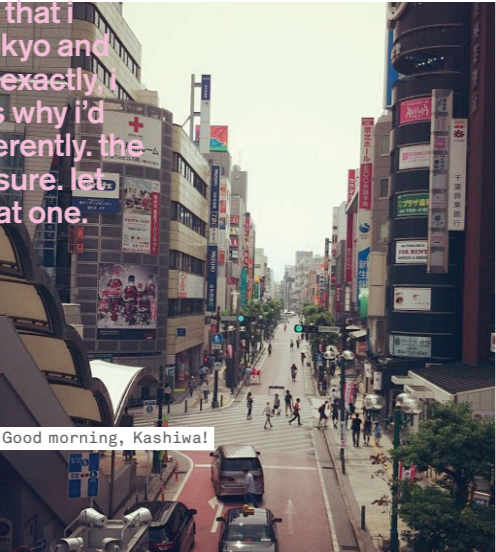




# i'm here: an american model slash actress in .japan

**why are you here? that's the question i've been asked countless times since moving to japan, and for whatever reason, i'd give a different answer every time. travel, start my own business, write, or the insufferably vague – i want to learn about japanese culture, are in my usual bag of answers. truth is, after nine years of print modelling and acting in california, the only thing i knew for sure was that i was ready to jump into tokyo and try something new. what exactly, i wasn't sure. maybe that's why i'd answer the question differently. the real answer is: yeah, not sure. let me get back to you on that one. by cynthia popper**



## THE AGENT

Getting an agent in Japan is an entirely different process than in San Francisco. In the States, you have to show you're worth representing. For modelling, you need pictures – good ones. For acting, you need a talent reel and solid training: commercial work, on-camera, stage, improv. You come to a prospective agent fully prepared. You submit a package: portfolio, headshots, and a loaded resume, and hope the bookers see something in you that they can market to clients. If they like what they see they ask you to come in for an interview. If that goes well, you get represented.

In Japan, foreigners simply Google the specialty agencies and register. It's really that simple, and that alone gets plenty of people work. But the models and actors who score real work: (i.e. national spots and big brand ads), have at minimum, professional photos and a few jobs under their belts. It takes time to build a resume, but once you get rolling, the audition calls snowball and booking work consistently becomes part of your daily routine. I submitted my portfolio to a few agencies about a week before I came over and was represented sight unseen. Before I'd even touched Japanese soil, my comp card was online in Japanese. About three weeks after arriving I landed my first audition.



## THE AUDITION

My first audition call in Japan was a fun one, especially since I'd been working within the American process for so long. I was curious how different it would be... especially since I don't speak Japanese. There's a big difference between auditions in the States and those in Japan. In San Francisco, I'd get an email from my booker that looked something like this:

Cynthia,

You're up for a national [commercial] for [insert global tech brand here].

Casting location: XYZ Studios  
Date/Time: Tomorrow at 1pm (which usually means 1:30, sometimes 2:00 if children are involved).  
Shoot: Three weeks from now, final selects chosen at the end of the week.  
Role: Hipster professional tech executive  
Dress: Cool suit (think young urban professional), hair down, dark colours, no patterns  
Script: Sides are attached – just know the gist, you can improvise on camera  
Usage: 1 year globally, internet and global ads.  
Rate: [whatever it is, for nationals it's usually pretty good]

Confirm that you can make it. Thanks!

I memorise the sides, steam my suit, and build my character. BOOM.

But in Japan it's different. You don't work with just one booker, you work with every booker at the agency, so you'll get multiple calls for multiple jobs, often in the same day, and it's up to you to keep it all straight, which is hard when you haven't met everyone and the communication gap is wide. But, unless you speak Japanese, you won't be asked to memorise anything, which is a huge bonus. You get a call from a booker after they've already sent an email (over-communication is important with a language barrier) and decipher the sometimes cryptic audition information.

This email looks more like this:

Cynthia-san,

You have an audition tomorrow for an in-store promotional video and ad campaign. Meet me (the booker) at Station X at 1pm. (Which means 12:45pm).  
Company: Not disclosed  
Role: Business lady  
Dress: Business  
Rate: We will confirm if you are selected.  
Shoot dates: Unknown (usually known 2-3 days before the shoot).  
As per your contract, please do not discuss this audition in social media.

It's not much to work with, but you roll with it and hope for the best. Japanese media is extremely private in comparison with the States. Sure some companies make models and actors sign non-disclosures for high tech products that haven't entered the marketplace, but most are fine with you socialising your work so long as you've asked and the company is cool with it. In Japan, you cannot take photos, talk about any product or brand names, no matter the brand or type of ad. So I bite my tongue until the ad is up and then blow up Facebook.

The audition process in Japan takes much longer but for different reasons than in the States. In San Francisco, sometimes clients show up late, the audition process starts slow, which backs everything up, so unless I'm one of the first to be seen, I usually plan on at least two hours. The duration is the same in Tokyo, but they run spot on time. Everything is just slower and more detailed. They don't just want to take one set of photos of you, they want to take five. They might change how you look (some auditions even have makeup artists), and your booker goes with you to translate and make sure you're in the right place at the right point through the whole process. My last audition took two hours. They changed my hair twice, re-did my makeup (and as a beauty nut, I followed their instructions to a tee), and had me do scenes with not just one person, but six. It was a little crazy, but it paid off. I got the job.





Late night shioyaki



My last shoot in SF. Nice to see some familiar faces.



No ramen, no life



Ohayo! Beautiful morning in Shizuoka



Snacks so I never grow hungry

THE BOOKING

No two jobs anywhere are the same, but I can say the Japanese set pays extra attention to the details. This is both good and bad, because while everyone is well taken care of, the shoots generally take longer. This job was especially great because there were kids in the commercial, and the crew made sure they had fun snacks and toys. Between takes, one of the crew came on set in an Iron Man costume and played with the kids – freaking adorable.

Along with the treatment of the child actors, the level of care that went into wardrobe, hair, and makeup for me was stellar. Not just the products they used (which were amazing – I took photos of my favourites!) but the kindness and pampering throughout the shoot. The girls would fan me, bring me tea, even give me massages in between takes. This would never happen in the U.S. Don't get me wrong, most of the makeup artists I've worked with in the States are super talented and sweet, but there are always shoots where the hair stylist cuts your hair without asking, or the makeup artist rips off false eyelashes like a sadist, or spends an hour pouring out the gruesome details of her divorce while you're held captive in the makeup chair. Japanese beauty teams keep everything professional – they're very serious about making sure you look exactly as you should for the role.

Once this shoot wrapped (and it was a long one, I understand 12-hour shoot days are the norm in Japan), my booker emailed me the kindest note, thanking me for my hard work and giving me the exact details of when the campaign would launch and exactly when I would get paid. I've never had an agency be so on point with these details before – which isn't my U.S. agent's fault – often they just don't know. In my experience, models and actors are treated very well here, but I've heard stories about shifty agencies, bad contracts and unpaid fees. It can happen anywhere, but if you don't know the culture and can't speak the language, you're going to be doubly screwed if things don't go your way.

So if you're thinking about coming over to work as a model or actor, here's some advice:

Get great photos. If you look at the Japanese agencies, most of the photos are sub par – these shots would never get seen on a legitimate U.S. agency site. Look the part and get professional photos in great clothes, with great makeup, and have the photos edited by a professional. Show you mean business, and you'll get real business.

Get great representation. Go with time-tested agencies who specialise in working with foreign models. Never deal with agencies who charge fees, demand you pay a particular photographer for certain types of photos, or push you to do certain kinds of work. Your agent is not your boss, you work together to get the book and they receive a fee for brokering the deal.

Be you and know your boundaries in this business. Anywhere in this industry you'll find people who will try and exploit new models. If there's a job you don't want to do, don't do it. Know all of the facts about the job before you agree to do it: what's expected of you, how much you'll be paid, where the campaign will be seen and for how long. If you get into the modelling business, you are self-employed – you are your own product, so be sure to protect yourself, and put yourself out there in the way you want to be seen by the world.

Challenging, creative, fun, and yeah sometimes even lucrative, modelling and acting has been the most successful profession in my creative career, and seems to be flourishing here on the Big Red Dot. So now when people ask “the question”, I answer: I'm a writer slash model slash actress. Where else better could I possibly be?

Read Cynthia Popper's blog at [cynthiapopper.com](http://cynthiapopper.com).



Streets of Tokyo



This says it all



Tokyo signs



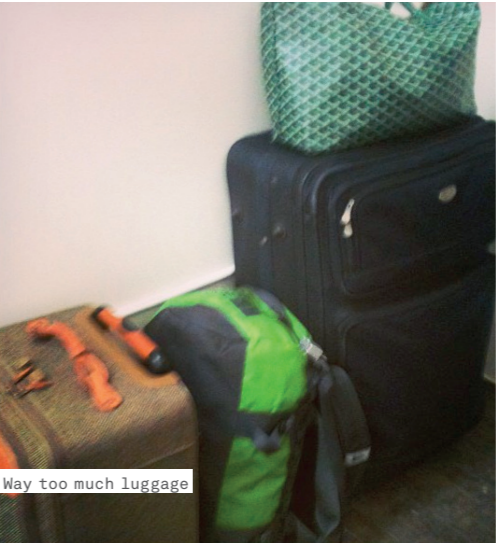
Vendors are the way to go



So to get to my place, just make a left at Barbie Teddy Bear...



Waiting for the photographer to set up



Way too much luggage



Western crew=famous people. They asked the producer if I was Angelina Jolie...