



Japan - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette

Welcome to our guide to Japan. This is useful for anyone researching Japanese culture, customs, manners, etiquette, values and wanting to understand the people better. You may be going to Japan on business, for a visit or even hosting Japanese colleagues or clients in your own country. Remember this is only a very basic level introduction and is not meant to stereotype all Japanese people you may meet!

Facts and Statistics

Location: Eastern Asia, island chain between the North Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan/East Sea, east of the Korean Peninsula.

Capital: Tokyo

Population: 127,333,002 (July 2004 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: Japanese 99%, others 1% (Korean 511,262, Chinese 244,241, Brazilian 182,232, Filipino 89,851, other 237,914)

Religions: Observe both Shinto and Buddhist 84%, other 16% (including Christian 0.7%)

The Japanese Language

Japanese is the sixth most spoken language in the world, with over 99% percent of the country's population using it. Amazingly, the language is spoken in scarcely any region outside Japan.

The origin of the Japanese language has many theories in reference to it, some believe it is similar to the Altaic languages, namely Turkish or Mongolian. It is recognized and acknowledged to be close in syntax to the Korean language.

Dialects are used in areas, particularly in Kyoto and Osaka, but standard Japanese, based on the speech of Tokyo, has become more popular through the use of television, radio and movies.



Japanese Society & Culture

The Japanese and 'Face'

- Saving face is crucial in Japanese society.
- The Japanese believe that turning down someone's request causes embarrassment and loss of face to the other person.
- If the request cannot be agreed to, they will say, 'it's inconvenient' or 'it's under consideration'.
- Face is a mark of personal dignity and means having high status with one's peers.
- The Japanese will try never to do anything to cause loss of face.
- Therefore, they do not openly criticize, insult, or put anyone on-the-spot.
- Face can be lost, taken away, or earned through praise and thanks.

Harmony in Japanese Society

- Harmony is the key value in Japanese society.
- Harmony is the guiding philosophy for the Japanese in family and business settings and in society as a whole.
- Japanese children are taught to act harmoniously and cooperatively with others from the time they go to pre-school.
- The Japanese educational system emphasizes the interdependence of all people, and Japanese children are not raised to be independent but rather to work together.
- This need for harmonious relationships between people is reflected in much Japanese behaviour.
- They place great emphasis on politeness, personal responsibility and working together for the universal, rather than the individual, good.
- They present facts that might be disagreeable in a gentle and indirect fashion.
- They see working in harmony as the crucial ingredient for working productively.

Japanese Non-Verbal Communication

- Since the Japanese strive for harmony and are group dependent, they rely on facial expression, tone of voice and posture to tell them what someone feels.
- They often trust non-verbal messages more than the spoken word as words can have several meanings.
- The context in which something is said affects the meaning of the words. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the situation to fully appreciate the response.



- Frowning while someone is speaking is interpreted as a sign of disagreement.
- Most Japanese maintain an impassive expression when speaking.
- Expressions to watch out for include inhaling through clenched teeth, tilting the head, scratching the back of the head, and scratching the eyebrow.
- Non-verbal communication is so vital that there is a book for 'gaijins' (foreigners) on how to interpret the signs!
- It is considered disrespectful to stare into another person's eyes, particularly those of a person who is senior to you because of age or status.
- In crowded situations the Japanese avoid eye contact to give themselves privacy.

Japanese Hierarchy

- The Japanese are very conscious of age and status.
- Everyone has a distinct place in the hierarchy, be it the family unit, the extended family, a social or a business situation.
- At school children learn to address other students as senior to them ('senpai') or junior to them ('kohai').
- The oldest person in a group is always revered and honoured. In a social situation, they will be served first and their drinks will be poured for them.

Etiquette & Customs in Japan

Meeting Etiquette

- Greetings in Japan are very formal and ritualized.
- It is important to show the correct amount of respect and deference to someone based upon their status relative to your own.
- If at all possible, wait to be introduced.
- It can be seen as impolite to introduce yourself, even in a large gathering.
- While foreigners are expected to shake hands, the traditional form of greeting is the bow. How far you bow depends upon your relationship to the other person as well as the situation. The deeper you bow, the more respect you show.
- A foreign visitor ('gaijin') may bow the head slightly, since no one expects foreigners to generally understand the subtle nuances of bowing.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- Gift-giving is highly ritualistic and meaningful.



- The ceremony of presenting the gift and the way it is wrapped is as important--sometimes more important--than the gift itself.
- Gifts are given for many occasions.
- The gift need not be expensive, but take great care to ask someone who understands the culture to help you decide what type of gift to give.
- Good quality chocolates or small cakes are good ideas.
- Do not give lilies, camellias or lotus blossoms as they are associated with funerals.
- Do not give white flowers of any kind as they are associated with funerals.
- Do not give potted plants as they encourage sickness, although a bonsai tree is always acceptable.
- Give items in odd numbers, but not 9.
- If you buy the gift in Japan, have it wrapped.
- Pastel colours are the best choices for wrapping paper.
- Gifts are not opened when received.

Dining Etiquette

On the rare occasion you are invited to a Japanese house:

- Remove your shoes before entering and put on the slippers left at the doorway.
- Leave your shoes pointing away from the doorway you are about to walk through.
- Arrive on time or no more than 5 minutes late if invited for dinner.
- If invited to a large social gathering, arriving a little bit later than the invitation is acceptable, although punctuality is always appreciated.
- Unless you have been told the event is casual, dress as if you were going into the office.
- If you must go to the toilet, put on the toilet slippers and remove them when you are finished.

Watch your Table Manners!

- Wait to be told where to sit. There is a protocol to be followed.
- The honoured guest or the eldest person will be seated in the centre of the table the furthest from the door.
- The honoured guest or the eldest is the first person to begin eating.
- Never point your chopsticks.
- It will yield tremendous dividends if you learn to use chopsticks.
- Do not pierce your food with chopsticks.



- Chopsticks should be returned to the chopstick rest after every few bites and when you drink or stop to speak.
- Do not cross your chopsticks when putting them on the chopstick rest.
- Place bones on the side of your plate.
- Try a little bit of everything. It is acceptable to ask what something is and even to make a face if you do not like the taste.
- Don't be surprised if your Japanese colleagues slurp their noodles and soup.
- Mixing other food with rice is usually not done. You eat a bit of one and then a bit of the other, but they should never be mixed together as you do in many Western countries.
- If you do not want anything more to drink, do not finish what is in your glass. An empty glass is an invitation for someone to serve you more.
- When you have finished eating, place your chopsticks on the chopstick rest or on the table. Do not place your chopsticks across the top of your bowl.
- If you leave a small amount of rice in your bowl, you will be given more. To signify that you do not want more rice, finish every grain in your bowl.
- It is acceptable to leave a small amount of food on your plate when you have finished eating.
- Conversation at the table is generally subdued. The Japanese like to savour their food.

Business Etiquette and Protocol in Japan

Understanding of Foreign Ways

- Japanese understand that it is very difficult for foreigners to work in Japan.
- They will not expect you to speak or read Japanese, or be conversant with their strict cultural nuances and protocol.
- Mistakes are allowed as long as genuine respect is shown at all times.
- They will usually try to help you but often feel embarrassment at their own lack of understanding or English language ability.

Relationships & Communication

- The Japanese prefer to do business on the basis of personal relationships.
- In general, being introduced or recommended by someone who already has a good relationship with the company is extremely helpful as it allows the Japanese to know how to place you in a hierarchy relative to themselves.



- One way to build and maintain relationships is with greetings / seasonal cards.
- It is important to be a good correspondent as the Japanese hold this in high esteem.

Business Meeting Etiquette

- Appointments are required and, whenever possible, should be made several weeks in advance.
- It is best to telephone for an appointment rather than send a letter, fax or email.
- Punctuality is important. Arrive on time for meetings and expect your Japanese colleagues will do the same.
- Since this is a group society, even if you think you will be meeting one person, be prepared for a group meeting.
- The most senior Japanese person will be seated furthest from the door, with the rest of the people in descending rank until the most junior person is seated closest to the door.
- It may take several meetings for your Japanese counterparts to become comfortable with you and be able to conduct business with you.
- This initial getting to know you time is crucial to laying the foundation for a successful relationship.
- You may be awarded a small amount of business as a trial to see if you meet your commitments.
- If you respond quickly and with excellent service, you prove your ability and trustworthiness.
- Never refuse a request, no matter how difficult or non-profitable it may appear. The Japanese are looking for a long-term relationship.
- Always provide a package of literature about your company including articles and client testimonials.
- Always give a small gift, as a token of your esteem, and present it to the most senior person at the end of the meeting. Your Japanese contact can advise you on where to find something appropriate.

Business Negotiation

- The Japanese are non-confrontational.
- They have a difficult time saying 'no', so you must be vigilant at observing their non-verbal communication.
- It is best to phrase questions so that they can answer yes. For example, do you disagree with this?



- Group decision-making and consensus are important.
- Written contracts are required.
- The Japanese often remain silent for long periods of time. Be patient and try to work out if your Japanese colleagues have understood what was said.
- Japanese prefer broad agreements and mutual understanding so that when problems arise they can be handled flexibly.
- Using a Japanese lawyer is seen as a gesture of goodwill. Note that Japanese lawyers are quite different from Western lawyers as they are much more functionary.
- Never lose your temper or raise your voice during negotiations.
- Some Japanese close their eyes when they want to listen intently.
- The Japanese seldom grant concession. They expect both parties to come to the table with their best offer.
- The Japanese do not see contracts as final agreements so they can be renegotiated.

Dress Etiquette

- Business attire is conservative.
- Men should wear dark-coloured, conservative business suits.
- Women should dress conservatively.

Business Cards

- Business cards are exchanged constantly and with great ceremony.
- Invest in quality cards.
- Always keep your business cards in pristine condition.
- Treat the business card you receive as you would the person.
- You may be given a business card that is only in Japanese.
- It is wise to have one side of your business card translated into Japanese.
- Give your business card with the Japanese side facing the recipient.
- Make sure your business card includes your title, so your Japanese colleagues know your status within your organization.
- Business cards are given and received with two hands and a slight bow.
- Examine any business card you receive very carefully.
- During a meeting, place the business cards on the table in front of you in the order people are seated.
- When the meeting is over, put the business cards in a business card case or a portfolio.