

# Japanese Etiquette

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TOKYO: Every day in Japan I face etiquette dilemmas. My son returns from camp with another child's clothes. Do I ship them back dirty, which seems sort of mean, or do I launder them, which would cause the owner to lose face? My neighbor tells me to leave my phone number in her letter box if I want to occasionally receive baked goods from her. It seems forward of me to leave her my number, but I don't want to ignore her request. I'm in a crowded train, and my nose is running. Blowing is considered disgusting here, but the alternative is disgusting to me. From the proper degree of a bow (15 to 45 degrees depending on occasion) to how a lady eats a rice cracker (broken by hand into bite size pieces with handkerchief on lap), a complex and subtle etiquette code dictates the proper way to do everything in Japan.

Japanese embrace the rules because following them assures there will be no offensive or embarrassing moments. My parents implanted the code into me from childhood, warning that I would be shunned if I didn't learn the protocol. But my reflexes are rusty from having lived abroad for many years.

Judging from the large section of manners books at my local bookstore, I'm not the only lost, rude soul. Increased social interaction and new technology like cellphones and computers have diversified scenarios giving rise to more rules and a big demand for the latest etiquette guides. Last year, long-time former bureaucrat Mariko Bando set out to write a book on how professional women could maintain their emotional dignity in a male-dominated workplace, but her publishers urged her to cover etiquette tips like attire, manners and polite language. She complied, and "Dignity of a Woman" has become a best seller.

Manners books traditionally focused on "kan kon sou sai" - literally meaning the rites of coming of age - weddings, funerals and ancestor worship. Now they offer titles like "PTA Dictionary for Getting Along with Others and Writing Notes," which tells you how to inform the teacher that your child has to sit out gym class or how to wiggle out of committee duties. A letter-writing guide offers tips on composing an apology note to a store where you have shoplifted two packs of gum and some AA batteries, (express deep remorse even if the items are small) and declining an offer for a second hand piano (blame it on a scatterbrained child who now wants to take swimming instead).

It doesn't all end in this lifetime either. Funeral preparation books offer pointers on how to be well-regarded after death.

Want to make a phone call? I found four books on the store shelf devoted exclusively to phone manners with tips like no walking and talking on a cellphone because the other party might detect a roughness of breath or hear your footsteps. If you buy the phone guide, you might need a language handbook, too, to guide you through the maze of honorifics. I was recently tongue-tied with confusion on the phone with my father's secretary when trying to tell her my father didn't need to call me back. I must use respectful forms when addressing her but humble language when referring to my father or myself. There are plenty of etiquette guides for foreign visitors, but it's probably most important to try to do as others do instead of flaunting what you think you may know. On several occasions I've seen foreigners striking wooden chopsticks against each other, smug that they know how to smooth off any splinters. That's actually a crass gesture. These people probably don't know that there are more than 30 faux pas chopsticks maneuvers each with their proper term like sucking and wandering. A likely infraction that is a topic of much discussion these days is applying makeup on trains. It's become a common sight to see young women drawing their eyeliner and brushing on mascara with great dexterity in crowded morning commuter trains. While critics say grooming is a private act that others don't wish to observe, "there are still no rules for anonymous situations," says Bando.

I'm still trying to get my bearings back, and my current strategy is to overcompensate. I laundered and ironed the scraggly camp clothes and took a gift with me when I presented my neighbor with my phone number. On the packed train, I dabbed my nose and swallowed the rest. All for the sake of politesse.