

In America, one thing that everyone associates with Japan is bowing. When saying thank you, when entering or leaving a room, when asking a favor... I think a good rule of thumb for foreigners in Japan is: when in doubt, just give a little bow or a nod of the head. After going out for dinner with friends recently, one of my friends noticed that we all gave a little bow in the direction of the other people we were eating with when we left. When my friend pointed this out to us, we all had a good laugh. Would you think it's strange if you saw three foreigners bowing to each other outside a restaurant?

In America, instead of bowing to each other, we usually wave or shake hands. A wave can mean thank you to the driver of another car who let you go in front of them. Of course it also means hello and goodbye. In business or with good friends, people might also shake hands after a meal or a meeting as if to say thank you or nice to meet you. Whenever I wave in Japan, I feel like it's quite unusual—and that everyone is looking at me. And I have almost never shaken hands with anyone here. Also at home, we often smile at people that we know in as if to say hello or have a nice day without using any words. But this is another thing that I've noticed doesn't happen as often, or perhaps as enthusiastically, in Japan. I guess this is why, over time, I have started to bow, or slightly nod my head instead.

I'm actually happy about this transition. In some ways, bowing makes so much more sense than waving or shaking hands. One thing about bowing that's much better than waving is that it's very inconspicuous. At home, if I see someone I know and give them a big wave to get someone's attention and to say hello, it's quite embarrassing if it doesn't work and the other person doesn't see me. Then other people see the wave and wonder who is ignoring me. Sometimes it's hard to figure out when is a good time to wave. It's so much easier to simply say hello and bow my head a little bit if I make eye contact with that person. Also, bowing is much more convenient than a wave or a handshake. If I'm in a rush or have my hands full, it's easier to give a bow on-the-go than it is to stop everything and shake hands or even to wave. It's definitely safer when driving, too!

This might seem like a silly subject, but when I think about little details of daily life like this, I realize how much my habits have changed since I've been in Japan. Sometimes it feels like I haven't been here too long, or that by spending time mostly with my other foreign friends, maybe I am not having a very Japanese experience. Looking at this habit at least, I can see that I have picked up some Japanese habits... and probably even more that I haven't noticed yet!