

pawn shops in japan

a beginner's guide

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One of the few businesses to thrive during a recession, pawn shops mean quick cash for some and good bargains for others. Japanese pawn shops have the advantage of excellent reputations for service, as well as a high standard of goods for sale - sometimes at a fraction of department store prices. You can expect bright lights, clean shelves and friendly, knowledgeable staff.

The seedy reputation that the business has generated in other countries is much less of an issue in Japan: pawn shops and second-hand shops here tend to look similar to retail stores which deal in *new* products, and they can be found in the same business districts as department stores and brand-name retailers. Compare that with the United States, where you sometimes have to access pawn shops through electronically locked doors only to be greeted by a heavily armed clerk...

There's a good reason why Japan's pawn shops try so hard to blend in. In Japan, second-hand goods are frequently frowned upon, a factor which necessitates that pawn shops do their best to fit into the environment and look just like their more expensive neighbors in up-market districts of Japan's big cities. This chameleon quality helps to soften the image of what could, in many parts of the world, be considered a rough trade.

When Ako (not her real name) needed some quick cash for an unexpected emergency, she looked for a way to turn her late father's jewelry and watch collection into cash. The jewelry was a silver necklace and some gold rings, and the watch was an International Watch Company (IWC) stainless steel dress watch with matching bracelet. New, the watch would normally retail for over ¥300,000.

Ako decided to shop around for the best price. The first place she went to was in a shopping arcade near her apartment. The privately-run shop buys second-hand jewelry and accessories for a fraction of what they sell for new, then marks them up to sell to customers. The same practice is conducted at all pawn shops. The unusual thing was, the shopkeeper offered ¥10,000 for the IWC and claimed that he had to hold onto it for a few days before he could buy it. "I said thank you and left," Ako says. "It seemed strange to me, because I was with my father when he bought it and I knew what it was worth then." And so Ako went to Umeda in Osaka and started looking around for another shop to sell the swag to.

She finally made her way to Daikokuya, a nationwide chain with a shop across from the Hilton Hotel in Umeda and down the street from Gucci and Bulgari shops. Entering the shop, customers are greeted by glass cases covering Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Hermes and other high-end brand goods. Louis Vuitton bags start at around ¥40,000 and gradually go higher depending on age and quality. The clerk Ako spoke to passed on a Louis Vuitton wallet because it was too old. "I'll give it to my boyfriend," she replied.

The watch cases here run the gamut from Tag Heuer, starting at around ¥50,000, to Omegas for ¥100,000, and all the way through to the master of bling Rolexes for ¥300,000 or more. Each of the watches shines under the fluorescent lights and some show scratches from their previous owners (so buyer beware).

In the back of the shop, a private area is set aside for people who are looking to sell, not buy. On the opposite side of a painted glass door are two booths

with a pair of chairs in each. Ako and I sat down across from one of the clerks, who was wearing a suit and tie and sporting a resin prayer bracelet on one wrist and a steel Rolex on the other. Ako emptied the articles onto a leather tray between us, and the clerk started his examination.

The gold and silver were checked for purity marks, then weighed. The weight was compared with a list of numbers in a vinyl book and a price was typed into an electronic calculator on the counter. Next came the watch. The IWC was examined under a jeweler's loop for the company's signature mark on the back of the case and dial. After that, the serial number was compared to a list in a separate vinyl book behind the counter. Fake Rolexes and IWCs are not unheard of.

After comprehensively verifying all the goods, the offer for the watch was typed into the calculator, which was turned around and shown to Ako. "I thought it'd be more," she says, "but it was OK." The offer was just over ¥100,000. The watch alone was ¥55,000. Although it's worth much more, the shop can only sell it for what people are willing to pay - which means the people they buy from make less in the long run. It'll likely sell for ¥120,000 or more once it has been cleaned and polished.

The final stage of the transaction simply involves filling in a form and showing valid ID to the shop, just in case questions about the source of the merchandise arise at a later date. Whether you're buying or selling, pawn shops in Japan exhibit impressive professionalism. Keep a cool head and there's really nothing to be afraid of.

