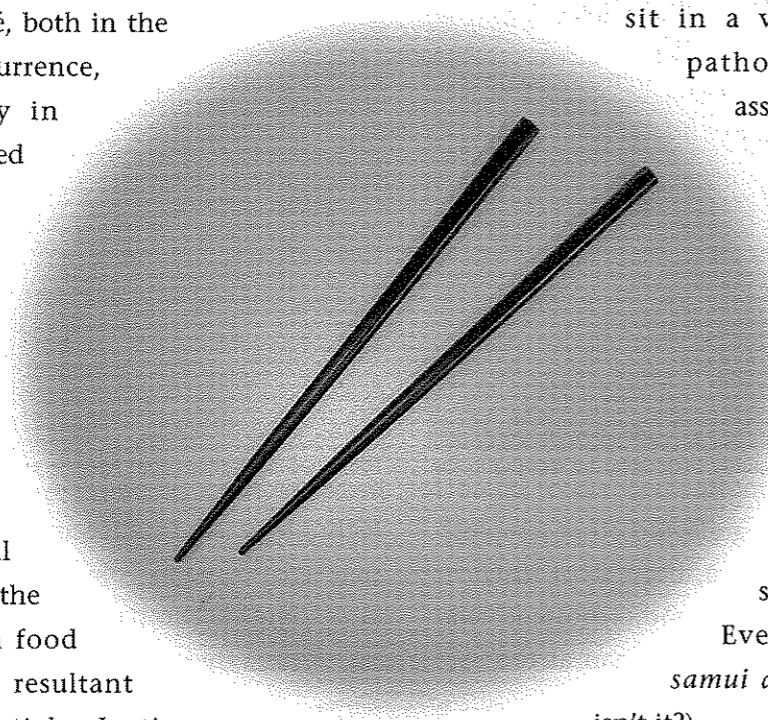


In Praise Of Praise

by Chris Mathews

"Oh, you can use chopsticks!"

It's a comment that every foreigner in Japan is only too familiar with and it usually provokes a reaction somewhere between mild irritation and outright indignation. This *o-hashii wa jozu* (skillful with chopsticks) phenomenon has become something of a cliché, both in the frequency of its occurrence, and the frequency in which it is commented upon by ex-pats. From a Western perspective, this unwarranted and often effusive praise is perplexing if not condescending. In response, the normal impulse is to explain the popularity of Asian food back home and the resultant ability to use chopsticks. In time, the temptation arises to reply with sarcastic comments about your companion's dexterity with a knife and fork—a seemingly fitting riposte to a patronizing and thoroughly unnecessary social nicety.



As anyone who has lived in Japan for more than a few months can testify, there are any number of customs and formalities that can be categorized alongside *o-hashii wa jozu*: the omnipresence of bowing (even when on the phone), constant apologizing for little or no discernible reason, people on trains fighting for the right *not* to sit in a vacant seat, and the pathological need of shop assistants to be the last to say thank you. Of course, there is always *o-hashii wa jozu's* illegitimate twin: *nihongo wa jozu* (you're skillful at Japanese—a personal favorite, always there to greet me when I crest the summit of linguistic Everests such as "*kyo wa samui desu ne.*" (Cold today, isn't it?))

However, before blithely dismissing these phenomena as annoying cultural tics, perhaps some thought should be given to the reasons for their pervasiveness. As most people are aware,

Japanese etiquette is highly structured in contrast to Western informality. These protocols are deeply ingrained into people from the earliest moments. A formidable grid of behavioral conventions is pressed upon them by parents, extended family, teachers, and society in general. *Aisatsu*, or "greetings," for example, are appropriate hellos, thank-yous and apologies taught to Japanese schoolchildren. This grid is so powerful that by adulthood these responses are so deeply entrenched that they are unconscious, reflexive reactions—as unavoidable as covering your mouth when you sneeze, or blowing your nose when you have a cold.

Obviously, there are a number of such conventions. As Japanologist Boye Lafayette De Mente writes in *Japan's Cultural Code Words*, "Most of these customs, which just as often appear unimportant and overdone to the average foreigner, involve catering to the culturally conditioned sensitivities of the Japanese by bowing at the right time in the right way, expressing thanks, paying compliments, apologizing—even when there is no real reason to do so, and following other etiquette rituals that remain deeply ingrained in the Japanese people."

The uttering of outwardly disproportionate praise is one of these behavioral conventions. Often referred to as *goma-suru* (which literally means grinding sesame seeds), it is a protocol that helps grease the wheels of social discourse and, most importantly in a Japanese context, maintain harmony. From a western perspective it may appear superfluous, but it in fact carries out an important social/cultural function. Just like the need to bow at the appropriate time in the correct fashion *goma-suru* caters to the highly attuned sensibilities of the Japanese.

As such, *goma-suru* goes beyond equivalent English terms such as "buttering up" or "soft-soap" as it is so automatic that in certain situations it would be a lapse in manners if it were not made;

with the Western equivalents there is a conscious effort on the part of the "butterer" to impress or gain favor with the "butteree" (Yes, this imagery is a little strange, not to mention high in cholesterol, but the other option—to use "soaper" and "soapee"—risked distracting the reader entirely.) The Japanese themselves are accustomed to a constant stream of flattery, especially if they occupy a position of any authority. It is obviously not to be taken personally, for it is motivated simply by the need to maintain social harmony. And, as Alex Kerr notes in *Dogs and Demons*, these etiquette rituals are "one of Japan's attractive features ... smoothing the flow of social life and contrasting sharply with curt New York or rude Shanghai."

So, rather than being patronizing, this effusive praise can be the result of a number of factors. It can occur as the result of years of cultural conditioning as an attempt to maintain harmony; it can occur out of nervousness and the need to say something, anything. It can also simply be a sign of respect and an indication that the person wishes to be well-regarded by you—a sincere attempt to endear themselves to you.

Bear in mind also that naïvety is, to a certain extent, a positive attribute in a traditional Japanese setting, particularly in the case of women (you have probably noticed that those Japanese who have spent a reasonable amount of time abroad seldom make these comments). Being somewhat unworldly reflects virtue and is not a negative value—"naïve" translates into Japanese as "innocent" or "pure-hearted." Surprise at a foreigner's ability to handle chopsticks can therefore be real or feigned, but either way the intention is not to insult.

So the next time you're having a meal with new Japanese friends, rather than being offended by unwarranted compliments on your preternatural ability with chopsticks, maybe you should ask those that fail to lavish praise on you what gives them the right to be so rude. ♥