

Japanese Culture

Cultural Traits

The Group Over the Individual

The Japanese believe that cooperation and harmony in a group is more important than the interests of any one individual. In North America, the importance of individuality is still seen even in a group. The individual is important in Japan too, but each person is a member of a larger “team”, whether it be a family, an office, a neighborhood, a community, or the entire country. The Japanese believe that whatever they do or say, they must keep in mind the interests of other “team members.”

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Status

The Japanese have a strong sense of hierarchy, rank, position, and status at all times. Verbal and non-verbal communication makes it very clear who should pay respect to whom. Rank is also important in social settings. There are even special names for the first-born son or daughter as well as different names for "older brother" or "younger brother" and likewise for sister.

Women

Traditionally, the role of the Japanese woman is to be in the home. Japanese wives usually have strict control over household affairs including the family finances and all important decisions regarding the children’s education. Although many women do work, most do not hold management positions. However, in recent years, many women are working longer and marrying later, causing many to rethink the role of women in Japanese society.



Good Manners

It is best to be humble, respectful, and modest at all times. It is the host's duty to make sure the guests are well taken care of, sometimes to the point of smothering. Hosts try to anticipate a guest’s every need, and the Western idea of “help yourself” rarely applies.

When served something to eat or drink, the guest will not usually begin until the host has said *dozo* (go ahead). Likewise, the host usually waits until the guests have begun before they eat or drink. If served a drink without asking, guests will not usually ask for something else. Instead, take a few polite sips

and leave the rest in the cup. You may notice that an empty cup is quickly refilled, so if you do not want any more, simply leave your cup full.

Facial Gestures

The “uncommitted face” of the Japanese is very common. It is rare to see someone clearly express emotions in public. The "Poker Face" is used to hide negative emotions as well as protect privacy.

The smile can often be an expression that conceals embarrassment or pain. In an uncomfortable situation, it is not uncommon for the Japanese to give a nervous laugh or awkward smile to conceal their true emotions.



Eye contact is often a Western signal for confidence or sincerity. In many cases, the Japanese consider direct and constant eye contact to be uncomfortable. The Japanese may shift their eyes or look down to show respect to others.

Touching

At first, it may be best to refrain from physical contact like a pat on the back or a hug. The Japanese do not usually show emotions or signs of affection in public. Young couples may be seen holding hands, but rarely are they seen kissing in front of others.

Showing Respect to Objects

Objects or items received from someone are shown just as much respect as the person might be. Business cards are not folded or written on. A guest's coat is not thrown over a chair but hung up carefully. The wrapping paper on a gift is not torn open, but rather opened carefully and gently. At a Japanese restaurant or home, the guest's shoes are placed together and turned around so that the guest can put his or her shoes back on easily when leaving.

Gestures

Hand gestures are different in Japan than in the United States, and you may accidentally give a very different meaning than you intended. The following is a short list of gestures used in Japan.

- “me”—pointing to one’s nose or touching the nose.
- “listening”—nodding the head up and down. This should not be mistaken for a “yes” gesture. It means that one is listening, not necessarily agreeing.
- “money”—forming a circle with the thumb and index finger—similar

to the OK sign.

- “eating”—holding an imaginary rice bowl in the left hand while pretending to shovel rice into the mouth using chopsticks.
- “come here”—waving the hand in a back and forth motion with the fingers pointed down.

Clothing

Generally speaking, the Japanese are much more conscious of their appearance in public than we are in the West. The attire and styles are also more formal and conservative. In general, women do not wear sleeveless tops, shorts, or revealing styles. At work, most men wear dark, two-piece suits with plain white shirts and conservative ties. Adults rarely wear bright colors, bold designs, or anything that makes one stand out from the group.

Being on Time

As a general rule, the Japanese are always on time. There is no such thing as being “fashionably late” or “making a grand entrance”. If an event is to begin at 9:00, then it is best to arrive a few minutes early to get yourself organized and be ready to begin right at 9:00 (not 9:05). Similarly, the end of an event or function is usually very sudden and abrupt.



Eating Food

Oshibori

Just after you sit down at a restaurant, you will receive a damp, hot (or sometimes cold in the summer) white towel called an *oshibori*. In a restaurant, it is wrapped in plastic or is often served on a small tray. Use the towel to wipe your hands before eating. In less formal situations, Japanese men often wipe their faces with the towels, but it is best not to do this. When finished, place the towel back on the tray.

What to Say

Almost all Japanese people begin and end a meal with certain phrases that express thanks for food.

- **Before eating**—*i-ta-da-ki-masu*

Meaning, “I humbly receive,” this phrase is used like the English phrases, “may I begin?,” or, “let’s eat!”

• **After eating**—*go-chiso-sama-deshita*

This phrase is similar to “thank you,” “it was a treat or a special meal,” or, “thank you for paying.”

Chopsticks

Many restaurants use disposable wooden chopsticks that come wrapped in paper. Remove the chopsticks from the paper and separate into two sticks. Although you might see other Japanese people rub the two sticks together to remove any thin fragments of wood, it is best not to follow this practice as you might embarrass your host.

Lacquer or plastic chopsticks are used in more formal situations and in the home. These kinds of chopsticks are placed on a special chopstick resting



piece, which is where you should place your chopsticks when not in use. Use the larger serving chopsticks that usually accompany a communal dish like you would use a serving spoon in a Western setting. If there aren't any, turn your chopsticks around and take the food with the clean, top ends of your chopsticks.

Slurping

Many people in Japan make slurping noises while eating foods like noodles or soup. Not only does it make hot foods easier to eat, but it also shows the cook your thanks for the meal. Try to imitate those around you...you may not have the opportunity to make slurping noises in America!

Dishes

Bringing small bowls of rice or soup to your mouth in order to eat is proper manners and prevents spilling. Once near your mouth, you may use your chopsticks to get solid things like rice or meat inside your mouth. Very small dishes are usually used for soy or other sauces, into which you dip certain foods such as *sushi*, *sashimi*, or *tempura*.

Toasting

Toasting is a popular tradition in Japan. If you do not drink alcohol, toasting with juice, tea, or other beverages is fine. The important thing is that you share in a group celebration.

Some Definite Don'ts

- ☆ Do not grab your chopsticks in the palm of your hand as you would grab a stick. This is how a sword is handled.

☆ Do not stick your chopsticks upright into your food, especially in your rice bowl, as this is the way of offering rice to the dead.



☆ Do not pour soy sauce on your rice. Other dishes are meant to flavor the rice as you eat.

In the home

By Western standards, the typical Japanese home is very small. In major cities, most families live in tiny apartments. However, because much of Aomori is very rural, land and building costs tend to be cheaper. The majority of people who are married and have families live in a house of reasonable size, often with several generations living under one roof. When in a Japanese home, try to keep the following things in mind.

Slippers

Shoes worn outside are always taken off in the *genkan* (entryway), where one changes into slippers to wear while inside the house. These are worn at all times, except in the bathroom and in rooms with *tatami* mats. Take off the slippers at the entrance to the *tatami* room and enter in your socks or bare feet. The slippers are also taken off when entering the bathroom, where a special set of slippers will be waiting just inside the door. This also acts as a signal to someone else that the toilet is occupied.

Tatami

Most Japanese homes have at least one Japanese style room that contains *tatami* mats. The floor in these rooms is covered with a number of tightly woven straw mats. Shoes or indoor slippers are not worn in *tatami* rooms at any time. The *tatami* room usually has very little furniture, and one typically sits on the floor. Women kneel and men usually cross their legs. Japanese style rooms often have sliding doors that run on tracks. These doors are usually fragile, so please use care when opening and closing them.

Shower Room

The bathtub is often located in a room that is like a large shower stall with a central drain. The toilet and sink are located in a different area of the house. Although many shower rooms have showerheads, some still rely on filling up bowls of water from the tap or hot water from the bathtub. The bathtub is

usually large and very deep compared with western ones, and it is filled once in the evening for use by the entire family. Since everyone is using the same bath water, be sure to wash your body well with soap and a cloth outside of the bathtub while seated on the small stool. After you are completely clean and rinsed, enter the tub of hot water to soak and relax. Once you are finished, rinse the wash area and cover the tub to keep the water hot for the next person. Many families use the bath in a set order, so be sure to check with your host when you are allowed to use it.



Greetings

In a Japanese home, you should always announce when you are leaving the house or when you have returned. The people in the house will then wish you off or receive you into the home. As a courtesy, "good-night" and "good morning" greetings are said after waking up and before going to bed. See the language section for more information.

Adapted from information found at <http://www.travelst.ca/index.php?pageId=52>