

# The Cutting of the “Culture Card”

By Mike Costanzo

Many times since coming here to Japan, I have been confronted by something I call the “culture card”. This is when someone uses Japanese culture (or their impression of it) to ‘trump’ people into behaving a certain way. For example, we’ve all heard arguments like, “You shouldn’t do so-and-so, because it’s not the Japanese way”, or, “In Japan, people don’t do this-or-that.” Granted, it’s a good thing to be culturally sensitive and to try to act in ways that are culturally appropriate; obviously this is the loving thing to do. The problem comes when false impressions of Japanese culture are allowed to trump peoples’ hearts—when culture is considered more important than people.

For example, early in my time here I formed the assumption that Japanese people don’t communicate their preferences because it is considered selfish and rude. So any time I felt like I wanted to express myself, I whipped out the culture card. “It’s not how things are done here”, I would tell myself. Eventually, I realized that not only was my assumption wrong, but that I had been stuffing who I really was in order to put up a false front. No wonder I didn’t connect well with my Japanese acquaintances and co-workers! I wasn’t being myself.

That’s the problem with the culture card: it’s ultimately shallow and superficial, and puts the focus on externals rather than on the heart. It buys short-term, surface-level harmony at the cost of real relationship. This is, of course, a big problem in Japan; most people think that they have to put up a false front (*tatemae*) and hide their true feelings (*honne*) in order to live their lives. This results in all kinds of tragic consequences, as you can see by reading the headlines in any Japanese newspaper. And one of the ways that we as Christians can help is to show by our loving example what honest, mature, “real” people look like.

I submit that it is better to work through the difficult issues and engage head-on in cross-cultural conflict than to sacrifice understanding and trust at the altar of “saving face”. I submit that it is better to treat people as individuals, and each case individually, than to stereotype and generalize and second-guess. And I submit that it is better to make important decisions based on your *character* (who you are) rather than your *circumstances* (who everyone else is). I truly believe that once the culture card is cut out of the deck, the game can really begin. And even though the rules get a bit tricky at times, trust me, it’s well worth playing.

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