

## Japanese Culture



## Japanese Culture

- I. Principal Differences
  - A. Group vs Individual
  - B. Long-term vs Short-term
  - C. Grey vs Black & White
- II. Corollary Differences
  - A. Self-Deprecation vs Self-Assertion
  - B. Mutual Dependence vs Mutual Independence
  - C. Conflict Avoidance vs Conflict Dynamism
  - D. Public Life vs Private Life
  - E. Spiral vs Linear
- III. Other Differences
  - A. Equality and Inequality
  - B. Directness and Indirectness
  - C. Practicing and Preaching

## Japanese Culture

- I. Group vs Individual

J: members of various groups (family, work, club, neighborhood organization)

A: individuals separate and complete by themselves (be true to yourself)

J: values are defined in terms of a group context, virtues and talents valued in terms of usefulness to group, "human rights" refer to "social rights"

A: "human rights" refer to "individual rights"

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- II. Long-term vs Short-term (nature of human relationships)

A: relationships are voluntary, conditional, temporary

J: relationships are long-term or life-long  
mother-daughter, teacher-student, sempai-kohai

A: buy now, pay later

J: save now for children (kodomo no tame ni)

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### III. Grey vs Black & White

A: heaven and hell, good and evil, guilty and not guilty, democrats and republicans, pro-life and pro-choice

J: some things are right or wrong under certain circumstances some of the time, everyone is partially guilty, every situation is different, no absolutes

## Japanese Culture

### 1. Self-deprecation vs Self-assertion

J: value self-deprecation

- not individuals, but part of supporting group
- try not to stand out, show no selfish delusions of independence
- others must say complementary things about you

A: value self-assertion

- group activity is the independent efforts of individuals
- each individual must show what they are contributing

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### 2. Mutual dependence vs Mutual independence

A: taught to be independent, self reliant, to show dependence indicates weakness

J: no one can exist without the help of others, view human society in terms of mutual dependence, mutual obligation and willingness to help is expected, and can't be refused

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### 3. Conflict avoidance vs Conflict dynamism

A: "adversary system" of mutual confrontation is a social catalyst, social issues are debated in public forums, lots of lawyers

J: people try to avoid conflict because relationships are life-long

## Conflict avoidance

- Never say “no” explicitly, “yes” means “I understand”
- Avoid expressions of personal opinion for fear of creating conflict
- After conflict, apologize and accept blame as a social lubricant, to keep things running smoothly
- Remove all possible opposition quietly and privately before a public meeting, so no real discussion at meetings

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### 4. Public life vs Private life

A: public life and private life, work life and social life are separate, and do not carry over

- boss and subordinate are social equals in private

J: all the same, so official work status carries over to all areas of life

- boss will be concerned about family affairs

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### 5. Spiral vs Linear

A: straight-line logic, get straight to the point

J: approach subject in a spiral way, take into consideration all conceivable facts and ideas, gradually focus on subject

## Japanese Contextualize

- Group together two of the three words
  - Seagull, sky, dog
  - Pen, notebook, magazine
- Michigan fish bowl experiment
  - Japanese : 70% more comments on background, twice as many comments about sand, rocks, shells
  - Americans: if it doesn't move, it doesn't exist
- AI Bloom study

## Equality

- More equality in Japan because...
  1. Distribution of income
  2. Everyone has the same potential to succeed
  3. Per capita school expenditures are the same in every school
  4. Yin and Yang
  5. Man and nature

## Equality

- Less equality in Japan because
  1. Extremely hierarchical society
  2. "All men are created equal" in the U.S.
  3. Confucian roles for everyone in society
  4. Very formal society

## Directness

- Japanese are more direct...
  - Personal questions about age, marriage, children, sex, etc
  - Ask group-oriented background questions
  - Americans view these as too "personal" because people are viewed as individuals, not members of groups

## Directness

- Japanese are less direct...
  - Uncomfortable with questions of personal opinion
  - Americans consider opinions to be "impersonal", everyone is expected to have an opinion

## Directness

When you decline an invitation....

J: excuse is direct, refusal is indirect

“well, my wife is ill....”

A: refusal is direct, excuse is indirect

“no, I can’t...”

## Preaching and Practicing

- Japanese talk more in some ways
  - More formal “aisatsu” (greetings)
  - Grey view of life, so they explain all conceivable facts and ideas before gradually getting to the point
- Japanese talk less in most ways
  - Avoid verbal explanation in expression of opinions
  - “Talk is cheap” and tends to distort reality
  - What one does is more important than what one says
  - What is left unsaid is more important than what is said

## Culture

- Culture is important
  - Policies which work in Japan may not work in the US, and visa versa
  - Need to design policies which are appropriate for the society
- Culture is not everything
  - In the long run, culture changes
  - In the short run, economic policies are much more important