

Chapter Two - Individuals and Groups

I. Reading

Who am I?

As some foreign language students discover, when they achieve a certain level of proficiency in another language, they also develop a second personality. Given the deep connections of language and culture, this isn't so surprising. What may be surprising, though, is how much our idea of who we are—Who am I?—is affected by culture. Japanese identity is much more dependent on the roles we fill—student, daughter, teacher—than is Western identity. Just as Japanese language is more dependent on context, Japanese identity is more dependent on the relationships and situations we find ourselves in. One way to think about it is that the Japanese “I” is a sum of the roles an individual fills: son, brother, student, baseball club member, 居酒屋 (*izakaya*) cook, etc. In contrast, the Western “I” is what's left when all those roles and connections are stripped away.



My idiot son

The relationship of the individual to his or her groups is also very different among Japanese than among westerners. Regardless of how close a relationship might be, westerners keep a very firm grasp on their individuality. They also strongly respect the individuality of others. In Japanese society, however, individualism often seems secondary to the group and the roles the group might dictate. Family members are seen as extensions of the self. Therefore, saying good things about them might seem like bragging. A mother will often talk about her “idiot son” when talking with neighbors. A businessman will refer to his wife as a terrible cook or housekeeper. While perfectly acceptable in Japan, talking this way in English would be considered extremely rude. Because the Westerner considers the son or wife to be a separate, autonomous (自主的な) individual, saying negative things about him or her is not only unusual, but unacceptable. In Japan, demeaning (屈辱的な) those close to you is another way of humbling oneself. That connection does not exist in Western culture.

よろしくお願いします

The importance of interdependency in Japanese culture can be seen in much of its language. In fact, it's almost impossible to translate the phrase "よろしくお願いします" (*yoroshiku onegaishimasu*), because in English speaking cultures, the feeling and the idea that the phrase expresses do not exist. In western cultures, independence and autonomy are important values; asking someone else to take care of you, or suggesting some kind of complicated reciprocal (相互) bond would make the listener uncomfortable. So, this winter, instead of "お世話になりました。今年も、どうぞよろしく," (*Osewani narimashita. Kotoshimo, douzo yoroshiku*) just say, “Happy New Year!”

Party time

Few situations illustrate the different ways of thinking about groups better than parties. From the lighting to the invited guests to the schedule of activities, the focus of a Japanese party is on a group getting together to formalize (再確認します) its existence. That could be why, when I attended my first Japanese party, just when I thought that the real party was about to begin, I heard someone announce that the party was over! Western parties usually are a chance for people from different groups to meet each other and talk in a casual, unstructured space and time. We'll discuss parties more in Chapter 10, but for now, consider the lighting at parties.

Us and Them

Japanese parties are brightly lighted so that everyone can see everyone else; the first thing a Western host does at a party is to dim the lights, to provide a more intimate setting for private conversations.

Work and responsibility

In the United States, the Japanese work world has been compared to a colony of worker ants. Japanese often think American workers as careless and lazy. Europeans and Australians think Americans are workaholics. What's going on here?

We'll take a close look at differences in work cultures in Chapter Nine, but for now, let's try to understand the idea that the very meaning of what "work" is or what "job" means can be very different from culture to culture. One good example is the idea of responsibility. In Japan, the worker feels a very strong bond with his work group and his company. In Japan a worker "enters" a company (会社に入る - *kaisha ni hairu*), and then calls it "my company." The idea of his work, his group, his responsibilities, his job, his company are all very closely related, maybe even difficult for him to separate.

It's very different for an American worker, and perhaps even more different for a European worker. These workers *work for* a company. If someone talks about "*his* company," others will think he or she is the owner or the president! The separations among an individual's work, his responsibilities, and his job, and his "group" or "the company" are clear and distinct.

For the American worker, work is an individual effort; for the Japanese worker, it's all about the group. The idea of group responsibility is foreign to the American worker, and the Japanese worker has a difficult time even thinking about his own responsibility separate from his group or company. If one looks for his own kind of work measures and relationships when looking at workers in another culture, he's not going to find them, and will come away with a very distorted view of what's really happening.¹

You foreigners

The idea of group identity lies at the very basis of Japanese culture and society. It goes so deep that it feels "natural." In contrast, the same is true of American culture and the idea of individual identity. In Japan, it feels completely natural to think of people as members of groups, rather than as individuals existing in a vacuum. At the same time, in the American consciousness, equality is such an important factor that drawing attention to differences in race, religion, nationality, social class, or even gender in conversation can be rude or even hurtful.

Even the idea of group membership is best ignored in conversation. The ideal is to focus on the other person as an *individual*, regardless of his other group affiliations...religion, political party, race, nationality, etc. Drawing attention to those differences is more than just rude, it can be a clear signal that the speaker wants to create a distance or separation from the listener. Sadly, Japanese people sometimes hurt foreigners unintentionally, when all they were trying to do is be friendly. How? By using the phrase "you foreigners" (or "You 外人 (*gaijin*)" or "You Americans"). Even if what is said is complimentary or flattering, the use of that phrase immediately reminds the Westerner that he is different, excluded, on the other side of some line from the speaker. This is something people try very hard to avoid doing when speaking English.

¹ The different ideas Japanese and Westerners have about work can be seen in the Hollywood movie, *Gung Ho*. (1986) For a look at some surprising information about labor in the world, download the zip file at <<http://tonyinosaka.googlepages.com/workinghours.zip>>.

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. How do the Japanese ideas and Western ideas of "I" differ?
2. Why would it be strange to say bad things about your family when speaking to someone in English?
3. How do you say "よろしくお願ひします" in English?
4. What is different about the lighting at Japanese and Western parties? Why?
5. What is one big difference about how Japanese and Westerners think about the companies where they work?

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: