

FYI

JAPANESE MANNERS

Japan life: Etiquette by the numbers

Bowing, bathing, greeting, eating — all manners of established codes of conduct

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Have you ever tried to shake hands with a Japanese only to be bowed at instead?

Or have you suffered disdainful looks when you blew your nose in public, or dunked your towel in a hot springs bath, unaware you are breaking social codes?

Japan's many rules of etiquette may bemuse foreign visitors, while for long-term residents mastering them is a key part of embracing the culture.



When in Tokyo: President Barack Obama shakes hands with and bows to Emperor Akihito at the same time at the Imperial Palace on Nov. 14. Some American critics accused the U.S. commander in chief of groveling to a foreign leader. AP PHOTO

So what constitutes Japanese etiquette, and how do foreign residents and experts view such manners?

Following are questions and answers:

What is included in everyday etiquette?

Posted notices and warnings against various perceived antisocial behavior are commonplace. People riding trains are advised not to take up more than one seat and are urged to refrain from talking

on a cell phone or playing loud music.

Most "onsen" (hot springs baths) ban swimsuits, advise guests to rinse themselves off before entering the bath and in cases of mixed bathing not to stare or flash oneself in front of others.

But many basic social codes provide no posted directions, requiring foreigners to learn by observation and that old standby, trial and error.

The handling of chopsticks can be a minefield of faux pas.

A guide put out by JAL Academy, a firm created by Japan Airlines to coach businesses on etiquette, directs users to first "hold the chopsticks horizontally and pull the chopsticks apart slowly, over your knees."

The book "Japanese Manners Read in English" advises never to use a chopstick to impale a food item, pass it from chopsticks to chopsticks or stick chopsticks into food in a bowl so the ends are pointing up. The latter is associated with the dead and food for the final journey.

Licking one's chopsticks is also taboo, as is waving them over food while deciding what to eat, or around while talking, the guide says.

Bowing is also a key practice, and the degree of bending depends on the occasion.

According to JAL Academy, a 45-degree bow is customary when meeting someone deemed to be superior, or to show gratitude or to apologize. A 30-degree bow is appropriate for greeting visitors or first-time acquaintances, while a 15-degree dip will suffice for a casual hello in the hallway, the book says.

Other advice found in the guide includes keeping conversations short during initial greetings and, when visiting someone's home, refraining from poking around in cupboards, bookcases and other personal areas — the latter taboos not being so uniquely Japanese.

What constitutes formal etiquette?

In addition to social codes of behavior for formal

dinners and religious ceremonies, there is the practice by adults of gift-giving, which many in Japan actually consider a headache. Gourmet food, sweets or alcohol may be given to relatives and colleagues at the turning of seasons and on special occasions. There are informal guidelines on how much money to spend on initial offerings based on the importance of the recipient, and then on return gifts.



Tsk, tsk, tsk: Sticking chopsticks vertically into food is considered extremely bad form because it is associated with death. YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO

Gift-giving is not always simply a gesture of gratitude or thoughtfulness, as it can have parallels with bribery, according to Katherine Rupp, a lecturer in anthropology at Yale University.

"Not only do individual Japanese people spend a lot of time, worry and money on gift-giving, but gift-giving is also a crucial part of the overall workings of the macro-economy," she writes in "Gift-giving in Japan."

Rupp points to the subtle undertones that personal gifts to bosses or doctors, or presents given by industries to bureaucrats or politicians, may have in persuading the recipient to act to the giver's advantage.

How would social codes be characterized?

Like other countries, Japan's social codes "lie somewhere between conscience or self-expression and the law," according to Isao Kumakura, a professor emeritus at the research institute of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka.

"Even if you are alone, there is a feeling that somewhere someone might be watching," and this feeling is particularly strong in Japanese, he writes in "Manners as Culture" ("Bunka to Shite no Manaa").

According to Kumakura, Japanese etiquette has roots in the rituals of tea ceremony and martial and creative arts, although such customs were exclusive to the upper class until Japan opened its doors to the West in the mid-19th century.

To appear sophisticated in Western eyes, commercial centers like Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka established regional laws that imposed codes of conduct between samurai and commoners, he writes.

These laws prevented men from urinating in public, and workers from walking naked to public baths carrying a change of clothes, a common habit as they did not want to change while they were still dirty from the day's work, Kumakura explains.

In modern times, instruction manuals on manners tend to focus on business situations rather than the home or society.

How do foreign residents and experts view Japanese manners?

Helmut Morsbach, an adjunct professor of psychology at Temple University Japan Campus and a long-term resident, writes in his book "Customs & Etiquette of Japan" that many Japanese drastically change their attitudes once they are outside their comfort zone.

Such a strict adherence to social codes may indicate that, as Morsbach says, "traditional etiquette continues to be extremely important, despite whatever outward appearances of 'Westernization' the visitor may experience."

But Ronald Dore, a professor at the London School of Economics specializing in Japanese society, stresses that foreigners should not feel compelled to master Japanese etiquette, only demonstrate an attempt at it in a relaxed, open manner.

"It is a perfectly viable strategy to profess a combination of total ignorance of Japanese manners and a total willingness to be instructed, and sometimes it can even be the best strategy," rather than becoming anxious and creating tension, he says in the foreword to Morsbach's book.

For business settings, a common scenario for foreign visitors, Morsbach's tips include don't make eye contact too strong during a conversation, don't point with a finger and don't mistake a smile camouflaging hesitation to mean an agreement.

Does everyone adhere to these codes?

No, says columnist Takashi Matsuo, who insists many Japanese find such strict rules stifling.

"Although it's a country that values manners, many Japanese themselves in fact feel a kind of stiffness, and perhaps (Morsbach) isn't aware that there are many people who want to forget such social rules and interact with people in a frank and open way," he writes in a commentary inside Morsbach's book.

But some observers see an antisocial side to this relaxed mind-set, and claim anonymity in large cities and online is making people less concerned about appearing rude.

"Modern Japan has been eliminating society from around them," Kumakura says.

"The fun of anonymity and the fear of losing manners are in conflict with each other. Now this has become a daily norm, and with the rise of the Internet, we ignore manners because of anonymity and abuse our rights."

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The Japan Times: Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2010
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