



Japan

cultural note

do not be offended by the many personal questions Japanese ask foreigners. Expect to be asked about your job, your title, your responsibilities, the number of employees that report to you, and so on. Japanese is a very complex language with many forms of address. The Japanese will need a lot of information in order to decide which form to use when speaking to you. (Most of this subtlety will be lost when translated into English, but it is important to the Japanese.)

Country Background

History

Japan has been occupied for thousands of years. The current emperor's dynasty is said to have been founded in 660 B.C.

Historically, Japan resisted outside influences, and frequently closed itself to foreigners. The United States forcibly opened Japan to foreign markets in 1853 when Commodore Perry sailed his fleet into Tokyo Bay.

What Westerners consider World War II was only part of a long running Asiatic war in which Japan invaded neighboring nations. Korea was annexed in 1910, Manchuria was annexed in 1931, and China proper was invaded in 1937. Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, and was occupied until 1952.

The United States, wishing to demilitarize and democratize Japan, instituted many reforms after World War II. These efforts included a decrease in the power of the emperor and decentralization of the government. However, the Japanese have recentralized their government in the past forty years.

Type of Government

Japan is a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch. The chief of state is the emperor; Emperor Akihito was crowned in 1989 after the death of his father, Emperor Hirohito. The head of the government is the prime minister.

Power within the government resides mainly in the prime minister, who is the leader of the majority party of the Diet, or parliament. The prime minister dissolves the House of Representatives every two or three years. The prime minister also appoints the Supreme Court and leads the Cabinet.

The Diet is made up of two houses, the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. Both are elected, with the House of Representatives having more authority.

Finally, the Cabinet is responsible to the Diet. In the Cabinet, it is the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) that are the most important.

MITI, through involvement in business and industry following World War II, helped Japan gain its strength. Today MITI does not have the same authority it once did, both because it is not as needed as much as before and because of pressure from other governments (such as the United States). The idea that the government controls industry to such an extent that the country can be called Japan, Inc. is a myth. The government ministries instead serve as intermediaries and as think tanks.

Language

Japanese is the official language of Japan. It is a complex and subtle language, and is spoken nowhere else in the world as a primary tongue. Most sentences in Japanese can be expressed on at least four different levels of politeness. Japanese women almost always use one of the more deferential forms. Communication in Japan is often marked by great subtlety; information is left unspoken yet is perfectly understood.

Education

Literacy is close to 100 percent, and 95 percent of the population has a high school education. The Japanese educational system is similar to that of the United States, except that students must pass many qualifying exams. The pressure to study and to get good grades is very intense. Once a student has passed the entrance exam for college, however, exams are over. Students accepted to the top colleges are almost guaranteed top jobs. Classes in English begin at age twelve. The goal for students of English is to have passing exam grades rather than verbal communication skills.

Religion

The Shinto religion is unique to Japan; the institution of the emperor is supported by Shintoism. However, the Japanese are very tolerant of religious differences, and may even practice both Buddhism and Shinto concurrently. Many people are married in a Shinto ceremony but select a Buddhist funeral.

Christianity (about 4 percent) and other religions (18 percent) are also present in Japan. There is no official religion. The Japanese tend to adapt their religion to modern life; for example, they will have new businesses blessed.

Demographics

Japan's population approaches 125 million. This dense population is cited as the prevailing factor explaining the Japanese "group mentality." The following statistics are useful for understanding just how crowded Japan is: Its land represents only 0.3 percent of the world's land mass, yet its people represent 3 percent of the world's population. In these conditions, conformity and group activity have proved to be the best way to avoid conflict. Over 99 percent of the population consists of native-born Japanese. The largest minority (less than 1 percent) are Koreans. Although farmers have a disproportionate amount of political influence, they represent less than 7 percent of the labor force. Some 33 percent work of Japanese in manufacturing or construction. Most of the remaining 60 percent are in trade or services.

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How Japanese Organize and Process Information

The Japanese generally close all doors to outside influences but are open to ideas within their group. They are subjective and experiential in their thinking, holding fast to traditional values. Strong loyalty to their groups makes them look to the particular and specific rather than the universal and abstract. They pride themselves on anticipating others' needs.

Negotiation Strategies: What Japanese Accept as Evidence

Since they tend to be more subjective than objective, the Japanese rely more on their feelings than on facts. However, because they insist on consensus within their groups, others may interpret this behavior as being grounded in faith in an ideology that says that they are superior to others. Their controlled communicative behavior exacerbates this situation with unknowing foreigners.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

Traditional value systems are only recently being eroded in the younger generation. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in the predominant culture—their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil, and so forth.

Locus of Decision-Making

Decisions are made within the group with little or no personal recognition. A person's actions reflect on the group, particularly his or her family. Outsiders must be accepted into the group before they can participate in decision making. The Japanese are only moderately collective.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

The Japanese have very high anxiety about life because of the need to save face. There are constant pressures to conform. A very strong work ethic and strong group relationships give structure and stability to life. Emotional restraints are developed in childhood, and all behaviors are situation-bound. This makes it extremely difficult for a foreigner to understand the culture.

Issues of Equality/Inequality

Age is revered. There is a great deal of competitiveness among equals, but also an inherent trust in people. Ethnocentrism is very strong. Male dominance is strong in all public situations. Sex roles in society are clearly differentiated, but Western-style equality is strong in the youth.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Be punctual at all times.

- The workweek is generally forty-eight hours without overtime pay, done in five and one-half working days. Recently large firms have begun to institute the five-day week. Few executives take their work home with them.
- Office hours are 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 or 5:30 P.M. (Many people go to dinner, then return to the office until 9:00 or 10:00 P.M.)
- During holidays, banks and offices close, while stores remain open.
- During three weeks of the year (New Year's holidays, December 28 to January 3; Golden Week, April 29 to May 5; and Obon, in mid-August), many people visit the graves of their ancestors. Conducting business and traveling are difficult during these periods.



Negotiating

- A Japanese response "I'll consider it" may actually mean "no."
- Negatively phrased questions will get a "yes" if the Japanese speaker agrees. A question such as "Doesn't Company A want us?" will be answered "yes" if the Japanese thinks that Company A indeed does not want you. In English, we would answer, "No, they do not want you."
- Incorporate the words "I'm sorry" into your vocabulary when you go to Japan. However, don't be ingratiate out of fear of offending; just be polite.
- Negotiations are begun at the executive level and continued at the middle level (working level).
- "Connections" are very helpful in Japan. However, choose your intermediaries carefully, because the Japanese will feel obliged to be loyal to them. Do not choose someone of lower rank than the person with whom he or she will have dealings. Intermediaries should not be part of either company involved in the deal.
- If you don't have a connection, a personal call is better than a letter. A letter might not even be answered.
- Use an intermediary, such as the one who introduced you to the company, to discuss bad news.
- Using a Japanese lawyer rather than a Western one indicates a cooperative spirit.
- The Japanese usually use the initial meetings to get to know you, while at the same time asking to hear about your proposal. Agreements of confidentiality are vague.
- Contracts are not perceived as final agreements. You or they may renegotiate.
- Because age equals rank, show the greatest respect to the oldest members of the Japanese group with whom you are in contact.
- You will not be complimented on good work, because the group and not the individual is rewarded. It is a bad idea to single out Japanese workers.
- The Japanese will not explain exactly what is expected of you.
- Most Japanese go through job rotation, in which they change jobs within the same company every few years. In this way, the employees get to know the company and its employees well.
- A quality circle is made up of people doing the same work who will discuss ways to improve their work.

- Suggestion boxes, so often ignored in the United States, are useful in Japan, simply because Japanese employees stuff them full of suggestions.
- Don't make accusations or refuse anything directly; be indirect. Also, don't ask questions that your interlocutor may be unable to answer.
- On the job, the Japanese are very serious and do not try to "lighten things up" with humor.
- When working with Japanese who know English, or when using an interpreter, be patient. Speak slowly, pause often, and avoid colloquialisms. Your interpreter may seem to be taking more time with the translation than you did with your statement; this is because she or he is using lengthy forms of respect.
- Do not be surprised if your interpreter translates Japanese into English almost simultaneously, but waits until English speakers are finished before translating into Japanese. Unlike English, Japanese is a very predictable language. By the time a Japanese business person is halfway through a sentence, the translator probably knows how the sentence will end. Indeed, it would be very impolite of a Japanese to end a sentence with an unexpected choice of words.
- At times you may need to pretend you are sure that your Japanese colleague or friend has understood you, even if you know this is not the case. This is important for maintaining a good relationship.



Business Entertaining

- Business entertaining usually occurs after business hours, and very rarely in the home. You will be entertained often, sometimes on short notice. While the first evenings will probably be spent going from bar to restaurant to "hostess bar" (not a good idea for businesswomen), you may suggest alternatives later. These may include Sumo wrestling or karaoke ("empty orchestra") bars, where you sing along with a tape.
- When you are taken out, your host will treat.
- Allow your host to order for you (this will be easier, too, since the menus are in Japanese). Be enthusiastic while eating, and show great thanks afterwards.
- While business entertaining is primarily for building friendships rather than for doing deals, you may discuss business during the evening.
- If you are invited to a Japanese home, keep in mind that this is a great honor, and you should show great appreciation.
- For social occasions, it is appropriate to be fashionably late.
- When entering a Japanese home, take off your shoes at the door. You will wear one pair of slippers from the door to the living room, where you will remove them. You will put them on again to make your way to the bathroom, where you will exchange them for "toilet slippers." Don't forget to change back again.
- In a home, you will sit cross-legged, or with your legs to the side, around a low table with the family. You may be offered a backrest.
- Meals are long, but the evening usually ends at about 11 P.M.
- Never point your chopsticks at another person. When you are not using them, you should line them up on the chopstick rest.
- Use both hands to hold a bowl or a cup that you wish to be refilled.

- Eventually, you will wish to invite your hosts out. Be insistent, even if they claim that a foreigner should not pay for anything. It is best to choose a Western-style restaurant for this occasion.

Time

- Japan is nine hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 9), or 14 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 14).

Protocol



Greetings

- The Japanese are very aware of Western habits, and will often greet you with a handshake. Their handshakes will often be weak; this gives no indication of their assertiveness of character.
- The bow is their traditional greeting.
- If someone bows to greet you, observe carefully. Bow to the same depth as you have been bowed to, because the depth of the bow indicates the status relationship between you.
- As you bow, lower your eyes. Keep your palms flat against your thighs.

cultural note

the business card is extremely important for establishing credentials. Have it prepared in advance by JAL (the airline) or by a Japanese representative. It is best to have one side in English, with extra information such as membership in professional associations; and the reverse side in Japanese. If your status changes, have new cards printed immediately, and distribute them again.

- Cards are presented after the bow or handshake. Present your card with the Japanese side facing your colleague, in such a manner that it can be read immediately.
- Read the card presented to you, memorizing all the information. Ask for help in pronunciation and in comprehension of the title; if you understand without help, make a relevant comment.
- Handle cards very carefully. Do not put them in your pocket, or in your wallet if you plan to put it in your back pocket. Never write on a person's business card (especially not in his or her presence).



Titles / Forms of Address

- Use last names plus san, meaning Mr. or Ms. Do not suggest that the Japanese call you by your first name.



Gestures

- Japan is a high-context culture; even the smallest gesture carries great meaning. Therefore, avoid expansive arm and hand movements, unusual facial expressions, or dramatic gestures of any kind.

- The American "O.K." sign (thumb and forefinger curled in an "O") means "money" to the Japanese.
- Some Western gestures convey nothing to the Japanese. These include the shrug of the shoulders and the wink between friends.
- Pointing is considered impolite. Instead, wave your hand, palm up, toward the object being indicated, as the Japanese do.
- Beckoning "come here" is done with the palm down.
- Moving the open hand, with the palm facing left, in a fanning motion in front of the face indicates a negative response.
- Sniffing, snorting, and spitting in public are acceptable, but nose blowing is not. When you must blow your nose, use a disposable tissue and then throw it out. The Japanese find the idea of preserving mucus in a neatly folded handkerchief to be grotesque.
- To get through a crowd, the Japanese may push others. There is also a gesture meaning "excuse me," which involves repeating a bow and a karate chop in the air.
- The Japanese do not approve of male-female touching in public.
- Men do not engage in backslapping or other forms of touching.
- In conversation, the Japanese remain farther apart than do North Americans.
- Direct eye contact is not the norm.
- A smile can mean pleasure; but it can also be a means of self-control, as when it is used to hide displeasure.
- Keep a smile, even when you are upset.
- Laughter can mean embarrassment, confusion, or shock, rather than mirth.
- Silence is not as uncomfortable for the Japanese as it is for North Americans; rather, it is considered useful.



Gifts

- Gift giving is very common in Japan. Business gifts absolutely must be given at midyear (July 15) and at year end (January 1). They are often given at first business meetings.
- For the Japanese, the ceremony of gift giving is more important than the objects exchanged. Don't be surprised by either modest or extravagant gifts.
- Take your clues from the Japanese with whom you are working. Allow them to present gifts first, and make your gift of the same quality as theirs.
- The Japanese do not usually open gifts directly upon receiving them. If they do, they will be restrained in their appreciation. This does not mean that they do not like what you have given. Again, follow their lead.
- Good gifts are imported scotch, cognac, or frozen steaks; electronic toys for children of associates; or items made by well-known manufacturers. Foreign name brands are always best.
- Always wrap your gifts in Japan or have them wrapped by hotel or store services. It is best to buy the paper there, so as not to choose a paper that is considered tasteful in the United States but unattractive in Japan (for example, black and white paper is unacceptable). Rice paper is ideal.

- If you are invited to a Japanese home, bring flowers, cakes, or candy. The flowers should not be white, as these are associated with death.
- Avoid giving gifts with even numbers of components, such as an even number of flowers in a bouquet. Four is an especially inauspicious number; never give four of anything.



Dress

- Men should wear conservative suits, and never appear casual.
- Slip-on shoes are best, as you will remove them frequently.
- Women should dress conservatively, keeping jewelry, perfume, and makeup to a minimum. Pants are not appropriate.
- High heels are to be avoided if you risk towering over your Japanese counterparts.
- In summer it is very hot in Japan, so bring cotton clothes. Be sure to have enough changes of clothes, because the Japanese are very concerned with neatness.
- If you wear a kimono, wrap it left over right! Only corpses wear them wrapped right over left.