

## Visiting my Australian Friend's House

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### Keywords

Individualism versus Collectivism, Receiving guests in Japan and in a Western country, Japanese student in Australian Home

My name is Mai Kaneshiro, and I grew up in a small city called the Gold Coast, in Australia. At school, all of my friends were Australian, and I was basically the only Japanese in my year level. Nonetheless, I really got along well with them all, and felt no different to any of them, except for my race.

The cross-cultural incident that most sticks in my mind happened when I first went to an Australian friend's house for a sleepover. I was thirteen. Before I went to my friend's house, I had imagined that I would be welcomed by my friend's family in the same way that my mother treated my friends when they came over to my house. For example, if visitors come to our house for a night stay, my mother would treat the guests with the best hospitality—cleaning the room beforehand; preparing a great breakfast, lunch, and dinner; making the bed, etc. But this was not at all how I was treated at my Australian friend's house.

When I was welcomed to the house, the first thing I was told by my friend's mother was to “use the house as if it is your home.” At first, I was really delighted by this, and I felt warmly accepted into the house. However, it was not until later that I really understood the meaning of her words.

As I entered, I noticed the difference from our house straight away. The room was dirty (it didn't seem as if any cleaning had been done before I came) and my friend's father was lying on the couch, wearing only shorts, and watching TV. In my house, there was no way my mother would allow any visitors to enter when it was dirty, and my father would definitely not be seen in such laid-back clothes when we had a guest. At that point, though, the disorganized room did not concern me much, because I just thought that her family must have been busy—however, I was embarrassed to see her father dressed like that.

But what surprised me most was the dinner my friend's mother prepared. Arranged on the table were bread, butter, pineapples (from a can), salami (not homemade), and instant soup. My friend, sitting beside me, was eating with delight; but

the food left me honestly wordless. My mum would always make everything from scratch, and, if we had a visitor, she would make an especially extravagant dinner. The poorly made meal made me think, at first, that maybe my friend's parents didn't like me. But when I saw the rest of her family eating contently, I realized that this meal was normal for them. Even though I felt unsatisfied, I ate the whole meal to show respect for my friend's mother. But, still, I could not help but think how unhealthy and simple the meal was.

My friend and I cleaned up afterwards, and it was time for us to get ready for bed. But here again something concerned me: my friend's room was as dirty as a pigsty, and there was no mattress, blanket, nor pillow—nothing, basically, for me to sleep on. So I went courteously to my friend's mum and asked if there was anything I could sleep on, and she replied, “Of course there is! Why didn't you find it for yourself! Just open up those cardboards and I'm sure you can find everything you need!”

“Alright . . . ,” I thought to myself, thinking that this was what she really meant by “use the house as if it is yours.” My mum hated it if visitors opened any cupboard, drawers, or the wardrobe, so she always made sure they had everything they needed herself. So I was really surprised that my friend's mother left those things for me to do on my own, truly allowing me to do anything in the house. After that, I found everything I needed to sleep on, and made space in my friend's room so I could set up the bed.

The next morning, my friend and I woke up at 8:30. There was no breakfast ready: instead, we were told to make our own breakfast. On hearing that, I was yet again in shock, because when I had invited my friends to my house, my mum had prepared a deluxe breakfast, such as fruit salads, French toast, bacon, scrambled eggs, and many drinks to choose from. But obviously it wasn't like that here. So we ended up making scrambled eggs and toast together, which was rather simple but which I actually found quite enjoyable—my mother never allowed me to use the kitchen on my own because it is dangerous.

These were the things that I found most different from my culture when inviting people over. I remember that I was really surprised and astonished at the difference in the way Australian people treat their daughter's/son's friends when they come over. My first sleepover at my friend's place was honestly distressing and astonishing: I felt so “cheap,” to be there and not to receive the hospitality I had expected. But as I grew older and came to be more familiar with the Australian culture, I

noticed the way my perspectives changed. Now, I can definitely say that I would feel more comfortable going to a house where the parents left everything up to us, and for them to be their usual selves: this is because I would feel relieved to know that I'm not causing any annoyance. The reason I came to feel this way is by comparing it with my mother. Of course my mum shows better hospitality, and makes it seem like she is happy to have guests over; but I know that she gets tired from working so hard to make them feel welcomed. Also, my friends once told me that they feel like an outcast when they come over to my house, because they get treated differently: with too much care.

What I learnt from this cross-cultural experience is that it is really important to understand different cultures, and know how they think—because what you may be doing to make them feel better may actually be making them feel uncomfortable (just like my friends felt with my mum's hospitality). It may be better to recognize their cultural background before inviting them over: in this way, we can avoid disappointing people. For example, if a Japanese guest comes over, treat them in Japanese style; but if the guest is a Westerner it may be better to treat them like they are part of your family, and do nothing particularly special.

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