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- linguistic help, and most importantly
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CultureShock! Japan will guide you through the confusion you will inevitably feel when moving to the Land of the Rising Sun. Peppered with personal anecdotes, this book gives practical advice on how to navigate Japan's fascinating and complex culture with ease and prepares you for what to expect at a typical *izakaya* with your fellow salarymen after a long day at work. Discover the best way to view *sakura* in full bloom and where the best *ryokans* are. Learn the dos and don'ts when you're out and about, and ride Japan's complex train and rail network with confidence. So whether you require information on office etiquette or where to find an *onsen*, *CultureShock! Japan* covers it all and helps you enjoy your stay in the country.

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CULTURE SHOCK!
JAPAN

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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

JAPAN



Raina Ong

For Review only

CULTURE **SHOCK!**

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

JAPAN

Raina Ong

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and cover a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

For Review only

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To my editors Rachel Heng and She-reen Wong, thank you for saving me time and time again, and giving me the opportunity to write about the country I can't seem to leave. This book will never be complete as there are just too many things to write about, which may take several lifetimes.

Thank you to my parents for letting me leave and move to yet another country. I think they resigned themselves to fate after the second or third year, as they realised I wasn't going home anytime soon. Also, thanks to the rest of my family who have had to put up with sporadic chats and video calls, while I live the high life (not!) in a foreign land.

To the friends I've made in my years here, I'm sure many of you would recognise your stories. Without you guys, I wouldn't have been able to survive living here for this many years. Thank you for putting up with my random (and oftentimes ridiculous) ideas and telling me that I can. Thank you for being curious, and offering your stories and ideas. Thank you for feeding me and giving me a place to crash.

Now that all this is said and done, it's time for a few weekend trips to a hot spring *ryokan* to sample some local cuisine and alcohol, and also to make sure that I fully understand what *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) really means, and perhaps come back with a few more additions to the book.

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INTRODUCTION

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Planning an international move or a trip to a different country is always exciting. Maybe it's just me, but some days, it feels like I live off the adrenaline that comes with planning a multi-day trip. But back to moving or travelling to Japan. There's so much to consider, so much to think about. Will I have enough money? Do I even need to bring cash or will a credit/debit card suffice? What's the weather like? How many clothes do I need? Will navigating the public transit make me break down and cry? (Have you seen Tokyo's rail and subway map?) What are some things I can bring from my home country for my hosts? Do I really need to give every single person a souvenir? Do people really wear suits to the office everyday? What do people do for leisure?

I had all these questions before I made the move to Japan all those years ago. Thinking back, a lot of the questions I had were kind of ridiculous (but there's no such thing as a stupid question right?) and I cringe when I get reminded of them. Having amazing *senpai*—people more versed in the field I was in, a senior, superior or mentor—in my first year of living in Japan was the best thing that a newbie like me could have asked for moving to a new country. I'm glad to say that we are still close friends even after all the embarrassing things I've put them through. Without them showing me the ropes at the new posting and being friends after work hours, I doubt that I would've lasted as long as I did.

This book, while not entirely comprehensive, is a handbook of advice from a *senpai* to a newcomer, aimed at helping you get ready for Japan. That said, there's only so much you can prepare yourself for as there are lots of things to

be aware of and it would be impossible to learn everything before coming over. So if you think you've humiliated yourself on your first day at the office or during your first meal in an *izakaya* (a Japanese casual watering hole), just remember that it makes for a convenient conversation starter and a great story to tell your friends after. At least that's what I tell myself about my ever-increasing pile of embarrassing stories, like the time when I was introduced to the company president of a slightly fancy *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn) while in my hiking clothes with one sock and one slipper on different feet. Yep, classy like that. But I guess the image stuck and he didn't forget who I was the next time we met two years later.



MAP OF JAPAN

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CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



☞ Tradition can, to be sure, participate in a creation, but it can no longer be creative itself.☞

— Tange Kenzo, architect

I had the privilege of studying Japanese and working at a sushi restaurant staffed by a mostly Japanese crew when I was in university, so my image of the country may have started off a little skewed. My Japanese friends were all very friendly and open to hanging out and going out to enjoy the great outdoors like camping and hiking. This was my first encounter with Japanese people, and they were nothing like the overworked salarymen I'd read about in the news. I'd always thought that Japan was a very technologically progressive/forward country; I mean, all my Japanese friends had fancy mobile phones that could do a lot of things while I was stuck with a Nokia brick (I guess you know which era I grew up in now).

Fast forward to a few years later. That image was quickly destroyed in the year I moved to Japan after graduating from university. I saw how some of my Japanese friends worked; joined in the morning commuting crush on occasion (hated it and opted instead to cycle the 50km return journey); the very first iPhone being released (oh how far we've come since then), putting foreign phones somewhat on par with Japanese ones; witnessed the phenomenon known as salarymen firsthand; and hardly saw my Japanese friends whom I used to see almost every day when we were overseas.

Japan was quite unlike what my friends made it seem to

Once I was at a restaurant with my French friend who clearly did not look Asian. We were speaking in English the whole time, and finally the young waitress plucked up her courage, came over and said to me in Japanese, "How and where did you learn English to get to this level? I want to be like you too!" I gave her a blank stare, not quite understanding what she just said, while my friend laughed till he had tears coming out from his eyes before telling me, "She thinks you're Japanese!" Looking Asian doesn't mean I can speak the language and I guess the server and I learnt different lessons that day.

be. The Japanese expats you meet in your country are quite different from the population living in Japan, who could be split into those with experience living overseas and those with experience holidaying overseas. But I guess the same differences can be found in other countries too. Nevertheless, it was a good learning experience for me, and occasionally I would stumble upon small glitches in the matrix that opened my eyes to the greater, wider, scheme of things that is Japan. While a lot of things may seem illogical at first sight, there is a system behind it. For each mindless human robot, there is someone working towards a greater work-life balance. For each corporate slave, there is someone working towards their dreams and passions. This probably comes across as rather optimistic, but the stereotypical Japan that we used to read about and think we know of is changing, slowly but surely.

For all their fame and connection to exotic Japan, samurai, ninja and *geisha* are hardly seen these days; I mean, samurai and ninja do not exist anymore (but perhaps their family lines still do), while *geisha* or *maiko* (*geisha* apprentices) can be seen in certain establishments in a few districts. Imagine my excitement when I saw a *geisha* in her immaculate make-up in Kyoto for the first time. I stared and thought, "Is that a real *geisha*?" while others were snapping a million pictures of her. *Maiko* sightings are the more common of the two and, even then, not very often. I'm still waiting in anticipation for the day



My licence to assassinate—obtained when I visited the ninja exhibition at the Miraikan museum in Odaiba, Tokyo.

I meet a real-life ninja but until then, all I can do is hope that my ninja certification opens up secret doors to meet one.

Language is probably the biggest obstacle a visitor to Japan has to overcome. I studied Japanese in university but pretty much forgot all of it after graduation and had to relearn everything after moving here. Granted, picking up the basics the second time was a lot easier but there were times when I was completely lost in a foreign place without understanding a single word. You don't get what's being spoken at rapid fire speed in your face, the other party has no idea what you're trying to convey, you both play a weird mix of pictionary, guess-tures and charades combined before realising the solution was quite simple indeed. Unless you arrive fluent in Japanese, you will probably experience that at some point or another. Getting better at this creature called Japanese just takes time and a willingness to pick up a new language.

Paying for purchases was something that made me feel uncertain of my move initially when my Japanese language skills were almost nonexistent and terrible. Cashiers would look at me and say a string of words before scanning the

items in my basket. Were they berating me for not taking them out of the basket before reaching the register? But the person before me did the same thing too! Were they making small talk or asking if I had a coupon, which was it? Then I'd give them the cash to pay for my purchases but they'd rattle off even more words, causing me to wonder if the note I used was too big and they wanted something smaller, or I shouldn't have handed the cash to them directly. All these uncertainties, when all I wanted was a bottle of water. Having made a fair number of purchases since my first month in Japan, I am proud to say I am mostly adept at holding my own at the cash register, and it never fails to make me smile when I see clueless tourists passing through the cashier gauntlet.

Fashion ranks highly in Japan and before coming here, I had heard a lot about how well-dressed the Japanese are. Added to that, the memo for the work dress code at my school said formal attire. I was a fresh graduate and had never worked in an office before—what constituted formal attire? Was wearing nice shoes instead of my usual flip flops formal enough? Was it a pant suit? Was it a skirt suit? Did I really have to wear this every day, even in the summer? I sure didn't want to spend a lot of time ironing my clothes during the week. Long story short, I got a couple of suits that only got worn for the first couple of weeks and then hardly ever after. Turns out, my school wasn't big on formal attire and there were a bunch of other teachers who seemed to live in tracksuits (and who weren't gym teachers either).

That said, most Japanese people are well-dressed when they go out, and they are dressed for the season and the place. Going to the beach? Then it's beach shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and maybe flip flops. Going shopping in the city? Then it's casual pants like jeans or khakis, a shirt and shoes. Going

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to your local countryside supermarket or convenience store late at night? Maybe your pyjamas or track pants and Crocs. Most staff don't get fazed and will serve you with their best poker face.

One thing that confounded me before I arrived were Japanese addresses, because how do people know where they live if there are only plot numbers and no street names? How do I look an address up if there are nothing but numbers? But somehow the system works, and I've since gotten used to it. Directions I've heard and used include: "If it looks like you're not supposed to be there, you're probably at the right place", "go down the street where it looks like the wrong street", or "it's a small alley between that old house and that weird-looking shop". But fret not, directions aren't as random in the city because landmarks such as buildings and shops are frequently used, and I've come to find these sort of directions easier to understand.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Raina Ong moved to Japan after graduating from university and has stayed for almost a decade. She started off as an assistant language teacher (ALT) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme but has since hung up her teaching realia, and is currently a Japan-focused travel writer. Having completed her tour of all 47 prefectures in Japan, her next goal is to visit the islands and peninsulas in the country. Raina may have a slight obsession with the Hobby and it is not uncommon to find her miles from home chasing a harebrained travel whim.