

The First Time I Was Called Ma'am  
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The first time I was called Ma'am was the first time I drove a car in Tokyo and hit a Japanese teenager on a bicycle. It was not an auspicious beginning to my driving career there, although it was way back when driving was still possible in what has become just another noisy, overcrowded city.

It was 1957; I was 25, and we had already lived in Tokyo a couple of years before we bought a second-hand car and gave up being crushed to death on the city's impossibly crowded public subways and buses. Young Japanese students were paid a few cents an hour during rush hours to stand outside stopped subway cars and push passengers inside so the doors could close. As pedestrians, we had already become accustomed to crossing streets where the traffic was driving on the "wrong" side of the road, although we never gave up looking both ways, just in case.

Wisely, I thought, I started my driving career on a two-lane back road with almost no traffic. I was going slowly when the kid on a bicycle came speeding out with absolutely no warning from a dirt road on my right and landed on the ground in front of my car. Have you ever had the experience of slowly getting out of your car wondering if you have just killed someone? I have forgotten a lot in the many years since then, but I can still remember that feeling.

Immediately, from what had seemed like a deserted place, Japanese folks arrived from every direction, most of them yelling. I finally learned that they were yelling at the youth—not me. They had witnessed his irresponsible action. And then, from nowhere, a very tall, handsome young man in uniform appeared and asked quietly, in a deep, masculine voice, "Are you all right, ma'am?" I leaned on him and burst out crying. I never did learn how my rescuer, an American Army military policeman, got there.

Miraculously, the boy was not hurt. But that's not the end of the story. Some Japanese customs are hard to understand, but you must follow them. I learned that even though the accident was not my fault, protocol required that I visit the family with a gift, which, of course, I did. So, soon after the event, I took my candy and flowers to the boy's home, bowed, smiled and the family bowed and smiled back. But I did not get a gift. End of story.