

## CHAPTER TWO

# Becoming a Friend

Perhaps you're reading this because you've met some Japanese people in your local area, at a church or international welcome event, at an English class, or in your school or office. Or maybe you're aware that there are Japanese people living and working nearby, and you want to reach out and befriend them.

Many Japanese people want to be friends with those from other nations. As an island nation, Japan has been learning foreign ways and borrowing what it has thought to be helpful for centuries. Some of these have been mentioned already, like the political system, economics and the white wedding dress. Even the language is filled with borrowed foreign words, especially from English. The Japanese have a natural

curiosity about other parts of the world and are eager to learn from other cultures.

Those venturing overseas are likely to be particularly interested in other cultures and are probably just waiting for someone to reach out to them. Japanese students are often keen to meet local students but find it difficult to build relationships with anyone apart from other overseas students. Those working may find it hard to build relationships with people other than fellow Japanese employees.

Sometimes when making an invitation, a Japanese person may be genuinely very eager to take you up on an offer to meet. Sometimes they seem nervous and want to be sure that it is a genuine offer. Sometimes they may be keen to meet but not want to express it too obviously, appearing to be cautious, when they are in fact quite eager to say yes. And sometimes they may express positive interest to be friendly, but not really be able or willing to meet. Be patient, warm, relaxed and continue to be welcoming and friendly!

This desire for friendship though, is often not expressed in the same ways as in Western culture. Most Japanese living overseas would probably think it forward or presumptuous to take the initiative in friendship. They are particularly aware of being outsiders, especially in their first

few months away from home. So be ready to make the first move – and keep at it! Perhaps you could invite them to join in with a club or group activity at your school or work. Or simply offer to go for a coffee or a meal. If there are some local points of interest, you could ask if they'd be interested to visit them together.

### **Social Pressures**

The average Japanese person feels social pressures much more intensely than the average Westerner. In showing a lot of concern and hospitality to a Japanese person, you might possibly make them feel like they owe you something, and they could feel the need to reciprocate. The 'obligation to return favours' is strongly felt in Japanese culture.

Many Japanese students enjoy free meals or activities if these are provided to them as a group and are described as a 'student meal' or a 'student party'. But because of the sense of obligation some may not feel comfortable to receive anything from you for free. They may want to repay you by giving a gift, or to contribute in some way to maintain an equal relationship with you. For example, if you invite Japanese people to your home, they will probably want to bring some food with them to share or a gift for the host. Or some Japanese people may send you a parcel as a thank you gift after they return to Japan. They might also feel more at ease if they can pay a fee for organized groups such as toddler groups, English classes and so on.

'Saving face' is a related idea of avoiding embarrassment arising out of doing something wrong and is also an important aspect of Japanese relationships. This is not selfish pride, but a concern for both parties. So Japanese friends will be as keen to save you from embarrassment as they will be to keep their own dignity. It would be good for you to try to keep the same perspective. Always treat your friend with respect. It is probably best to avoid joking in a sarcastic way, even if you are 'just kidding'. While this may feel a natural part of friendships for you, a Japanese person may not appreciate this.

### **Family Ties**

Family ties in Japan are generally stronger than in the West. Making friends with a Japanese person may mean that you are beginning a friendship with their whole family. If family members come over to visit from Japan, show an interest and even hospitality, if you can. You could send a Christmas card or a New Year card to them in Japan. Learn all you can about the family and pray for them as well as for your friend.

### **Politeness and Friendship**

Japan is a 'vertical society'. This means people define their identity by those above or below them in social status. That status itself may be determined by age, wealth, education, occupation, and family connections.

The society is so stratified that this affects how Japanese people speak to each other in their own language, including how to address each other. They constantly monitor their audience and change the pronoun forms and verb endings, depending on whether they are speaking to someone on the same level, or speaking 'up' to someone of higher status or 'down' to someone of lower status. So all relationships are vertically-orientated, including friendships.

In the West, people relate very differently. Neither partner in a friendship is concerned so much about status, and we relate on more equal terms. Japanese people often have a good awareness of these differences and are eager to act according to the local norms. If this seems to be the case, the best way to love them would be to complement, encourage and help them in doing so.

Nevertheless, there are some practical steps which should ease the forming of friendships:

Learn how to pronounce your friend's name. Clarify which is the 'given' (first) name, and which is the surname. Don't be hesitant to check on pronunciation, and practice how to say it better.

Of course, we will always want to show respect to people we meet. Japanese society is one where this is especially noticed and is felt to be particularly important. Check if they're happy for you to use their first name. In Japan, it is unusual to use first names but most people know that it's different in the West.

Business cards are still used very widely in Japan, partly because it is important to know how to write a person's name, and partly to get a feel for their social status to address them properly. Japanese acquaintances may give you their card, and if they do, treat it with respect and offer yours in return if you have one. Or you can take the initiative and offer yours first. The gesture will be appreciated.

Today, in informal situations and for younger people, it is more common to simply exchange phone numbers or connect via LINE, Instagram, and other social media.

### **From Honeymoon to Reality**

People coming to live in a foreign country typically go through a 'honeymoon period' at the start of their stay in the West. During this time, they will focus on the positive aspects of Western life: perhaps the less crowded cities and, in some countries, the sense of history and the accessibility of travelling to new places. Or perhaps they are enjoying the relaxed atmosphere in classes and the lack of pressure to conform to society's expectations. When you hear remarks along these lines, it can be good to engage them on what things they like or miss about Japan. You could respond that Japan has good points not found in many countries in the Western world, such as a strong sense of family, commitment to study and good public transport that runs on time.