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# Japanese Culture, Customs And Cuisine

## Introduction to asian cultures and customs

Asia is the largest continent on the Earth which is occupying almost 9% of the surface, which includes 50 countries. Asia is the most populated continent with 60% of the total world's population. Asia is home for many traditions, Customs, Philosophies and Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism which is obeyed by 80% of the world. Economical wise as well, Asia has been a major contributor to the world's GDP. Some countries in Asia are experiencing poverty because of its huge population growth. Afghanistan which lies in the south-central part of Asia tops the poverty list.

The languages spoken in Asia include Arabic, Bahasa, Chinese, Hindi, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Tamil and Urdu. As a diverse place, Asia has adopted so many traditions and practices from their ancient civilizations. Few of the festivals are 'Eid, Chinese New year, Diwali. Another important aspect of the culture of Asia is the large varieties of dresses people wear in different countries. The dress culture has been adopted from religious and ancient custom practices. Some of the famous traditional dresses of Asia are Saree, Salwar Kameez, Kimono, Qipao, Kebaya, Sarong and Abaya.

In many countries of Asia, people consume rice 3 times a day. Asia is the country which imports 90% of rice which is being grown all over the world. In Asia, Most of the people usually have food with their hands but now, they are moving towards western culture by using spoons, forks and knives. East Asian countries like China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam people use different shapes and sizes of chopsticks for eating food.

## Japan & its culture

An Island located in the Pacific Ocean and located near the eastern coast of continent Asia is Japan. Japan is often called as "Land of the Rising Sun". Japanese culture and history are protected and alive despite its progress in modern society. Japan is a highly developed country in Asia with very high living standards. After the United States and China, Japan is the third-largest economy in the world due to the highly skilled and educated workforce. Japan contains the larger industrial capacity and produces advanced motor vehicles, electronics, tools, steel and many more on a larger scale.

Japan comprises nearly 6900 islands, among which Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku are popular. Majority of people live on the coastlines. There are many cultures and rituals which are being followed today. However, the Samurai is a highly respected culture.

## Language

In Japan, the Tokyo dialect Japanese is considered as national language although also the most spoken language is Japanese. Earlier in the 8th century, there's a language which is originated from China and written in ancient Chinese characters was mostly used. It's called Old Japanese or Kanbun. Later, during the Edo period between 1603 and 1868, Modern

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Japanese was developed. There are three alphabets in Modern Japanese. They are,

- Kanji – Logographic Chinese characters
- Hiragana – phonetic Japanese alphabet
- Katakana – phonetic alphabet used for foreign words

The most developed and much-used alphabet is Katakana, which shows the adoption of western cultures, ideas and words.

## **Cultures and customs**

Japanese culture was very much influenced by China earlier. Now, it's a mixture of tradition and modernity which we can observe in all aspects of daily life. In Japan, most of the older population will consider the Emperor as a divine personality. In society, the premier philosophy required in both family and business is Harmony. Everyone from childhood is taught to value peace over the individual needs and are trained to work together than to be independent. This resulted in group-dependency.

This group-dependency culture has so much impact on the society of Japan including schools, companies and communities. They believe "saving face" as an important lifestyle trait. Which resulted from the unchanging concept of "loss of face" which includes personal dignity and status. Any conflict, criticism, request or insult which cannot be fulfilled will result in loss of face and must be avoided at all costs.

## **Etiquette**

In Japan, a code of etiquette which will be expected from everyone and is very important. Like many social cultures, depending on the status of the person in question, the etiquette varies in Japan as well. There are some regional practices, which will not exist in all the regions of Japan. The long way the history, some of the customs have changed. The generally accepted and followed customs of Japan are listed below,

- **Bowing:** is the most common way to greet each other. It can be a small nod and slight bend or a deep bend at the waist. Bowing can also be used to thank, apologize and to make a request.
- **Bathing:** is an important part of daily routine in Japan where bathtubs are not for cleaning but for relaxing the body. Therefore, before entering the bathtub, the body must be cleaned and scrubbed by sitting on a small stool in the same room. The bathtub is also called as "Ofuro". No soap residue is expected to fall into ofuro.
- **Gift-giving:** is a standard Japanese culture. Depending on the occasion different types of gift can be presented by wrapping it. The gift should be wrapped nicely, if not at least it should be presented in a bag.
- **Shoes:** if anyone is visiting someone's house, we are expected to take-off the shoe before entering the house. Place the shoes/slippers in the place where they are meant. Never wear normal slippers in bathrooms.
- **Visiting someone's house:** Do not sit anywhere, until you are offered and shown where to sit. Socks can be accepted to wear in informal situations. When the guest is leaving, he/she doesn't put on the coat/hat until the door has closed.

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## Japanese Cuisine

Japanese cuisine comprises of a wide variety of appetizing and seasonal dishes with regional flavors. Japan's traditional food- Washoku, which is based on rice with miso soup along with other dishes. It signifies not only the flavors of Japan but also the presentation and nature.

### Traditional dishes

There are so many varieties of food available in Japan where fish plays a vital role not only as food but also as an offering to God. Although, there are a few traditional and religious recipes which are famous. The traditional foods of Japan are Sashimi, Sushi, Yakizakana, Tofu, Ramen, Tempura, Sukiyaki and Soba.

1. Sashimi – It's the finest and formal dish in Japan. Sashimi is raw and fresh seafood like tuna, salmon and squid. This is presented with the slices of raw seafood arranged on top of a bed of shredded daikon, sans rice and garnished with shiso leaves. In my opinion, as it is made from fish meat the texture would be soft and delicate. The garnishing and colours look attractive and uncontrollable for fish lovers.
2. Sushi – Sushi is available in both vegetarian and non-vegetarian forms. Sushi is nothing but vinegar rice served with any of the veg/ non-veg items. It's served with pickled ginger, wasabi and soy sauce for vegetarians and seaweed, tuna, salmon and eel for non-vegetarians. In my opinion, Sushi is a light and healthy and nutritional dish. Sushi combined with soy sauce and wasabi not only tastes better but soy sauce helps in improved digestion and the latter provides vitamin C and antibacterial properties.
3. Yakizakana – This is the most common dish which can be made everywhere in Japan. This is nothing but grilled fish served with grated daikon. Varieties of fish like mackerel (saba), horse mackerel (aji), Okhotsk Atka mackerel (hokke), sea bream (tai) and sweetfish (ayu) can be served for us to enjoy. This is often used as breakfast and whole fish is served per one serving. Though the skin feels crisp the flesh will still have some moisture left inside. Yakizakana is best enjoyed with soy sauce.
4. Tofu – It's made of curdled soy milk, pressed into blocks which is similar to Indian paneer and have a delicate taste. It's a good course of protein for vegetarians. Hence it is an important ingredient in Buddhist temple cuisine. Texture and taste of tofu mostly based on how much water is removed from the blocks and flavors added which will be done according to the dish to be prepared.
5. Ramen – It's basically a Chinese food which the Japanese adapted to. Ramen is a popular and affordable meal. Ramen is thin and curly noodles served in chicken soup and flavored with soy. There is a wide range of toppings available for this which include, sliced pork, egg, spinach and nori. This sodium-rich national dish has many varieties which can be prepared from different types of broths (water in which meat, bones is boiled), toppings, and meat. There is one different type ramen called tsukemen in which noodles and a thick soup served separately which needs to be dipped to enjoy the taste.
6. Tempura – Tempura is mainly prepared with vegetables and seafood and served with Soba. The seafood used in Tempura fish and prawns. It is crisply in nature and served with a dash of salt and soy sauce for dipping with grated radish, hence tempting. Though tempura started as a street food snack, some restaurants and eateries serve this dish with rice and noodles.

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There are so many other dishes available along with the above-mentioned food, such as fish, pickled vegetables, grilled/raw seafood and a wide range of soups.

### **Table Manners:**

The important table etiquette is to say customary phrases before and after a meal. It is traditional for people to say 'Itadaki-masu'(meaning "I humbly receive" or "let's eat") before meal and 'Gochisemasu' after a meal. These phrases mean thanks for the food and indicate the beginning and end of the meal.

- One of the fundamental chopsticks etiquettes is not to directly pass food from your chopsticks to somebody else's chopsticks or vice versa.
- It's also important not to vertically stick a chopstick into food, especially into a bowl of rice.
- It is not polite to wave your chopsticks above food dishes or to use your chopsticks to point at somebody.
- When you eat to prevent dropping food, you can lift small bowls of rice or soup.
- If you do not receive a soup spoon, it is acceptable to sip soup out of the bowl and eat the solid food with chopsticks.
- It is usual in Japan to make some slurping noises while eating noodles, in a belief that they taste better when making slurping noises.

The reason why I chose Japan is because of the way it emerged as the world's second-largest developed economy after the catastrophic damage it took during the Second World War. The unique traditions, customs and the way Japan created its own culture during the isolation period is fascinating. Be it anime, clothing, technology or automobile Japan always tries to be unique.

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