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Research: Active materials.

It's pretty much a given that everyone reading this will have a soft spot for Japan. It is a singularly unique place and, in a world that is rapidly homogenising elsewhere, it is strikingly refreshing just how very Japanese it remains - long may that last. My advice: the last thing a visitor should do is come to Japan to look for "flaws", from whatever foreign perspective. One will certainly find aspects of life here that one can label as flaws, if one tries hard enough. Instead, I find great enjoyment in its beauty, particularly the kind of unexpected and charming experiences that one finds so very regularly if one simply keeps one's eyes open. Here are a few examples, the first to spring to mind: Japanese children (uniformly delightful); the care that goes into many of even the tiniest private gardens; random acts of kindness from complete strangers - you are a guest in their country; the way that almost everyone, whatever they do in life, is trying to do it well; the respect with which interpersonal transactions are conducted. I could go on. What about the day job? It has been amazingly easy to become part of the team here. My needs have been seen to attentively, on the rare occasions that they haven't been anticipated in advance. My host has been so incredibly kind it actually makes me slightly anxious that I won't ever be able to properly thank him. The quality of the science in my host lab is very high, higher even than I perhaps expected it to be. In Japan more widely there are highs and lows, as everywhere. The social convention at conferences and meetings is quite different. Questions will rarely be phrased as direct criticisms and are often carefully constructed to merely hint at the real question, so that the speaker can choose to evade it without loss of face. I haven't yet quite formed an opinion on whether this is an impediment to frank communication, which sometimes needs to have a critical interpretation. I think perhaps that this is communicated in more subtle ways than I yet fully appreciate. Who you know is very important in Japan. If we are to be honest with ourselves, it is important everywhere, but perhaps more so in Japan. Social interactions seem almost as important as scientific ones. My advice: be humble, don't be a brute when asking questions, don't interrupt and a small gift to repay some kindness doesn't hurt. Finally, I hope for your sake that you have access to English-speaking group secretaries as efficient and helpful as Aiko Sotani and Hanae Hoshihara.