Chapter Three - Equality and Hierarchy

I. Reading

How old are you?

Some of the differences in the ways Japanese and Westerners meet and introduce each other are well known, such as bowing vs. handshaking. Less obvious are the language patterns we use and expect in each language and culture. Even less well understood are the underlying reasons for many of those differences.

If one thinks about it, it’s not surprising that in a vertically oriented culture in which hierarchy is a major structural concept, people lower themselves (bow) as a gesture of politeness. Similarly, one can expect the behavior of those in a horizontally oriented culture to have gestures that reflect the notion of equality and a classless society - shaking hands while making steady eye contact.

The reasons for these differences go very deep, and the expressions of these differences extend not only to the kind of language used (Ex.: 敬語/keigo), but even the content of introductory conversations. Many Japanese are surprised to learn that when speaking in English with a westerner, asking a person’s age is extremely rude. How can this be?

Underlying any communication between two Americans, for example, is a basic unstated understanding that everyone is equal. Any comment or question that draws attention to differences in rank or hierarchy (階層) is likely to make others uncomfortable. This includes things like salary and age. On the other hand, in Japan, the idea of hierarchical rank is a basic assumption. Asking someone his or her age feels natural, even necessary. Unless one knows where the other person stands in relation to you in the hierarchy, it’s difficult to know how to speak to the person politely.

Another example of how our basic assumptions affect our behavior can be seen with the exchange of business cards or 名刺/meishi). In Japan, hierarchy is assumed; when businesspeople meet, they exchange business cards at the beginning of the conversation. Everyone can see where everyone else is on the vertical hierarchy. Both parties then understand each other’s relative rank, and know how to speak to each other. We know who the 同輩 (kobai) and 先輩 (sempai) are, and we can speak and act appropriately. Words, language, and conversation patterns depend on who stands higher on the hierarchical ladder.

In such situations, Westerners pretend to and try to ignore those differences, in order to be polite. It’s only at the end of the conversation, when everyone is saying good-bye, that cards are exchanged, and then, mostly for the contact information on the card. In English, the language rarely changes based on the rank of the speakers. Just as the Japanese language makes it easy to define rank differences, English makes it easy for speakers to ignore differences in
rank. Drawing attention to differences in rank would be considered rude. Businesspeople in the United States exchange business cards at the end of their conversations as they say good-bye.

"Hi, I'm Ken, and I'll be your server this evening."

Clapping one’s hands for a waiter’s attention, “talking down” to restaurant staff while they submissively bow and reply only with “はい” (hai), customers talking as if no restaurant staff were present...these behaviors are common in Japanese restaurants. If there is any “real” conversation between a customer and restaurant staff, it’s usually only with the “master” or certain chefs (sushi, teppanyaki). Contrast this with the way a server might address customers in an American restaurant:

“Hi, my name is Ken, and I'll be your server this evening. Here’s our drink menu. Today’s special is the Chocolate Martini. We have a selection of local beers, and for this season, the Pale Ale is delicious - it’s my favorite. Our bartender, Alison, also makes a great Margarita. Have a look and give me a holler when you’re ready.”

Such a monologue is almost impossible to translate into Japanese. Although the speaker is “just” a waiter, his language and demeanor are meant to convey a feeling of cordiality, friendliness, and equality; this is what will make his Western customers feel most comfortable. In contrast, restaurant staff in Japan speak much more formally to (and rarely “with”) their customers. They will use 敬語 (keigo) and the word “はい” (hai) frequently, and rarely initiate any kind of personal conversation. It’s this formal mode of communication that is most likely to please a Japanese customer and make him or her feel comfortable.

Of course, there are exceptions, and fortunately, one of the great exceptions is one’s neighborhood sushi restaurant. There, the conversation - and conversation style - can be very casual. This makes Japanese and foreigners alike all feel comfortable and “at home.”

ご存知ですか (Gozonjidesuka?)

When speaking English, there are different levels of politeness and formality, as there are in any language. This is called “register.” What is different from Japanese, however, is the lack of language differences to signal differences in rank. In English the same word “give” is used whether one is giving a gift to a head of state or giving a bone to one’s dog. How many ways can you think of to say “give” in Japanese? In English there are few differences in the language used when speaking to people of different rank. This is because to be polite when speaking English, one should be trying to draw attention away from those differences. To be polite when speaking Japanese, though, one tries to emphasize the other person's superiority and to simultaneously humble oneself.

Sit anywhere...

Sitting down for dinner is one of the most intimidating (脅威的な) minefields (地雷原) foreign visitors to Japan must navigate. Of course, for some the challenge of getting the food into one’s mouth with chopsticks (箸, hashi) is difficult enough. However, that’s just one of the more obvious difficulties. The different ideas cultures have about equality and hierarchy and how those ideas are reflected in our eating habits and manners can make it very hard to switch from one set of rules to another.

あげる、くれる、やる、捧げる、くださる、贈る。。。
In keeping with westerners’ ideas about equality, seating is often random in restaurants, with subtle consideration given to guests’ comfort; older people, or people who have a hard time getting around might be steered toward the seats that provide easy access. Otherwise, seating will be mostly random. In homes, the person doing the serving will probably be seated closest to the kitchen. The “head of the family” will probably sit at the head of the table, and guests will be seated to encourage and facilitate conversation. Contrast this with the seating arrangements when your university club has dinner at an 居酒屋 (izakaya). Where does the club president sit? Who sits next to him or her? The leader or the highest-ranking person will almost always be seated farthest from the door. If anything, the opposite would be true in the U.S.—sitting nearest the door makes it easiest to get to the restroom!

These patterns continue when the food and drink arrive. In Japan, no one begins eating or drinking until all have been served their drinks and the highest-ranking person indicates it is time to begin, usually with a hearty “カンパイ!” (kampai). Westerners will usually start to sip at their drinks as soon as they are served; they may also hesitate before beginning to eat, though others will almost always encourage a person who is served before the others to begin eating “before it gets cold.” I first learned the Japanese rules while studying 空手 (karate) under a very strict, traditional Japanese master, and the rules seemed strange and bewildering in the context of Western culture. In the context of Japanese culture - or my 道場 (dojo) culture - they make sense and feel “natural.”
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 are some reasons Japanese bow and Westerners shake hands when they meet?

2. What should you know about asking a person his age?

3. What is different about exchanging business cards in Japan and in the west?

4. Why do food servers in restaurants in the West introduce themselves?

5. What is different about seating patterns in Japan and in the West?

III. Thinking

*New words and expressions*
Us and Them

**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: