

Chapter Ten - Party Time

I. Reading

Party, Party, Party

Few situations reflect the different ways of thinking about groups better than parties. Bright lights, fixed beginning and end times, a minute-by-minute schedule of activities, all invited members being acquaintances, a 二次会 (*nijikai*)—this probably sounds like a normal party to you. You might be surprised to find that few Westerners would consider this a “party.” Whereas Japanese parties are brightly lighted so that everyone can see everyone else, the lights are dimmed at Western parties to give a feeling of personal intimacy. Western parties rarely specify an end time; a start time is common, but often ignored by guests, who often show up an hour or two later—and then possibly leave early! If it’s a dinner party, the time of the dinner will be specified, but most Western parties have no schedule or even scheduled activities at all. Individuals are expected to eat, drink, and chat on their own, even though many of the people at the party may be strangers. Most Western parties are opportunities to meet and talk with new people, much like a Japanese コンパ (*kompā*). Finally, a Western host would be offended to hear his guests discussing a 二次会 (*nijikai*). After all, there is no end time specified, so why would his guests be discussing going somewhere else, unless they weren’t having a good time? In general, Western parties usually involve more people (groups of less than ten “getting together” would probably not be called a party), and are more likely to be held at someone’s home.



Here we are

It’s no surprise that the reasons for these differences can be found in the bigger differences between the two cultures. Consider the guest lists for Japanese and Western parties. Japanese parties most often involve smaller numbers than Western parties, but more importantly, the guests usually all know each other. Often they are members of some group, such as a tennis club or friends from high school. Western parties usually involve a larger number of people. Another difference is that guests at a Western party often have very different relationships to the host, and often will not know many of the other guests. A party host may invite a combination of friends from work, neighbors, family, and so forth. The objective is to throw together a bunch of people who don’t know each other so that they can all meet new, interesting people. All very unpredictable.

What’s next?

There are differences in the time structures of Japanese and Western parties, too. The time schedules one finds at Japanese parties is similar to the tightly scheduled itineraries of Japanese package tours. On these tours, every day’s events are planned almost to the minute, with perhaps an hour or two of “free time.” The more things are planned, the more people know what to expect, and the easier it is to proceed without having to worry about making the wrong decision. When the pressure of deciding what to do next is removed, one is able to relax. No one needs to worry about what he should be doing or about doing the wrong thing. Eliminating surprise and confusion allows everyone to feel free and at ease.

Westerners don’t see things this way at all. In fact, they feel exactly the opposite! The idea of a strict time schedule doesn’t fit the idea of a party in the least. Being told what to do at a certain

Us and Them

time makes it harder to relax. Remember, Westerners are raised to be independent and self-reliant from an early age. In addition, making a mistake doesn't have the same seriousness as it does in Japanese culture - there is less likely to be one "correct" thing to be doing, and people will be more comfortable if they and others are left free to "do their own thing." Of course, dinner parties that involve a sit-down dinner will be more formal, with a suggested starting time and a specified time for dinner. Otherwise, only a starting time is likely to be indicated, and people will sometimes not pay too much attention to that. There's likely to be very little structure at all. There will be music, refreshments, food, and perhaps an announcement or two. Mostly, guests will be free to eat, drink, talk, and possibly dance when and with whom they choose.

Are we having fun yet?



My first experience with Japanese parties illustrates these differences perfectly. A conversation school at which I was teaching held a Christmas party for the students, staff, and teachers. The party began with game time. Then there was eating time, followed by *karaoke* time, and then Santa (me!) gave out gifts. Feeling a bit weary, I asked someone, "Is this the last of it?" When she answered that it was, I gave a big smile of relief: now the party could begin! My smile faded quickly when I finally realized that the party was over. It was inconceivable to me that all this

structured activity could be considered a party. I was waiting for all that to stop, for the lights to dim, for the music to play so that we could all finally relax and enjoy ourselves. I was waiting the whole evening for the party to begin.

Hit the lights

One of the other differences between Japanese and Western parties is the lighting. This also can be understood by looking at some of our bigger cultural differences. Japanese parties are usually brightly lighted, while Western parties are usually held with the lights dimmed. Consider each culture's preferences for group and individual activity. It makes sense that a culture in which group activity is preferred would also prefer a party environment that added to a group feeling—such as always being able to see everyone else. The time schedule also contributes to the group feeling; everyone is in sync, doing the same things at the same times.

On the other hand, the dimly lit Western parties are suitable for a culture in which its members are expected to and do enjoy individual activity. The dim lighting helps you focus just on the person or persons with whom you're speaking. It's easy to maintain the illusion that it's just the two of you, two individuals, not two parts of a larger group. The lack of a time schedule adds to this feeling of individual action; you can do whatever you like whenever you like.

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. What things do you like or dislike about Japanese parties?
2. What things do you think you would like or dislike about Western-style parties?
3. Why are Japanese and Western parties so different regarding time?
4. How would you explain a 二次会 to a foreign visitor to Japan, especially, how it differs from the "first party"? What's the purpose of a 二次会?
5. What would be most difficult about Western style parties for most Japanese?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: