



CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: JAPANESE SOCIETY

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Theodore Bestor :: One of the things about Japanese social relations that foreigners frequently comment on, and indeed Japanese comment on a lot themselves, is the character of interaction between people. For example, Japan is widely, and I think correctly, regarded as a fairly hierarchical society. People are expected to understand and know their social standing vis-à-vis the people that they're interacting with. If you've ever seen pair of Japanese businessmen exchanging name cards, for example, they will spend a great deal of time very carefully studying each other's name cards, not simply to know the name of the person, but also for clues of their social status. Do they work for a more important company or a less important company? Are they from a major city, or are they from the countryside? From their job title can you determine whether they're sort of senior to you or junior to you? Because all of these things are important markers for how you're going to interact with one another.

Perhaps the most classic example is the fact that in Japanese polite conversation, you have to adopt a relative standing to the person you're talking to. You have to assume that you're either the social superior or the social inferior, because the structure of the language requires most polite conversation to include degrees of deference and respect and distance, so that if you get the clues wrong, you can offend the person you're talking to by sounding as if you think you're superior to them when you should be more deferential, or sounding insincerely deferential when it's clear that you are the senior person in this conversation. So, people are very concerned about establishing a hierarchy, even on the

most initial meeting, to understand how two people are supposed to react to one another.

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