

My Nice Japanese Friends

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I have been in Japan for four-and-a-half years since April 2010. During this period, I've had mixed feelings. What has impressed me most so far is the friendly personality of most Japanese people, both at work and in private situations. They've always helped me when I needed it.

Before I talk about my experiences in Japan, I want to briefly introduce my earlier life in my home country of China.

I took the decision to study in Japan after just 1 week, and landed at Narita Airport and started my life here 6 months later. Actually, I had been interested in Japan for more than 15 years before I decided to come here.

Just like many other foreigners, Japanese animations, manga, and TV dramas first interested me when I was a child. Once I had realized all my favourite things were from Japan, my interest in our neighbour broadened.

I grew up in Shanghai and after graduating from university, I worked for western companies for more than 4 years. Then I felt I needed to go back to school to acquire more knowledge to advance my career. Of course, I could have studied in China while working, but I was eager to study abroad, so I quit my job to come to Japan. It wasn't an easy decision to start over as a student from zero, but luckily my parents supported my decision.

I spent the first 2 years in Japan studying at a Japanese-language school, working at a part-time job, and preparing for the graduate school entrance examination.

Before I came to Japan, I had studied Japanese only once a week for 3 months and I could hardly read it. However, since I had watched a lot of Japanese animation and TV dramas, I had memorized the pronunciation of many



On a trip to Akita

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With colleagues at Hard Rock Cafe

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Japanese words before I learned to read them, so I didn't get into too much trouble in my daily life when I needed to speak with local people. I finally settled down and started looking for a part-time job.

As is well known, Tokyo is one of the most expensive cities in the world, so most foreign students here take part-time jobs to help cover living costs. I was no exception, but a part-time job is also a good way to practice Japanese.

My first job was as a cashier at a supermarket near my apartment. Frankly, although I had more than 4 years of solid work experience in Shanghai, I had never worked at a service job or talked to customers. In addition, my Japanese was poor compared to the other cashiers who worked so courteously. I had no confidence at all. I was in a total panic when asked to stand behind a cashier and try—I couldn't remember any of the steps I had practiced so many times. I couldn't speak a Japanese word to customers. My trainer stood next to me to help, but that didn't help calm me down at all. When I messed up for the third time, I was asked to go back to training to practice again.

Luckily, my trainer was really patient. He didn't get angry and blame me, but helped me review every step over from the beginning; from how to operate cashier machines to how

to move baskets to make the working process smoother. He even taught me by gestures how to count money more quickly. To help me remember the procedures, he also allowed me to stand near veteran cashiers so I could watch their working process.

His patience relieved my nervousness and an hour later, I was back at my position to challenge it again. This time, although I still made mistakes and couldn't speak the payment and change in Japanese clearly, I finished the whole process by myself without help. When I got back home after work that day, I was so fatigued I couldn't move.

Then I realized people working in service industries are really awesome. Even simple cashier work needs practice, courage, and the spirit to give absolutely good service. Every step in a process lasting hours is performed with a smile while still concentrating on calculations so as not to make mistakes.

Unfortunately, when I entered graduate school, my schedule did not allow me to keep working at this supermarket, so I started a new part-time job in late 2010 as a sales clerk at Hard Rock Cafe Rock Shop, where I still work today.



At Hard Rock Cafe after graduation ceremony

(Author)

I found the job by chance. After checking a part-time job hunting website, I sent a lot of job applications to many workplaces that matched my schedule. Hard Rock Cafe was the only one to invite me to a job interview. Compared to working as a cashier, working in a café was more difficult because of my poor Japanese. I couldn't even remember

the name of the manager who called me. So when I went to the interview I didn't think I would be hired, especially because the job offer was in the Rock Shop, not the restaurant. That meant I would be a salesclerk who needed to talk to guests and recommend goods in Japanese. However, I succeeded in getting the job. Immediately after

the interview, my manager told me that since half the guests are from overseas, English was as important as Japanese. Therefore, although I was still anxious, I began my work at Hard Rock Cafe.

My Japanese was far from good enough to work as a salesperson and I needed to persuade myself not to fear approaching guests and talking to them, especially Japanese guests. We all know there are different levels of politeness to use when talking to different people. Generally speaking, people use the most polite Japanese when talking with guests and clients, but it was really hard for me to do. So, when I started work, I preferred to fold T-shirts more than talk to guests. I think my manager and senpai (somebody who joined the same group like a school or company earlier than you) soon noticed, so they patiently taught me the basic knowledge about the apparel, accessories, and other Hard Rock Cafe products. Of course, it included how to speak about apparel in Japanese as well. Whenever I had a question, they would answer and help me remember by writing a memo or drawing a cute picture. Meanwhile, I practiced speaking more-polite Japanese. To help me to overcome my fear of talking to guests, they gently encouraged me to come and talk to guests as much as I could. They taught me how to start a natural conversation and how to make guests feel comfortable.

To start, they suggested talking with foreign guests because speaking in familiar languages like Chinese and English wouldn't make me nervous. In addition, foreigners usually would be happy to chat with a stranger like a friend. That really helped me relax and gradually adjust to talking to strangers.

Of course, I was not allowed to attend only foreign guests. No matter how reluctant I was to talk to Japanese guests at that time, it was still an important part of my job. But when I started to talk to Japanese guests, my manager and senpai would stay nearby. At the same time, they would not disturb me and helped only if I had any trouble communicating with a guest.

But I found I didn't have to worry because most Japanese guests were really kind and did not blame me at all when they knew I was a foreigner. At first, they might think I was Japanese because Chinese look similar but after a short conversation they could tell I was a foreigner from my accent. Then, they would ask where I was from. Many times after a conversation I realized I had used less-polite expressions to talk to Japanese guests, but none of them were ever angry. Sometimes, they would even help correct my Japanese in a friendly and careful way.

As well as my work experience, I met a lot of friendly Japanese strangers as well. The most impressive was when I met a lady on 11 March 2011, the day of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Due to the earthquake, all trains were stopped so I had to go home from work by bus. It was a really tough day. People were going home by taxi, bus, bicycle, and even on foot, so the traffic was really terrible. My only choice was standing on a bus packed like sardines and wait for it to inch forward in a massive traffic jam. My usual 35-minute journey home by bus took almost 6 hours!

A lady got on the bus at the same stop and stood next to me. After 3 hours, I noticed she was in pain and I asked if she needed any help. She said her waist had a problem and standing for a long time made it really tired and painful. I was leaning against a pole so I suggested we switch positions, and we started to chat before exchanging mobile numbers 3 hours later when the bus finally arrived at the terminal.

We have kept in touch since then and sometimes meet. After the earthquake, food, water, and many daily necessities were sold out and my new friend thought such a situation would be hard for me living alone in Japan. So every time we met, she always brought things like cooking oil, soya sauce, soft drinks, and even shampoo. They were not so expensive, but really helped me out a lot at that time. I am happy that we are still good friends today.

After I arrived in Japan, I experienced and felt tremendous variety of things every day. And I have so many things to tell about Japan and Japanese people. Before I came to Japan, I always had an image that Japanese are polite but keep distance from other person. But now I know that was wrong. Japanese would like to help you whenever you are in need. Their kindness makes me believe that coming to study in Japan was my best choice. ■



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