

Japanese Culture From the Outside Looking In

- Face saving

If you invite someone to church or to a bible study or maybe a day long hike you might hear new friend say, "Okay, that sounds interesting." That might mean yes. But it very well might mean no. Listen for a bit of hesitation in their voice, it might yield some important clues.

- Omote-ura

Omote refers to the image which an individual, a company, or any institution wishes to present to outsiders or to the public in general. *Ura* is the opposite of *omote*. It is the reality behind the surface. This is sometimes known as the "public face and private face". It takes time to build a friendship that is close enough to begin to see the private face. And even then, there are degrees of openness to move through.

- Gift giving

Omiyage is a gift that a visitor always brings to the host. It's often a very practical gift such as a dessert or some other snack but it can be simply a cute souvenir or some other small thing. They won't expect it from you, but if you bring something they will really appreciate it. And if you travel *anywhere* and you bring a small gift (even a postcard) they will be very pleased that you thought of them.

- Importance of harmony among people - 和 "wa"

It's better to agree about something you really don't like than to show disagreement and cause disharmony. This can be confusing because you might think someone really wants to eat German food when actually all the time they are 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 stand's for" could be considered rude.

- Importance of the group

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

- Younger children discipline differences

In American culture, discipline is used to control a child's behavior much more strictly than in Japan. In Japan, the desires of the children come first and can take over the adults conversation and even take over plans for outings or trips. Their desires often come first. In America, kids are more independant from their parents. In Japan children often sleep with parents, take baths together until they are as old as seven or eight years old.

- In Japanese culture, silence has positive connotations because it implies contemplation. However, "in English-speaking communities silence is considered socially undesirable"

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 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 would begin sharing your reflections on the topic.

Tennis anyone?