

Introduction of Japanese culture for the participants of the 38th Annual International Seminar of the International Society of Teachers Education (ISfTE) in Japan



My name is Sabine Meise from Germany. I lived in Japan for 10 years and call Japan “my second Heimat (home)”. I will be a participant of the ISfTE 2018 in Japan (keynote presentation and paper). I was asked by the organizer to write a short piece about my interpretations of Japanese culture for the participants of the conference. I have enjoyed writing this paper and hope we have many opportunities to share our experiences and views while attending the ISfTE seminar in this interesting culture.

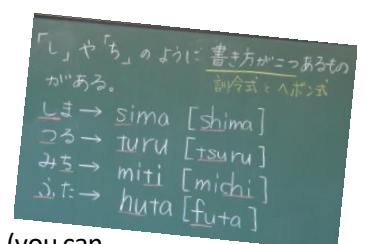
Let’s start with the foundation of Japanese culture: *Wa* (harmony). On the picture you can see the *Kanji* (Chinese character) for “harmony”. When Japan created its first constitution “Seventeen-article constitution” (十七条憲法 *jûshichijô kenpô*) in 604 it said “Harmony is to be valued, and the avoidance of wanton opposition to be honoured”. Even though we sometimes meet rude people in Japan – as in any other country – most of the Japanese people will still - after so many centuries - value harmony highly in their daily life actions. Japanese people pay special attention to the relationship of people around them to prevent any disharmonic feelings from developing.



Another highly valued element in Japanese culture is nature. Even as we see in Japanese industrial development destruction and disrespect towards nature, Japanese people celebrate not only *Sakura* (cherry blossom), but many flowers and natural phenomena in different seasons during the year. Each season has its own food, flower on the *Kimono* (traditional dress) and activities. Japanese people mostly think, there are four seasons in Japan. However, I think they sometimes minimize the reality of a rainy season in June – the fifth season. Coming from Germany my respect towards the power of nature – experiencing earth quakes, *taifû* (typhoon), *tsunami*, landslides and so on – have grown over the years. But my respect also grows towards the people in Japan, who try to prevent disasters as strongly as they can and rebuild as soon as possible, when things are destroyed.

That brings me to a third pillar of Japanese culture, which is a two-part one. Japanese tend to say two sentences quite often: “*Ganbatte kudasai!*” (頑張ってください) and “*Shoganai!*” (しょうがない). I think these opposing sentences describes Japanese mentality in a nutshell. Let me explain: “*Ganbatte kudasai!*” is the first part of a little dialog and the reaction is “*Ganbarimasu!*”, which means “Please do your best!” and the answer “I will do my best!”. You can hear this dialog several times a day. It is said, that Japanese have this “*Ganbaru mentality*” – always do their best. I am sure we will enjoy this during the surely perfectly organized conference. On the other hand, you can hear – not so often but frequently – “*Shoganai!*”, which means “It cannot be helped!”. I think this attitude is one of the secrets of Japanese people to keep calm and balanced. Work hard when you can and let it be, if nothing can be done.

After describing basic parts of Japanese mentality, I would like to introduce the Japanese educational system. Impressive to the world, but natural to the Japanese: Japanese children must learn four writing systems! Attentive readers of this text have probably already noticed that some of the Japanese writings look extremely complex, others very plain. *Kanji* (漢字), the Chinese characters, built the starting point for the *Kana*, which are divided by *Hiragana* (ひらがな) and *Katakana* (カタカナ). In grade 4 (you can see the picture of the black board) the students study also Latin letters, which are called *Rōmaji*. Until the end of the compulsory school in grade 9 the students need to know by heart 2136 Chinese characters, 46



Hiragana, 46 *Katakana* and all the Latin characters. But most of the Japanese people learn throughout life more and more *Kanji* – more than 50.000 *Kanji* are existing.

It becomes clear, that this amount of necessary memorization is enormous work. No wonder the Japanese culture is called a “Learning culture”. The Children often learn *Hiragana* in Kindergarten, which most of the children attend from age 3. Children start school by age 6 and enjoy elementary school for 6 years, where the educational goal is an all-round education for every child. Most of the disabled children learn also in regular schools. Since 2007, when 特別支援教育 (*tokubetsu shien kyôiku*) – “Special support education” was introduced, these children have received a lot of attention, so it can be said that Japan is on its way to building an inclusive school system.

After 6 years Elementary school the students study 3 years in Junior and another 3 years in Senior high school. Also, the secondary school education pays a lot of attention to developing citizens who have a wide range of knowledge and abilities. A strong part of this education takes part in club activities and school events, where students can show their skills and develop a strong sense of themselves as individuals and as a part of a group. Most of the students enter Senior high school after completing a comprehensive examination and they prepare for university entrance examinations. Because of these “examination hell(s)”, the image of Japanese schools in other countries can be negative at times with outsiders to the culture critiquing Japanese education as too strict and unfair. I hope our school visits during the conference will give you an impression of the reality in Japanese schools.

In the last part of my short introduction to Japanese culture I would like to mention some *Dos* and *Don'ts* – so you feel comfortable in Japan. First of all: „ A monkey sometimes falls off the tree “ (*サルも木から落ちる saru mo ki kara ochiru*). This Japanese proverb shows the reaction towards “not so suitable” behaviour of foreigners in Japan. Japanese people are in general very tolerant when visitors don't keep the etiquette, but also appreciate when visitors try to do things the Japanese way.



Watch Japanese bowing and you easily understand, how deep to bow, where to put your hands and show (relaxed) respect. If you pay attention you will find signs everywhere which show you, what to do. On the left side you can see, what to do in a public bath.

Exchanging name cards is a very important practice in Japan. Leave the name card during your talk on the table to show so respect to the person, you are just getting to know. Japanese people ask you a lot of questions, when they meet you the first time. It is easy to end up in a monolog, since Japanese people will hardly interrupt you. Pay attention to this and also ask many questions to show interest.



Because of too little space I have to end here

If you look for a funny way (there are many serious ways) to learn about Japanese etiquette, please look at this web sites from [Tim Ernst](#).

See you soon in Japan and let's enjoy Japanese culture together! ようこそ日本へ Sabine Meise

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to write me an email: sabine.meise@uni-oldenburg.de