viruses, and dirt. Shops feel their responsibility for the health and safety of their customers more immediately than general notions of protecting the environment. Thus, the use of single-use plastic bags for cleanliness and for protecting their customers has been regarded as a sign of good citizenship.

### Eco-Bag Shoplifting and the Search for Propriety

Many people in Japan believe or have heard that shoplifting has increased since more people have started to use eco-bags. With 41,635 likes and 2,878 dislikes, one

of the comments that has attracted the most attention on the Yahoo site is by user gir\*\*\*\*: 'I'd like to know how much shoplifting has increased because of people using their own bags. I hear that it has increased.' (31 July 2020, 22:46). Similarly, user ugn\*\*\*\* comments:

As I predicted, I heard that shoplifting has increased. When someone comes out of a shop with their hands full of stuff, it's difficult to tell if they've paid for it or not. They say it's for the environment, but why do they carry on producing bags at all? It's a strange country! (31 July 2020, 21:06).

It is surprising that shoplifting should have become such a big problem, as anyone who was so inclined could have used their own bag for this purpose before the introduction of the levy. Moreover, although Japan is not immune to cases of shoplifting, it is a country that prides itself on the honesty of its citizens and its low rates of crime. Nevertheless, various media in Japan have reported a 'sudden increase' in so-called 'eco-bag shoplifting' (*ekobaggu manbiki*). Shirane Eriko, a married woman in her 40s who works part-time at the check-out of a large supermarket in a village near Iida City in Nagano Prefecture, responded to questions about shoplifting:

The other day, we were told in a staff circular that we should contact the management if we saw anyone shoplifting. [...] It said that there had been a significant increase in shoplifting. But it's a bit tricky for us to police people when at the same time we are welcoming them as customers [...]. If they claim, 'I bought it earlier', we can't really question them further. Sometimes people come in with their bag full of shopping and ask, 'I forgot something. Is it ok [to re-enter with my bag full of purchases]?' That means we can no longer distinguish between what they've already paid for and what are new purchases. So, they probably just shoplift as much as they want. There's really no way of telling. The store is quite big, so we can't watch everyone. Sometimes they hire security guards and they catch quite a few people, [...] usually habitual offenders. I really think that it has increased with the use of eco-bags. But even previously, when people came back to the shop with their own full basket (**Figure 2**) or eco-bag, there was no guarantee that they'd paid for it all.

When asked if it was difficult to demand to see the receipt, she replied: 'That's right, I can't say anything. Without security guard they are usually not caught.' (Interview 12 August 2020)

Despite Shirane's belief that shoplifting has increased, she does not provide any hard evidence to substantiate this claim. However, she describes her dilemma at having to police people whom she also welcomes into the shop as customers. Similar unease about being suspected of shoplifting is also expressed by the customers themselves.

Maekawa: I can carry a few items of shopping in my hands without any problem, as I live just a minute or so away from the *konbini*. But I'm actually quite embarrassed to carry my shopping without a bag. Shiota: That was the same for me with carrying things 'naked' (*hadaka*) when I lived in Japan. [...] I am quite shy about other people seeing what I've bought.

Maekawa: That's right. Quite strange, isn't it?

Shiota: Why do you think that's the case?

Maekawa: I'm not sure. But I'm certainly embarrassed to be seen carrying a carton of milk home! [Laughs]. I think that there are several aspects to it. For one, I wouldn't want to be mistaken for a shoplifter. (Interview 18 August 2020)

These comments indicate that the plastic carrier bag, called a 'cashier bag' (*reji bukuro*) in Japan, that was given out to customers, was not just a free gift to make shopping more convenient but also a sign and a tacit agreement that the items it contained had been bought and paid for legitimately. That sign is now missing and it is difficult to prove whether the items in a customer's eco-bag were there before they entered the store, thus creating the suspicion of shoplifting. The fact that it is legitimate to bring personal items into the store and that eco-bags are usually opaque adds to the confusion. Theft is not only a prosecutable crime, but being caught or even just suspected of shoplifting is embarrassing both for the person committing the crime and the person who has to confront them (see Goffman 1963: 40), thereby complicating the sales assistant-customer relationship.

That the bag is seen as a confirmation that items have been processed by the cashier is also supported by Whitelaw's observations. He describes how food in *konbini* that was approaching or had passed its sell-by date was thought of as 'loss' (*rosu*) rather than 'waste' (*gomi*) and in many stores was put in a shopping basket in the backyard from which employees were allowed to help themselves, thus diverting unsold food from the waste stream. Employees either had to eat it at the workplace, or if 'workers wanted to take the food home, it had to leave the backyard in a plastic bag, disguised as a purchase' (Whitelaw 2016: 109; emphasis added).

There are other ways of marking items as paid in Japan. When customers refuse free bags, the salesperson often marks each item with a coloured sticky tape. This process takes more time than putting everything into a carrier bag and is cited by some as a reason for not refusing free bags. Inoue Mariko, a university administrator in her 40s in Hiroshima, uses her own 'my basket' for shopping at her supermarket and also brings a small towel to cover her purchases after payment. In this case, the cashier moves the purchases from the shop-owned basket to the 'my basket', covers them and puts a little green band on the handle to mark the items as paid. Thus, while supermarkets have established ways to deal with the issue, as of summer 2020 it appears that *konbini* have not yet adapted their procedures.



**Figure 2:** Inoue Mariko's 'my basket' (photo by the author).

The word 'naked' (*hadaka*) used by Shirota to describe the items she carried home without a bag is also commonly used for multipacks in which items such as chopsticks and snacks are not individually wrapped. Something or someone who is naked is exposed to the view of others as well as to dirt and damage. Apart from intimate situations and relationships, nakedness conveys a lack of propriety and invites embarrassment and shame. If consumption is central to forming modern self-identity (Giddens 1991), the unprotected display of daily purchases implies a naked self. Moreover, the 'thing bought [...] is not just "itself"; nor is it just the cluster of symbolic meanings attaching to it. It is indeed all of these too, but it is also transformed by one additional and quintessentially Japanese procedure: its wrapping' (Clammer 1997: 77). This is particularly important when items change hands or are presented to others. The careful wrapping and packaging of items expresses politeness and care for the objects and therefore for the recipient (Hendry 1995: 18). It signifies propriety, and it is likely that such requirements led Sakakibara to protect his edible plates with single-use plastic packaging. Unsurprisingly eco-bags are now quickly becoming fashionable items that signify the wearer's environmental consciousness and good citizenship.

Thus far, the *reji bukuro* has been referred to as a single-use carrier bag, but in reality, the bags are often reused as rubbish bags (*gomi bukuro*). Amemiya no longer uses eco-bags and buys single-use carrier bags, which she uses as bin liners for her household waste (Interview 10 August 2020). Similarly, Maekawa feels that it is okay to buy carrier bags for this purpose. In Minato Ward in Tokyo where he lives, he has to buy dedicated rubbish bags for putting out household waste. These bags are rather large,

but single-use carrier bags are just the right size to fit as bin liners in the boxes into which he and his wife sort the rubbish. On collection day, they put the small carrier bags full of rubbish into the larger bags (four small bags fit inside one large bag). As he explains, double-bagging the rubbish means it is not a problem if one bag has a hole (Interview 18 August 2020).

In order to prevent unpleasant smells, dirty items such as nappies and food waste are often put into a carrier bag that can be tightly closed with a knot before being placed into a bigger bag. Several people on the Yahoo platform said that they used to put the packaging and food waste from their lunch into the carrier bag and throw it away like that, but now they do not have a proper way of doing it. Others complained that it was difficult to take their rubbish home without a carrier bag and that it would result in increased littering. User ( ; 'カ (kaomoji expressing agitation) worries that people will no longer put all their rubbish into the carrier bag to throw it away, but just throw the individual items into the bin, from which the wind will blow the rubbish onto the streets and the parks (7 July 2020, 22:31). These comments indicate that the policy to reduce single-use plastic bags to care for the environment conflicts with cleanliness practices aimed at avoiding litter and 'aesthetic pollution' (Pathak and Nichter 2019: 315), thus revealing contesting notions of environmental pollution.

Historically, waste collection and waste legislation were introduced in the early twentieth century to get rid of 'dirty things' (*obutsu*) in order to improve public health and protect against vermin and epidemics (Inamura 2015: 83–8). The emphasis has been on avoiding litter and following strict rules of sorting, disposing, and recycling. In this regard, it makes sense to use two layers of bags for



**Figure 3:** Plastic bags out for collection, many with bags within bags (photo by the author).

the rubbish. When wet and dirty waste, as well as hazardous items such as broken glass and needles, spills out of bags, the rubbish can end up strewn over the street and the waste collectors can be exposed to injury and contamination, as Fujii Seiichirō observed during fieldwork as a waste collector (Fujii 2018: 17–27). However, during fieldwork with consumers, no-one expressed to this study consideration for the wellbeing of the waste collectors when they talked about double-bagging. During interview, Fujiwara Isamu, in his 70s and the proprietor of the Fujiwara Ryokan in Nagasaki, explained that he puts rubbish into a carrier bag first and then into the official rubbish bag because it is dirty. However, he also does this (or has it done by his employees) even when the rubbish items have been cleaned, which is often the case with recyclables.

I don't want to put it in 'naked'. We were told [by the municipality] to put the recyclable waste in naked, but somehow, I can't bring myself to do it. I only throw away bottles and cans naked. Somehow, I find it tough (*nantoka kitsui*). (Interview 8 November 2018)

He clearly has a sense of order and propriety when preparing the rubbish bags, but not one that is congruent with the waste management regulations. It is clear that the feeling of embarrassment about nakedness when displaying everyday consumption without wrapping extends to the disposal of the remains of consumption.

### ***Mottainai furoshiki*—A New Environmental Consciousness?**

A keyword in the service industry in Japan has been 'hospitality' (*omotenashi*), which focuses on displaying generosity towards customers and visitors. During the economic boom leading up to the 1990s, such generosity might express itself in ordering twice as much food in restaurants as people could eat or excessively cooling rooms in summer while overheating them in winter; this type of conspicuous consumption was considered a sign of good citizenship as it supported the country's economy. *Omotenashi* also expressed itself in layers of packaging and wrapping. The opposite of this type of generosity is 'stinginess' (*kechi*). One commentator on the Yahoo site expressed his anger about the bag charge succinctly:

Something as basic as the carrier bag (*reji bukuro kurai*) ...

Really stingy, stingy...

Stingy, stingy, stingy, stingy government ...

(ノ\_-)ノ ~ [*kaomoji* expressing anger]. Eco-bags are so annoying. (username displayed as ???; 1 August 2020, 0:08)

Here the accusation of stinginess is directed towards the government rather than the stores that have to abide by the law. Indeed, many comments on the site blame the government for not understanding the financial struggles faced by ordinary people. Given that few people, even in straightened circumstances, would notice a difference of

3 or 5 yen in their daily shopping bill, the issue appears to be not so much the cost as the fact that anyone would charge for what is widely regarded as a basic service.

This accusation of being stingy also extends to those who do *not accept* free bags. In the first episode of the popular TV series *Around 40: Chūmon no ōi onnatachi* (TBS, 2008; 33:32–34:25), the protagonist Ogata Satoko—a successful psychiatrist who has recently been under pressure to find a marriage partner—observes a young couple in a hotel's gift shop. The girl has bought a small PET bottle of cold tea and a snack, which she is carrying in a plastic bag. She immediately takes the tea out of the bag and starts to drink. Her boyfriend tells her off as they still have tea in their room and says she should have refused the bag. She complains, 'You are so stingy!', but he corrects her in a patronising tone, 'No, as I'm always telling you, not stingy, eco[logical].' When she threatens, 'I'll leave you if you carry on like that,' he replies, 'Okay. We have to separate.' She asks incredulously, 'You're choosing your stinginess over me?!' He replies, 'Not stingy, eco!' With a 'Sayōnara', she walks away infuriated. Ogata, observing the scene, comments: 'Here we have it! A man who cannot get married!'

Although exaggerated for comic effect, this scene clearly reflects attitudes towards those who refuse to buy bottled drinks or to accept plastic carrier bags. Whereas the girl is characterised as immature and self-indulgent, the young man's attempts to restrain consumption for environmental reasons are presented as unreasonable and obnoxious. Although the supposed stinginess in this case is about *not accepting* a free gift rather than *not giving* one, it violates the requirement to be generous and indulgent. The shop assistant and customer may be involved in a business exchange, but through the service provided there is also the expectation of an ongoing social relationship. Indeed, gift giving is a matter of social exchange and it requires acceptance and reciprocity (Slater 2013). Although the 'stingy' young man later comes to work as a psychologist under Ogata in the hospital and they become romantically involved, her initial assessment that he is not the marrying type turns out to be correct. His attitude towards consumption and waste may well be ecological, but it characterises him as someone who is unable to sustain a mature social relationship.

When Koike, then Minister of the Environment, tried to introduce a bag levy in March 2006, she also promoted the '*mottainai furoshiki*' as an alternative to plastic carrier bags:

I've created what you might call a *mottainai furoshiki*. The Japanese word *mottainai* means it's a shame for something to go to waste without having made use of its potential in full. [...] The Japanese wrapping cloth known as the *furoshiki* is said to have been first used in the Muromachi Period (1392–1573), when people [...] wrapped one's clothes with it. The *furoshiki* is so handy that you can wrap almost anything in it regardless of size or shape with a little ingenuity by simply folding it in a right way. It's much better than plastic bags you receive at supermarkets or wrapping paper, since

it's highly resistant, reusable and multipurpose. In fact, it's one of the symbols of traditional Japanese culture, and puts an accent on taking care of things and avoiding wastes [sic]. It would be wonderful if the *furoshiki*, as a symbol of traditional Japanese culture, could provide an opportunity for us to reconsider the possibilities of a sound-material cycle society. As my sincere wish, I would like to disseminate the culture of the *furoshiki* to the entire world.<sup>5</sup>

In her campaign, Koike made clever use of traditional Japanese culture to promote a waste reduction agenda. This fitted the mood of the recession years after 1990, as it reinterpreted what many people viewed as a sign of stinginess and frugality, i.e., reusing bags in terms of *mottainai* (wastefulness) and the Japanese way of caring for the environment (Siniawer 2018: 241–265). The term '*mottainai*' was first used specifically to promote second-hand and repair shops in an article in the magazine *Look Japan* in November 2002 (Chiba 2002). *Mainichi Shinbun* chose the term for their campaign to promote environmental issues (Yamaguchi 2019) and suggested it to Kenyan activist and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, who promoted it at UN meetings, thus helping to brand Japan as a leader in environmental awareness (Siniawer 2018: 256–257). What potential does the concept of *mottainai* hold for reducing plastic waste in Japan?

Although *mottainai* was not specifically asked about during fieldwork in 2014 and 2018, it was noticed that several informants used the word. Kobayashi Noriko, who lives in a small village in Kyoto Prefecture, stated that she and some friends were organising a monthly garage sale, which they called a *mottainai* shop. This was a good way for them to get rid of things that they did not need anymore but felt *mottainai* to throw in the bin (Interview 27 July 2014). Kunishio Sachie, living in Odaka Ward of Minamisoma, said that she had changed the tatami mats in the back rooms of her house just before the nuclear accident occurred. So, when she returned a few years later after the evacuation restrictions had been lifted, she decided not to throw out the tatami even though they had been contaminated, because she felt it was *mottainai* (interview 11 October 2018). Demachi Makiko in Tokyo often eats the tinned food that is stored in case of emergency at her two children's school when it is handed out because it is nearing its sell-by date. She does not give it to her children in case it makes them sick, but because it would be *mottainai* to throw it away—and she thinks she is the toughest in the family—she eats it herself, even though she dislikes tinned food (Interview November 2018). Clearly, people in Japan feel that it is *mottainai* to throw things away that have been acquired for a purpose which has not yet been fulfilled or can still be used by others. However, these comments do not reveal a concern for the environment.

Manami Gill in Yokohama (Interview 29 September 2018) used the word twice. She thought it was *mottainai* to buy lunch every day, so she made her own lunch and



brought it to work, reusing her lunch box and chopsticks. The result was that she avoided plastic waste, but what she mainly felt to be *mottainai* was needlessly spending money on something she was able to make herself. She also used the word *mottainai* when we talked about the various bins and bags of waste and recyclables that were in her kitchen. When related to her that in Austria people usually have drawers under the sink that contain several compartments for different kinds of waste and recyclables, she responded that her daughter in Hokkaido had something similar:

In the end though, since the compartments are very small, when the drawer is full, she takes out the bag and puts it on the floor next to the drawer until it is full, otherwise it would be *mottainai*. You see, you have to buy the waste bags, so it's *mottainai* if you don't fill them to the limit [laughs]. So, she leaves out the bag in the kitchen until it is completely full. That means the bag is hidden away in the drawer during the first half of the week, but then it's taken out and left in the kitchen until it's completely full.

Failing to completely fill the dedicated rubbish bag—which had to be paid for—is here judged to be *mottainai*, even though it means that the partially filled waste bag is left standing around in the kitchen for half of the week. Thus, a levy on plastic carrier bags, as well as on other single-use plastic items, would appear to be an effective way of reducing plastic waste, not because of any significant difference it makes to people's purses, but because it would make people feel it was *mottainai* to pay for a bag when they could bring their own.

As Suzuki Sayuri, a married banker from Tokyo in her late twenties (7 November 2019), comments, one of plastic's virtues is that it is 'easy to throw away' (*suteyasui*). Clear disposal rules and frequent collections of plastic waste—in most parts of Tokyo plastic waste apart from PET bottles is incinerated—certainly make it 'easy to throw away', but it is also *suteyasui* because the cost of plastic packaging is included in the price of the item and thus appears to be 'free'. In other words, plastic packaging, plastic cutlery, and plastic carrier bags can all be tossed in the bin without any sense of this being *mottainai*. Japanese consumers have never experienced a period when there was a shortage of plastic, and having been provided with free disposable plastic bags for so long, they have never been seen as valuable. In this context, reinterpreting 'stinginess' as caring for the environment in tandem with ascribing a value—however small—to plastic carrier bags may be an important way to reduce plastic waste.

## Conclusions

Based on the premise that in order to reduce plastic waste, we need to understand the practical and moral needs it fulfils in everyday life, discussions around the plastic carrier bag levy that was introduced for Japanese retail businesses on 1 July 2020 have been analysed. This study argues that the charge is changing the socio-cultural

meaning of the carrier bags (*reji bukuro*, lit. cashier bags) in fundamental ways.

Handing out free carrier bags has long been an intrinsic part of customer service in Japan. It has signified generosity and consideration on the part of retailers and an awareness of their customers' busy lifestyles and their need for convenience. It has also allowed sales staff to carefully pack customers' purchases as part of a smooth and efficient check-out process. Customers have been reluctant to refuse bags, not wanting to interrupt this smooth flow of work. The levy on the bag—however small—means that it is no longer a free gift and the salesperson has to confirm whether the customer wants to buy one or not. Successfully changing the checkout process without disrupting the cashier-customer relationship and the flow of business involves a learning curve for both retailers and customers, especially in *konbini* where customers have to pack their goods quickly in a limited space in order not to keep others waiting.

At the same time, the 'cashier bag' has functioned as a visible receipt indicating that shopping items have been paid for and are legitimate purchases. Thus, when customers use their own carrier bags or carry items 'naked' in their hands, the lack of such a sign has led to widespread suspicion that so-called 'eco-bag shoplifting' has become rampant. The 'nakedness' of unwrapped goods also makes consumers feel embarrassed that they may be judged by others for a lack of propriety in failing to keep their private self (as expressed by their everyday consumption) shielded from view. This sentiment extends to the disposal process, with people's reluctance to throw things away 'naked' leading to the double-bagging of waste. Plastic bags, cutlery, and packaging are considered 'easy to throw away' because they are explicitly made for the purpose of being discarded after use. As long as they are free, it is not considered 'wasteful' (*mottainai*) to throw them away.

In the context of discussion on sustainable development and maritime pollution, the levy encourages a change in notions of cleanliness and its relation to plastic packaging. As a *reji bukuro*, the plastic carrier bag has been viewed as something that protects purchases from dirt and contamination; when used as a *gomi bukuro* (waste bag), it contains the rubbish and thereby protects the environment from litter. However, consumers are now becoming aware that plastic bags interact with the environment in a way that is harmful to plants, animals, and humans alike. In other words, plastic bags have *become* dirt that pollutes the environment and can enter the food chain. As Elizabeth Shove (2003: 82) has argued, 'new practices of cleanliness indicate a reconfiguration of social ideas and orders', thus a change in the meaning of plastic bags also changes what it means to be a good citizen. Good citizenship today is not just a matter of packaging consumer items hygienically or avoiding littering by containing waste in bags, but of reducing plastic waste. The levy on single-use plastic carrier bags may indeed help to change lifestyles, not so much due to any financial incentive, but because it makes plastic waste an everyday conversation and helps people to reinterpret their relationship with plastic carrier bags. The levy encourages people to no longer view plastic

packaging as 'easy to throw away', but as something that is *mottainai* and indeed polluting to toss in the bin. It is to be hoped that it will lead more people to conclude that reducing their use of plastic is 'Not stingy, eco!'

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/press/106866.html> (all web-sites last accessed 27 September 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.i-kasa.com>; Asahi TV news on 30 June 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkGYV4x3LE4>; *Mainichi Shinbun*, 18 April 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/02/7dff32a04f7-feature-japanese-company-turning-the-tables-on-plastic-waste.html>; see also: <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/photo/30791226>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/articles/eff36b41f6518e6b4f5a2e039670b9f7a826c75a> (accessed 8 August 2020, no longer online); original article: Nakajima and Doi 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.env.go.jp/en/focus/060403.html>. The text is published in English; 'sound-material cycle society' likely means 'circular economy'. The *mottainai furoshiki* is made of fibre from recycled PET bottles and features a design by the 18th-century artist Itō Jakuchū.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that she have no conflict of interest. Prior informed consent was requested and received from all participants included in this study. Her research has been funded by a Downing College – Keio University Fellowship (2014), a Cambridge Humanities Research Grant (2018) and UKRI funding (2020; EP/SO25308/1).

## References

- Borg, K, Lindsay, J and Curtis, J.** 2020. When News Media and Social Media Meet: How Facebook Users Reacted to News Stories about a Supermarket Plastic Bag Ban. *New Media & Society*, 16 September. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820956681>
- Chiba, H.** 2002. Restyling Japan: Revival of the 'Mottainai' Spirit. *Look Japan*, November. <https://web.archive.org/web/20040405084940/http://www.lookjapan.com/LBcoverstory/02NovCS.htm>.
- Clammer, J.** 1997. *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Endō, T.** 2000. *Purasuchikku no bunkashi* (Cultural history of plastics). Tokyo: Suiseisha.
- Fujii, S.** 2018. *Gomi shushū to iu shigoto: Seisōsha ni notte kangaeta chihō jichi* (Waste collection work: Local governance considered from the waste collection truck). Tōkyō: Komonzu.
- Giddens, A.** 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. London: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E.** 1963. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York and London: The Free Press/Macmillan.
- Hendry, J.** 1995. *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Inamura, M.** 2015. *Gomi to Nihonjin: Eisei, kinken, risaikuru kara miru kindaishi* (Rubbish and the Japanese: Modern history seen from hygiene, frugality and recycling). Tokyo: Minerva Shobō.
- Mainichi Shinbun.** 2020. Kifu: Reji-bukuro saku-gen no kōka de 70 man-en kifu. *Mainichi Shinbun*, Oita edition, 18 April. <https://dbs-g-search-or-jp.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/aps/WSKR/main.jsp?ssid=20201006185805257gsh-ap02>.
- METI.** 2020. Konbiniensu sutoa shōhinbetsu hanbaigaku nado oyobi zennen (Itemised sales at convenience stores). *Jikeiretsu dēta* (Quantitative data). <https://www.meti.go.jp/statistics/tyo/syoudou/result-2/index.html>.
- Nagano, Y.** 2020. Tokyo Areas to Get Cash to Stop Burning, Start Recycling Plastic. *Asahi Shinbun*, 12 February 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13121351>.
- Nakajima, Y and Doi, S.** 2020. Konbini rejibukuro, jitairitsu 7 baichō ni, yūryōka-mae no bai ijō (More than 70 percent refuse carrier bags in convenience stores; more than doubled from before the introduction of the carrier bag levy), *Asahi Shinbun Digital* 31 July 2020. <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN7061X-WN70ULFA01M.html>.
- NHK.** 2018. 'Risaikuru hatan' dō kaiketsu? Datsu-purasuchikku shakai e no mosaku (How to solve the recycling breakdown? In search of a society that gets rid of plastic). *Close-up Gendai Plus* (NHK TV Current affairs programme), 1 November. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/4203/index.html>.
- Nielsen, TD, Holmberg, K and Stripple, J.** 2019. Need a Bag? A Review of Public Policies on Plastic Carrier Bags: Where, How and to What Effect? *Waste Management*, 87: 428–440. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wasman.2019.02.025>
- Ohtomo, S and Ohnuma, S.** 2014. Psychological Interventional Approach for Reduce Resource Consumption: Reducing Plastic Bag Usage at Supermarkets. *Resources, Conversation and Recycling*, 84: 57–65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2013.12.014>
- Pathak, G and Nichter, M.** 2019. The Anthropology of Plastics: An Agenda for Local Studies of a Global Matter of Concern. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 33(3), 307–326. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12514>
- Shove, E.** 2003. *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Oxford: Berg.
- Siniawer, EM.** 2018. *Waste: Consuming Postwar Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501725852>
- Slater, DH.** 2013. Moralities of Volunteer Aid: The Permutations of Gifts and Their Reciprocals. In: Gill, T, Steger, B and Slater, D (eds.), *Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 267–291.
- UNEP.** 2018. Single-use Plastics: A Roadmap for Sustainability. Rev. ed. [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25496/singleUsePlastic\\_sustainability.pdf](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25496/singleUsePlastic_sustainability.pdf).

- Whitelaw, G.** 2016. The Waste Basket? Trailing Expired Food in Japan's Konbini. *Gastronomica*, 16(3), 102–110. <https://online.ucpress.edu/gastronomica/article-abstract/16/3/102/44961/The-Waste-Basket-Trailing-Expired-Food-in-Japan-s?redirectedFrom=fulltext>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2016.16.3.102>
- Whitelaw, G.** 2018 Konbini Nation. In: Cwiertka, KJ and Machotka, E (eds.), *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 15–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv56fgjm.8>
- Yagura, K.** 2020. Kyoto Pref. City to Implement Japan's First Plastic Bag Ban, with Power to Name Offenders. *Mainichi Shinbun*, 24 March 2020. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200326/p2a/00m/0na/005000c>
- Yamaguchi, A (Mottainai Campaign Office).** 2019. Kisha no me: SDGs, wakamono ga teigen. Kokusai kyōchō no dojō sodatetai (From the perspective of a journalist: SDGs, proposal of young people, we want to prepare the ground for an international agreement). *Mainichi Shinbun Tokyo morning edition*, 19 September.

**How to cite this article:** Steger, B. 2021. 'Stingy, Stingy, Stingy Government': Mixed Responses to the Introduction of the Plastic Carrier Bag Levy in Japan. *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(1): 5, 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/wwwj.69>

**Submitted:** 11 October 2020

**Accepted:** 11 April 2021

**Published:** 24 June 2021

**Copyright:** © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[

*Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 