

Japan – From the Outside Looking In

Introduction

My hope is that this material will give you a brief overview and fresh perspectives on the Japanese people, their unique culture and perhaps yourself as you seek to communicate with them on a deeper level.

“Let us humbly bow before our Creator in thanksgiving for the wisdom and knowledge He has revealed to us in Christ. . . . (We) ought not be smug nor complacent in (our) knowledge of Christ, for He has given (us) a commission to disciple the nations. Therefore (we) must still learn if (we) are to teach, if (we) are to *communicate Christ across cultures!*” ~ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*

Have you ever played the game Charades? That’s where you are given a phrase or some other ‘thing’ to communicate to others without using words. A similar game is called Pictionary where, rather than acting, we draw pictures to communicate an idea. What makes those games difficult is that we are forced to drop our most trusted communication tools and rely on some of the other things we know and do. Communication is a complex system of coding and de-coding ideas that we wish to share with others. Culture provides a people group with a common context, a set of assumptions about the way things are. In Charades or Pictionary, words have been removed from the code and the ideas must be communicated using only body movements or pictures drawn on a board. With words removed the ‘victim’ needs to figure out how to code the idea into body movements that the group can decode and figure out. It’s not easy. We ‘code’ ideas using words, tone of voice, facial movements, hand gestures, body position and many other things. Within a culture, these things are fairly well understood and usually just taken for granted.

Even within the same culture there are sub-cultures and gender differences that can make things complicated. You may remember the book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.¹ It was written to help men and women understand some of the differences between them in the hope that better understanding would lead to better communication—and better marriages.

The problem is that even within a culture, “Yes” does not always *mean* “Yes”. We Americans like to think of ourselves as a direct and clearly spoken people. We say what we mean and we mean what we say. We let our “Yes” mean “Yes” and our “No” mean “No”, right? Well, maybe, unless someone asks you if the dress they are wearing looks ok. Or, your classmate has just finished giving their class presentation and wonders how you thought it went. What do you do? What do you say? Will you tell someone that the dress they just bought actually looks awful? Will you be the one who tells the classmate that the presentation they worked on for the past several weeks was boring and uninformative? OR, will you help them save face by not answering directly?

In looking at some character traits of the Japanese culture, we will be looking into their means of getting along with each other, of sparing the feelings of their friends and coworkers and of communicating within their own complex labyrinth of social behavior---just like we do.

We will look at six specific cultural traits that are commonly found in Japanese culture. However, it is valuable to keep in mind that these are not intended to describe every Japanese person you meet. The Japanese society is rapidly changing and the younger generation does not always manifest these things to the same extent that their parents or grandparents did. Internationalism has fostered a Global Youth Culture² that transcends their host culture.

¹ Published in 1992 by [John Gray](#), Harper Collings

² Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, [Global Youth Culture](#)

Your Japanese friends may not realize that they are influenced they are by these things, but they are. For them, this is just the way life is and the way it is supposed to be.

Culture Traits

These, are not presented in any particular order and one is not intended to appear more important than another. In practice, they all overlap and influence each other and usually there is more than one characteristic operating in any given situation.

Face Saving:

If you invite someone to a party at your home, or to an event at church, you might hear your new friend say something like, “Okay. That sounds interesting.” That might mean “yes” or it might mean “no”. How can you know? You cannot always know. Begin to sharpen your listening skills. Was there any hesitation in their voice? Were there any pauses in the flow of the sentence? Those voice inflections or pauses *could* be signs that the meaning is really “no thank you”. But don’t be too quick to assign meaning. Remember that they are also speaking in English, a second language for them. You may not really know their intent until the day of the event when they do or do not show up.

Why would they tell you “yes” if they don’t intend on showing up? Are they trying to deceive you? Are they lying to you? Do they really disrespect you so much that they won’t tell you the truth?

The fact is, the face they are saving is not their own. They are honoring you by sparing you the embarrassment or shame of rejecting your offer to your face.

It can be awkward and in my own experience, it can hurt. But understanding why it is done can help you appreciate their friendship and soften the blow to your ego when no one comes to your event.

Omote - Ura

“Omote” refers to the image that an individual, a company or any institution wishes to present to outsiders or to the public in general. “Ura” is the opposite of that. It is the reality behind the surface. This is sometimes known as the “public face and the private face”. It takes time to build a friendship that is close enough to begin to see someone’s real “private face”. Even then, there are degrees of openness to move through before you are going to know someone’s true feelings or thoughts.

We know what this is, right? There are things about you that only your closest friends know about you. If you are married, there are things your spouse knows that even your closest friends don’t know about what you think or feel about certain things.

In the case of the Japanese, this is much more so than with Americans. In Christian circles this often results in misunderstanding to what degree a Japanese person really accepts the things of Christ. A missionary I know recently wrote to me to tell me that my friend should be regarded as a Christian. But I know this friend well. We have gone beyond superficial things and well beyond the public face. This person is not a believer. They are open to the things of Christ but are still far from accepting them.

What happened here? The missionary misunderstood my friend’s openness to hear. The missionary even led my friend through a “prayer of salvation”. But privately, in a personal space the missionary never reached, my friend did not believe and did not receive the things of Christ into his heart. – not yet!

Gift Giving - Omiyage

“Omiyage” is a gift that a visitor always brings to the host or a gift that a traveler brings home from a trip to give to friends and family members or coworkers. It is very often a practical gift such as a snack or a cute souvenir and it is almost always inexpensive.

Being a gaikin (foreigner) they won't expect if from you. But if you are invited to dinner in someone's home and you bring a snack or some fruit or a dessert they will really appreciate it. And if you travel *anywhere* and you bring a small gift (even a postcard to give them) they will be very pleased that you thought of them. It is a nice gesture and is an easy way to be culturally sensitive.

The idea here is that by doing this, you show that you are thinking about them and the things that they value. It is a small way you can honor them and their culture.

Importance of harmony among people – 和 “wa”

With Japanese, it is considered better to agree about something you really don't like (Omote – Ura again) than to reveal your opinion and show disagreement that might cause disharmony. This can be confusing because you might think someone really *likes* the German food you have served while they are actually suffering through it.

In Japan, acting untrue to one's personal beliefs in order to maintain the harmony of the group is a virtue. To “stick up for what one stands for” could be considered rude. A well-known saying goes something like this, “The hammer will hit the nail that sticks up.”

Do you remember the missionary who thought my friend had become a Christian? As it turned out, my friend had acted in a way *contrary* to his personal belief and “prayed to receive Jesus” as a way to:

1. *Save the face* of the missionary who obviously wanted my friend to become a Christian
2. *Preserve harmony* within the group of Christian friends who had been talking about Jesus. In order to do this my friend acted in a way that was clearly contrary to his personal belief.

Why? It was certainly not to deceive or mock the missionaries or Christian friends. It was done in order to honor their desires and to avoid hurting them.

What comes to my mind is this verse: “. . . *in humility, count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” (Philippians 2:3b-4)

There are things about the Japanese culture that are very honorable and good. As we seek to understand and to better communicate the Gospel, let us remember to honor those things that are worthy of honor even when they are hard for us to fully understand.

Importance of group

As we've learned, In Japan the expected way is that everyone seek an agreed upon opinion. Opposing views or challenging statements can be considered rude. In America, making strong assertions of opinion, even opposing opinions, is not only encouraged but also expected and doing so earns respect.

Japanese international students doing group projects in America often have a hard time with this. Back home they earn the respect of the group as they hesitate and find ways to discover and support

the group opinion. Stating an opposing view would be very out of place. But in the states, they find that other members of the group are quick and aggressive to share their own opinions. The more reticent Japanese student soon discovers that he or she has lost the respect of the others unless they boldly (and rudely) assert their own individual ideas.

If you are observant, you will notice Japanese students in a church setting will nod as if in agreement or signal in other ways that they are in sync with the group (whether or not they really are). They long to belong in the group and will consistently work to serve and uphold the group. This does not mean that they agree with what the group believes. It just means that they want to be a part of the group. Being ostracized from the group is one of the worst things that can happen to a Japanese person.

Silence is golden

It is interesting to me that, although this is an American or maybe European saying, Japanese people take it more seriously. In English-speaking conversations, silence is considered socially undesirable. In Japanese culture silence has positive connotations because it implies contemplation.

American style of conversation has been described as a kind of tennis match whereas a more typical Japanese style of conversation could be described as a bowling tournament.

In America, I say something, you immediately respond with your opinion and I return with mine, in something like a tennis game style of give and take. In Japan, I make longer comments while you wait. Then, once I have finished I expect that you have been listening carefully. There might be some silence while you begin formulating your thoughts. Then, you will begin sharing your reflections on the topic.

If you have ever listened to a news show interview of guests who hold opposing viewpoints on a subject then you have seen the epitome of our American value of expressing your own opinion.

In Japan, however, this sort of ‘over-talking’ one another just doesn’t happen. Instead, listening is an important skill to develop.

Recources

[Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally](#), David Hasselgrave: online though Google Books

[Japanese Culture: A Primer For Newcomers](#)

[The Japan FAQ: Know Before You Go \(Or: What I wish I knew Before . . . \)](#)

Culture Notes From the web site: [Japanese Manners & Etiquette](#)

Eating

- It is impolite to eat or drink something while walking down the street.
- Do not bite or clean your fingernails, gnaw on pencils, or lick your fingers in front of others.
- In restaurants or when visiting it's customary to get a small, moist rolled-up towel (cold in summer, hot in winter) called an "oshibori" to wipe their hands with. It's impolite to wipe the face and neck with it though some do in less formal places.
- In Japan it is impolite to pour your own drink when eating with others--you pour your companion's drink and your companion pours yours.
- If you don't want any more to drink, leave your glass full.
- It's customary to say "Itadakimasu" before eating and "Gochisosama deshita" after eating, especially if you're being treated, as well as "Kanpai" for "Cheers".
- When sharing a dish, put what you take on your own plate before eating it.
- Do not make excessive special requests in the preparation of your food, nor wolf it down.
- Do not use your chopsticks to skewer food, move dishes around, and NEVER dish out food to another using the same ends you just ate from--use the top ends.
- Don't use your chopsticks to point at somebody.
- Don't leave your chopsticks standing up out of your food.
- It is normal in Japan to pick up your rice or miso soup bowl and hold it under your chin to keep stuff from falling.
- Traditional Japanese food is served on several small plates, and it's normal to alternate between dishes instead of fully eating one dish after another.
- Don't leave a mess on your plate--fold your napkins neatly.
- Don't take wads of napkins, sugar packs, or steal "souvenirs" when you leave a restaurant.
- Do not put soy sauce on your rice--it isn't meant for that.
- Do not put sugar or cream in Japanese tea.
- There is no real custom like "help yourself". Wait until the host offers something.
- If you act as host, you should anticipate your guest's needs (cream/sugar, napkins, etc.).
- If you must use a toothpick, at least cover your mouth with your other hand.
- Be aware that in Japan it is normal to make slurping sounds when you're eating noodles.
- In Japan, it's good (in commercials, anyway) to make loud gulping noises when drinking. Expect to hear lots of it in ads.
- It is normal to pay a restaurant or bar bill at the register instead of giving money to the waiter/waitress. There is no tipping in Japan.
- It's considered rude to count your change after paying the bill in a store or restaurant, but the Japanese themselves do give it a cursory lookover.

Everyday Living

- Thou shalt *NOT BE LATE* for appointments.
- There is no custom of "Ladies First".
- Avoid excessive physical and eye contact
- It is considered rude to use your cell phone on trains and buses.
- Japanese often use silence for communication as much as speaking.
- Do not chew gum when working or in other formal situations.
- When Japanese start work at 9 AM, they *START WORK* at 9 AM.
- Avoid lots of jewelry or very colorful clothes when going to work.
- White-collar Japanese typically leave the office only after their superiors have done so. Do not expect someone to be instantly free once the official business hours are over.
- Exchanging business cards is de rigueur in formal introductions. You should extend your card to the other person with both hands, right side up to them (upside down to you). You receive cards with both hands also. Be sure to look at the card and not just pocket it. Never put it in your pants pocket and sit on it in front of them.
- It is polite to put "-san" after another's name, or "-chan" after a young girl's name, or "-kun" after a boy's name, but NEVER use these after your own.
- Do not scream about why workplaces or restaurants are filled with chain-smokers. The "health thing" is not big here yet.
- Avoid shouting loudly at someone to get their attention--wave, or go up to them.
- If you have to blow your nose, leave the room, or at the very least try to face away from other people--and use a tissue--not a handkerchief!
- Don't wear tattered clothes outside, nor socks with holes when visiting someone.
- On escalators, stay on the left side if you plan to just stand and not climb them.
- The Japanese gesture of "Who, me?" is pointing at their nose, not their chest.
- The Japanese gesture for "Come here" is to put your hand palm out, fingers up, and raise and lower your fingers a few times. The western gesture of palm-up, closing your hand is only used to call animals to you.
- The Japanese gesture for no is fanning your hand sideways a few times in front of your face.
- Japanese residences have thin walls and poor insulation - don't blast your stereo or television.
- Don't wear your slippers into a tatami (straw) mat room.
- It's customary to sit on the floor in a tatami room (called "washitsu").
- Don't wear your slippers into the genkan (at the entrance to a home, where the shoes are kept), nor outside.
- Don't wear the toilet room slippers outside the toilet room.
- It's better to wear shoes slipped on easily when visiting someone.
- Japanese wear kimono or yukata (light summer kimono) with the left side over the right. The reverse is only for the dead at funerals.
- It's polite to initially refuse someone's offer of help. Japanese may also initially refuse your offer even if they really want it. Traditionally an offer is made 3 times. It may be better to state you'll carry their bag, call a taxi, etc., instead of pushing them to be polite and refuse.
- When they laugh Japanese women often cover their mouths with their hand. This comes from an old Buddhist notion that showing bone is unclean, If you're a woman you have no obligation to copy this, but you will soon notice how frequently Japanese do this.

- It's polite to bring some food (gift-wrapped in more formal situations) or drinks when you visit someone.
- Gift giving is very important in Japan, but extravagant gifts require an equal or slightly higher extravagant gift in return. Avoid giving pricey gifts.
- Giving cash is normal for ceremonies like weddings and funerals; but given in special envelopes with a printed or real red tie around it (available in stationary and convenience stores). Use new and not old bills.
- After coming back from a vacation it is normal to bring a small gift for all those you work with, even if you don't really like them a lot. Nothing expensive is required, however.
- It's polite to belittle the value of your gift or food when you offer it, even if it's blatantly untrue.
- In more formal circumstances it's impolite to unwrap a gift someone brings you as soon as you receive it. In casual surroundings it's normal to ask the giver if it can be opened now.
- It's polite to see a guest to the door (or the front of a building even) when they leave.
- When someone visits it's polite to turn their shoes around and put them together so they can put them on easily.
- This is older custom, but in a home the guest is seated facing the room entrance. The highest ranking host sits across from the guest.
- Again old, but in a car the highest ranking person sits behind the driver. The lowest rides shotgun.
- For taxis the driver will open/close the rear left hand door for you.
- Japanese often compliment each other to promote good will, but it is polite to deny how well you speak Japanese, how nice you look, etc.
- In Japan the whole family uses the same bath water -- as a guest you will probably be given the privilege of using the bath water first. Do *NOT* drain the water out after you have finished your bath!