

Japanese Style Politeness

Benjamin Tardif

My passion for Japan began with the first trip I took as a child. It would be difficult to describe this country today with the same view that I had on my first visit. Nevertheless, Japanese society has its own customs and rules that remind me everyday of why I decided to come and live here, and that incite me to encourage everybody to come and discover the country beyond the stereotypes.

The first thing you notice with pleasure upon arriving in Japan is the sense of service and welcome that you find rarely to the same degree in other countries. Signs with the word *yokoso* (welcome in Japanese), hostesses ready to guide you with a smile through the often complicated corridors of the airport—the first signs of Japanese hospitality are felt as soon as you leave the plane.

These impressions are reinforced upon arriving in the city, even if only when taking the subway between districts. The stations, with their large size and multiple lines in the heavily-frequented areas, are a real headache at the beginning. In fact, the simple act of buying a ticket can seem rather complex because it's necessary to verify the price corresponding to

the destination as indicated on information signs above the numerous automatic ticket machines. Fortunately, in addition to the instructions in English for non-Japanese speaking visitors, it is always possible to ask one of the numerous station employees recognizable by their uniform and always ready to assist with any problem. With practice, buying your ticket quickly becomes an almost pleasant ritual, even if it's more practical today to use a rechargeable IC card that allows you to pass directly through the automated gates, often avoiding lengthy lines at ticket machines.

Once on the platform, you appreciate the electronic message boards showing the precise arrival time of each train as well as their terminus. Delays, relatively rare, are always announced apologetically and as politely as possible by a station platform attendant.

Another detail that might seem minor but greatly contributes to passengers' comfort—the presence of markings on the floor indicating where the doors will open, around which passengers line up with surprising discipline to allow other passengers to get off before getting on themselves.

Japanese subways are known for being incredibly crowded during peak times with numerous *salariman*, a popular term for employees dressed in dark suits and white shirts, going to work. It's true that you can sometimes find yourself pressed between fellow passengers to the point that it's impossible to move. Nevertheless, in these situations you really appreciate the air conditioning that most trains have to help you stay cool, despite the crowds. These conditions might seem rather extreme for some people, but the women-only cars during rush hours are specifically designed to avoid embarrassing situations.

After spending several days in a city like Tokyo, you quickly realize the overwhelming presence of rail lines in the Japanese urban landscape. Kilometres of tracks form a vast network that contributed to the urban expansion of the large conurbations, where the stations became veritable district centres. As a result, there is nearly always a heavy concentration of stores, restaurants and other places for recreation and leisure near stations, and it is common to find shopping malls attached to the station itself. Moving away from the station, there are fewer people and stores



LED train guide with train schedules and terminus information (JR East)



In-station shopping area 'ecute' operated by JR East

(JR East)

are gradually replaced by residential buildings. This urban contrast, accentuated by the lack of uniformity in the general architecture of the buildings, could give the impression of a chaotic and charmless city, but something that is always felt while walking through Tokyo's streets is the constant impression of safety and order. Practically everyone, respects a common set of social rules, contributing to collective well-being and facilitating day-to-day life.

Coming back to the districts around stations, it is striking to see how the restaurant business is much more developed in Japan than in many European countries. Whether for large franchises or small independent businesses, the restaurant signs are as numerous as they are varied in concept. It is possible to find somewhere to eat at almost any hour of the day or night for a reasonable price. Even people who are not fond of Japanese cuisine will be surprised to find almost any type of food in Japan, although some recipes are slightly modified to suit the Japanese palate. But it would be altogether unfortunate to completely by-pass Japanese gastronomy with a quality and variety incomparable to versions found in so-called Japanese restaurants elsewhere in the world.

After a long week at work, people often get together with colleagues and friends in *izakaya*, places for both eating and drinking. Forget about the traditional starter, main course, and dessert sequence in western restaurants; the Japanese principle is based on sharing several small dishes in the middle of the table rather than each person ordering their own. The types of dishes enable each person to easily take a piece with chopsticks and place it in their own small plate, often without the need to cut. Cold Japanese beer or a small glass of slightly stronger alcohol such as *nihonshu* (rice wine) or *shochu* liquor often accompanies the meal and

contributes to the friendly atmosphere.

Service in restaurants is exemplary. If there is a country that adheres to the customer is king concept, it is Japan. Waiters are always ready to respond to the smallest requests. For example, any *hashi* chopstick that falls to the ground will be immediately replaced by a new pair without asking. There is no lengthy wait for the food, and sometimes the dishes arrive so quickly that the table is overwhelmed. Finally, the client is always treated politely with their arrival and departure acknowledged by several members of the restaurant staff with a respectful salutation.

Seen through my eyes, there are so many aspects characterizing the charm of life in Japan that you quickly get used to the small details that make life so pleasant here and may even experience reverse culture shock when returning to your own country!

**Benjamin Tardif**

Mr Benjamin Tardif majored in Japanese and International Trade at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (Institute of Oriental Language and Civilization) in Paris, France. He was a Project Coordinator at the Japan External Trade Organization from 2006 to 2008.