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Only a brief encounter but it has left a lasting impression

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THERE'S much to learn from Ryoko, a waitress in a coffeehouse in one of Tokyo's famous hotels. In fact, there's much to learn from Japan. Regardless of one's job or profession, one can always pick up something new and useful from Asia's economic giant.

One may claim to have been to Japan many times, or know many Japanese, or read countless books about the Land of the Rising Sun, but one cannot claim to know everything about Japan.

That's why there's always something to learn from Japan. One can acquire much technical knowledge by being an apprentice with any of Japan's hi-tech companies, or a small- and medium-scale industrial operator.

Ahmad, an executive with Petronas who has spent more than two decades in Japan, told me that he learned a lot when he worked with a Japanese construction firm in the early 1980s.

In short, one can acquire many skills from any of its firms. Provided that one is prepared to learn, of course. And Ahmad, from Kampung Morten in Malacca, readily admitted his stint in the construction company has helped toughen him up to face today's very competitive and fast-paced business environment.

Which leads me to Ryoko, the petite waitress. Always wearing a smile, one can pick up traits from her that can help make a difference and create a lasting impression on people. Ryoko demonstrated one of the many positive attitudes that most Japanese have, an attitude which some of us had either completely ignored or choose not to pay sufficient attention to.

I was in Tokyo for a few days covering Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's working visit. Zak, a colleague, and I stopped at the coffeehouse for refreshments. And that's where we met Ryoko, a brief encounter that has created yet another lasting impression.

Zak, friendly as usual, had asked Ryoko for the translation of the greeting "Good evening" in Japanese. Since Zak has been to Japan several times, I wasn't sure whether he really wanted to know the Japanese greeting or he was just being, well, you know, trying out a new line! Ryoko, rather hesitantly, gave the translation, which pleased Zak. Further attempts at a decent conversation were unsuccessful as Ryoko only knows a smattering of English. She was also very busy taking orders.

We enjoyed our cappucino and pan-cakes as we discussed global issues (read national gossip and who's doing what to whom), while watching the world go by.

Our conversation was interrupted by Ryoko who appeared blushing and apologising profusely. She had given Zak the wrong translation of "Good evening!" She said she consulted a colleague whose English was better and that's when she discovered she had given Zak the wrong translation.

This may seem a trivial thing. But what struck me most was the waitress' sense of honesty and her attitude. Those who work in Japan and know the work culture well say that this is typical of the Japanese. They pay attention to details, always try to do their best, work hard and are generally efficient.

It was the same at the souvenir shop. The sales person allows one to browse at leisure - again, wearing a smile and always ready to help. If a purchase is made, he or she will wrap the gift speedily and make sure the wrapping is to your satisfaction. There's considerable fussing to please

the customer.

It doesn't matter if the purchase costs 100 yen (about RM4) or 10,000 yen. This attitude has made Japan what it is today - a world economic power.

Japan's growth has been phenomenal even though its economy has stagnated somewhat with unemployment running at slightly more than five per cent.

Even the hotel chambermaid is efficient and thorough. Not to mention polite, of course. One gets the feeling of being valued by all the attention. Perhaps, this is something that our workers in the service industry should pay attention to.

It can't be the money or salary. In fact, Japanese hotel management forbids tipping its bell boys and other workers. Ahmad says it's the attitude ingrained in the workers from their infant days. It's the discipline that has served the country well time and again.

Ever grumbled why it takes so long to check out of a hotel in Kuala Lumpur or Johor Baru, Penang and elsewhere in Malaysia? I'm sure you have stories to tell about this. But in the Tokyo hotel where I stayed, the check-out took less than a minute! A couple of basic questions, the bill was printed out, you sign on the credit card imprint, and you're out of there!

If you're in KL, JB or Penang, you'll probably have to produce your credit card again, argue that you've already produced it when you checked in, wait for a new imprint, sign, make sure the first imprint is torn up, and only then can you jump into the waiting taxi and rush like mad to the airport.

I suppose this is why Dr Mahathir initiated the "Look East" Policy way back in the 1980s - to learn and adopt the positive points from the Japanese. They were then known as the copycats, producing poor-quality and cheap consumer goods.

Today, the same Japanese are producing high-quality items for the world market at prices that force you to think many times before parting with your money. Dr Mahathir continues to go to Japan, each time picking up something new and useful. The rest of us should do the same, too.

They have negative traits too, I'm sure. But we don't need them as we have enough of our own, dirty toilets and all. At the end of the day, it boils down to attitude.

As for me, I want to start picking up a few more Japanese, language that is, and let's see what else is there. Sayonara for now.