


# Human history: Handshaking's international journey

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## **Penelope J. Corfield, from Royal Holloway, University of London, offers a compelling analysis of handshaking's international journey in human history**

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Humans everywhere meet and greet one another daily. Although they do at times behave in belligerent ways, they usually (that is, outside war zones) expect 'ordinary' life to unfold smoothly from day to day.

In that context, all societies have developed greeting rituals. These are adopted formally, when encountering strangers, and adapted informally among friends. Having a known repertoire of salutations reduces stress and uncertainty. People do not have to re-invent greetings from scratch.

Over time, an immense range of salutations has evolved worldwide, from rubbing noses to shaking hands to hearty hugs and kisses to stately bowing and curtseying.

Broadly, these greeting styles can be divided into two main categories: those that entail touching others – and those that avoid bodily contact. But it's not uncommon, especially in times of change, for people to borrow from more than one tradition. As a result, upon first meeting, people often engage in an instant (and usually unspoken) social negotiation. What style of salutation is required here? How best to decide?

### **Salutations without bodily contact**

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A significant form of salutation in the non-touching tradition is the dignified bow. Thus, traditionally, in Japan, both men and women bow deeply from the waist, after catching the eye of the person to whom the salutation is addressed.

Its universalism makes it socially easy and convenient. The format can also be adapted to allow for social nuances. Conventionally, the person of 'lower' status sustains the bow for a fractionally longer period, while the 'higher-ranked' one is the first to stand up straight.

Hence the sometimes strange spectacle (to outsiders) of two Japanese people continuing deep bows for many long minutes – with their heads together, whilst conversing intently. They cannot decide upon their relative status.

Neither knows who should straighten up first. So they remain doubled up together.

That's one problem when greetings are used to acknowledge relative status. They work well enough when there is a clear social hierarchy. The old tradition in Britain was for men to bow to their social 'superiors' and women to hold out their skirts and curtsey. So

‘ordinary’ people knew precisely how they should acknowledge the august presence of the monarch.

But things became much less evident in Britain’s bustling, crowded cities as the economy industrialised. Did a skilled engineer outrank a wealthy shopkeeper, or vice versa? Over time, the old-style deep bow was retained for court ceremonial, while daily rituals were modified. Men took to touching their hats or tugging them gently – while women replaced the deep curtsy with a brisk ‘bob’ of the upper body.

## **Salutations with close bodily contact**

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Salutations that entail close bodily contact can, by contrast, have the opposite problem. If non-touching can seem too remote – and hard to sustain in times of change – then touching salutations can risk becoming too intimate. How, in particular, can due respect be shown to social ‘superiors’?

For that reason, ‘tactile’ salutations are usually undertaken with stately composure. The Maori greeting, known as Hongi, requires two people, standing in close proximity, to press their noses – and often their foreheads – together. Symbolically, they are sharing the ‘breath of life’.

Accordingly, the ritual is performed with ceremonial care – and has been used (for example) by Maori chieftains to welcome British royalty to New Zealand.

## **Closest of all greetings – the Russian bear-hug**

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One of the closest of all salutations is the all-embracing Russian bear hug. Arms are fully wrapped around the other’s body. An example is currently visible on YouTube (2024): the American journalist, Evan Gershkovich (of Russian-Jewish parentage) has returned home after a Russian-U.S. prisoner exchange. Waiting at the airfield are his parents. Gershkovich greets both in turn with massive bear hugs – exuberantly lifting his mother off her feet.

So famous is this salutation that its name recurs in other contexts. Thus, in wrestling, a dominant body lock, whereby one wrestler seizes control of another, is termed a bear hug. In the world of corporate finance, a super-aggressive take-over bid, which shareholders find hard to refuse, is also described as a bear hug. And the term even appears in sexual slang. When, during intercourse, the erect male member is held in a tight vaginal or anal grip, the affectionate embrace is known as – yes! – a bear hug.

Needless to say, however, ultra-close-hugging salutations work best with close friends and family. And the same applied historically.

Russian peasants, in earlier eras when they lived in conditions of serfdom, did not greet the Tsar – or local landlord – with an all-enveloping hug. Indeed, they were unlikely even to dream of such gross – even treasonous – impertinence.

## Handshaking as a halfway house

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Given the multitude of options, how then did the handshake spread into international usage? It was itself a salutation of great antiquity, adopted within many different cultures.

Handshaking does entail the touch of hand upon hand. However reassuring that might be, it does imply some intrusion into another's 'personal space'. Yet, simultaneously, the manoeuvre is performed – literally, at arm's length. Those who like to keep their distance can keep their arm straight. They can even add a little bow, if they wish. Conversely, those who enjoy closeness can keep their hand near the body – and even pull the other person closer still – with the option of adding a quick kiss.

Crucially, however, the handshake does not require any kowtowing. It is an egalitarian greeting. People are not rendered absolute equals – whether in wealth, status or abilities. Yet they meet and greet as fellow humans.

Herein lies the handshake's international attraction. It offers a compromise between 'touching' and 'non-touching' styles. It simultaneously remains polite to all parties without requiring any kowtowing. Handshaking is internationally known and has had a long career in diplomacy from ancient times until today.

Currently, to be sure, not everyone accepts the practice. There are religious and cultural objections. Epidemics like COVID-19 also provide disruptions. Yet consider the long-term trend! Humanity's default global salutation has become the handshake. And its international journey shows no sign of ending.

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