

Module 10: Asian Civilizations and their Cultural Exchanges


Topic 2 Content: Japan

Introduction

Japan

Geography **Early History** **Influences**

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Geography of Japan

Geography of Japan

Geography **Early History** **Influences**


Japan is a mountainous archipelago.

People settled in river valleys along the coasts.

Japanese used the water for food, trade, and a buffer against foreign contact.

Tsunamis have caused much destruction in Japan.

Image: While this tsunami is in Thailand, it allows you to see the magnitude of such underwater earthquakes, 2004



Japan is a mountainous archipelago. Because the country is too mountainous to farm, most people settled in river valleys along the coasts. Whether the Japanese looked to water as a source of food, as an opportunity for trade, or as a buffer against foreign contact, Japan's surrounding waters, like the Sea of Japan and South China Sea, have proved essential to the country's growth and development. Japan's surrounding waters, however, have not always been kind. Underwater earthquakes have triggered massive tidal waves, called tsunamis, that sweep over the land and destroy everything in their midst.

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Early History of Japan

Early History of Japan

Geography

Mountains were an obstacle to unity.

There were a variety of independent clans.

Shinto was the earliest religion.

Kami is the divine spirit that lives in nature.

A *Torii* is a gateway that signals the transition from secular to sacred.

The Yamato clan united the people politically.

Image: A shrine with a Torii gate

Early History

Influences



At first, Japan's mountainous terrain was an obstacle to unity, and early Japanese society consisted of a variety of independent clans. Each clan was self-governing and worshipped its own nature gods and goddesses. Eventually, the clans' varied customs and beliefs combined to form Japan's earliest religion, called Shinto, meaning "way of the gods." Shinto has no founder or sacred scriptures. Its worshippers believe in the *kami*, divine spirits that live in nature. All things in nature, especially the beautiful and unusual, are considered the home of a *kami*. Shinto worshippers thus respect the forces of nature and worship of their ancestors. The emperor of Japan is believed to have descended from the *kami*, and needs to maintain communication with them and receive inspiration from them. Therefore, the ideal state of Shinto is when the emperor reigns and performs certain rituals, centered on the *kami*, to ensure Japan's prosperity. Many followers of Shinto pray at shrines in their homes or visit public shrines. An iconic symbol of a Shinto shrine is a *Torii*, a gateway that signals the transition from secular to sacred. It is usually located at the entrance to a Shinto shrine. Today, Shintoism has not gained an international following.

While Shintoism united the Japanese religiously, by about 500 A.D. (C.E.), the Yamato clan united the people politically. The Yamato clan steadily increased its power, and eventually came to lead most of the clans throughout Japan. Justifying its power even further, the Yamato clan claimed to be the direct descendants of the sun goddess, and chose the rising sun as its symbol.

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Influence of Chinese Culture

Influences of Chinese Culture

Geography	Early History	Influences
Scholars and artists were sent to China.		
Buddhism was brought back to Japan and coexisted with Shintoism.		
The Japanese adopted the Chinese writing system, artistic styles of painting, architectural designs, cuisine, fashion, gardening, and tea.		
Over time, some Chinese customs sustained, while others were modified or eliminated.		
Japanese maintained their tradition of inheriting positions of power based on family status.		

Image: Nara Daibutsu, a large statue of Buddha built in 752

Until the early 600s when the Japanese developed an interest in mainland Asia, inspired by Chinese travelers, they enjoyed relative isolation. Scholars and artists were sent to China to gain a firsthand understanding of the Chinese ways. Buddhism was one of the most important influences brought back from China to Japan. The Japanese did not give up their Shinto beliefs, but allowed Buddhism to coexist. Some Buddhist rituals became Shinto rituals, and some Shinto gods and goddesses were worshipped in Buddhist temples.

An interest in Buddhism gradually developed into an enthusiasm for other elements of Chinese culture. The Japanese adopted the Chinese system of writing, the artistic style of painting landscapes, the pagoda-style architectural design, cuisine, fashion, gardening, and drinking tea.

Over time, however, the intrigue for all things Chinese lost momentum. While the Japanese sustained some Chinese customs, other influences were modified or eliminated. For example, Japan never accepted the Chinese civil service examination - a merit-based system for choosing government officials. Instead, the Japanese maintained their tradition of inheriting positions of power based on one's family status.