Civilization of Ancient and Medieval Japan

The Japanese islands are located 124 miles from mainland Asia. The distance is far enough to ensure a certain degree of geographical insularity and the development of a unique Japanese cultural identity. At the same time, the islands are close enough to the Korean Peninsula and to China to guarantee a high level of interaction with mainland cultures.

The physical geography of the Japanese islands influenced cultural development. Surrounded by water the islands have a maritime climate that is milder than the nearby mainland. The mild climate, and the limited amount of productive farmland, influenced the development of agriculture. As a result, the Japanese have always depended upon seafood to supplement their diet. The 4 main islands of Japan are Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and there are many smaller islands. Altogether the islands are slightly smaller than the state of California, but with a population more than three times the size of the Golden State.

The coastal plain from Tokyo to Osaka is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. The mild climate and a long growing season help with productivity, but even with the use of fertilizer for the poor soils means that in modern Japan the importation of food is a necessity. Despite the agricultural challenges, the Japanese have created one of the most advanced societies on the planet. And, despite the growing influence of the West, the Japanese have retained their unique level of cultural uniformity in the modern era.

![Figure 1.1 Earthenware stone statue from late Jomon period (1000-400 BCE)](image)

The earliest identifiable culture of Japan was the Jomon, a pre-Japanese people. However, before the establishment of Jomon civilization another hunting and gathering people - identified as the Ainu (Hairy Ainu), inhabited the islands. Over time the Ainu were assimilated by the Jomon and later by the Japanese. Today there are very few Ainu. The Jomon period lasted from as early as 14000 BCE to 300 BCE, when ethnic Japanese migrated to the islands from the mainland. Gradually the Jomon were assimilated. A significant percentage of modern Japanese are connected genetically to the Jomon. As with the Ainu, the Jomon were primarily a hunting and gathering culture. Evidence does exist for limited plant cultivation by the Jomon. The Jomon are noted for the style of pottery and stoneware they produced.

Sometime before 300 BCE migrants from the Korean Peninsula began crossing the Korea Straight to the Japanese islands. These people established the Yayoi culture. Yayoi farmers intermixed with the hunting and gathering Jomon people, and assimilated the Ainu. The Yayoi established small farming villages and
cultivated rice and other crops. The Yayoi migrants from the mainland brought bronze tools and weapons to the islands.

Figure 1.2 Yayoi pottery (100 - 300 CE)

As Yayoi culture developed they built burial mounds, established methods of preserving food, and created a unique style of pottery that was similar to what was being produced in Korea. Characteristics of Jomon pottery can also be seen in what the Yayoi produced. The continuing influence of the Jomon culture upon the Yayoi can also be found in the stone tools utilized, the lacquer used for decorations, the use of bone for fishing equipment and other cultural implements. Tomb building was another feature of late Yayoi culture. The Kofun tomb building style was also a Korean cultural borrowing. Cultural connections between Korea and Japan were so strong in this early period.

Contact with Chinese culture via Korea contributed to the development Japanese culture. Accounts of Japan in China can be found dating from as early 290 CE. The unique Japanese writing system, influenced by the Chinese, was established by the 5th-6th centuries, and the oldest surviving Japanese written records date from 712 CE.

Japanese mythology from this era includes “The Account of the Three Kingdoms,” the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters), and the Nihongi (History of Japan). In these stories the word Nihon – the Japanese word for country is used. The Shinto creation story of the Japan involves the sun goddess Amaterasu and the brother and sister gods, Izanami and Izanagi. In the Shinto belief system, Izanami and Izanagi are credited with creating the islands of Japan. Shinto gods, or spirits (kami), are also traced back to Izanami (‘she who invites’) and Izanagi (‘he who invites’). Another Shinto god is Ninigi – the grandson of Amaterasu, who was sent to earth (tenson kōrin) to plant rice. The Japanese royal family line is traced back to Ninigi, who is considered to be the great-grandfather of 1st Japanese Emperor Jimmu, and founder of the Yamato Dynasty.

Figure 1.3 Painting by Kobayashi Eitaku – Izanami and Izanagi creating the Japanese islands.
From this early era, Japanese were noted by the Chinese for their involvement in piracy along the coast. The first Chinese word for the Japanese is wa – dwarf. The Chinese referred to the Japanese as Hairy Sea Dwarfs. Ironically, when the Japanese first encountered the Portuguese many centuries later they described the Portuguese as as hairy, smelly, ugly and uncouth. The influence of the Shinto belief, and the influence of the Chinese civilization, contributed to the great emphasis the Japanese place upon cleanliness. For the Japanese, the kami dwell in special places, where the water is clean water and the natural surroundings are beautiful.

Japanese society was also clan based, with Uji or tribes that were ruled by hereditary chiefs. Ancestor worship, again perhaps resulting from Chinese influence, was important. The Yamato state consolidated of the uji system under centralized control. According to the Nihon Shoki, written in the 7th century CE, Prince Shotoku modernized the system of government. The dual role of Japanese emperors as a religious figure, and as a political leader, can be traced back to this time.

The introduction of Buddhism in this era influenced the culture and political system of Japan. People began to adopt some Buddhist practices, but they did not abandon their traditional Shinto beliefs. Shinto is a form of animism, with great emphasis upon nature’s kami (divine spirit). Nature is seen as a productive and beneficent force. The connection to the productive spirit of nature can also be seen in the importance of phallic symbols as representations of fertility. Practitioners of Shinto did not see a conflict with also adopted many of the ideas and beliefs of Buddhism.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea by around 552 CE. The Japanese adopted Tang Chinese Buddhist ideas. As mentioned, Prince Shotoku is given credit for encouraging Buddhism. In essence he created a “constitution” that emphasized reverence for Buddhism, the supremacy of the ruler, a centralized power system and a hierarchy of established ranks for court officials. Ambassadors were sent to China, along with students, and with the Buddhist monks from China they all played a role in the Sinification of Japanese culture. A devotional cult arose around the figure of Prince Shōtoku, as a figure who protected the Japanese people, the Imperial Family, and Buddhism.

Figure 1.4 Prince Shotoku with Two Princes, 1842 drawing.

Following the death of Prince Shotoku, the Taika (great change) Reforms were instituted, sweeping away earlier forms and replacing them with a Chinese style system. The Taika included Confucian inspired land reforms. Also, under the Taika the government was centralized, giving more power to the emperor. The Nihon Shoki and the Kojiki - works of Japanese literature from this era, support the idea of the supremacy and centralized power of the emperor. From the Chinese style of writing, to the type of architecture, to the religious beliefs and Chinese philosophy, Japanese culture borrowed heavily from their powerful neighbors.
Following the time of Prince Shitoku, the Nara era commenced. The Nara era was short, only lasting from 710 to 794 CE. At the beginning of the period the capital was moved to Nara by the Empress Genmei. The city of Nara was modeled on the Chinese capital of Chang’an. In 794, the capital was moved to the city of Kyoto by Emperor Kanmu, and remained the center of Japanese government until 1869. Today Kyoto is an important religious and cultural center. The idea of the divinity of the Japanese emperors may have been an attempt to replicate the Tang Chinese model. Over time the Japanese emperors take on a symbolic and ceremonial role in government – the idea being that because of their divinity an emperor should not get caught up in the daily problems of politics.

Court intrigue, competition between Japanese clans for power and influence, and the growing influence of Buddhism, mark Nara era. A rebellion by the Fujiwara clan was defeated, however this rebellion was a sign of future developments – the beginning of a long line of nobility playing a big role in the history of Japan. Hereditary aristocracy and rural administration were key features of the Japanese system. A census was taken to form the basis for taxation. Overall Japan was an impoverished state, still operating a barter economy. And, although Confucian principles influenced Japanese culture, the Chinese exam system and its meritocratic (status based on merit) institutions were rejected.

The growing influence of Buddhism can be seen in the heavy influx of Buddhist art, although distinctive Japanese styles developed. An example is the Horyuji temple, built 607 CE. The impact of Buddhism on Japanese culture includes the adoption of cremation and the growth of vegetarianism. Another feature of Japanese religious beliefs is that many people practiced both Buddhism and Shinto. Today 70-80% of Japanese are non-religious, but the cultural affinity with Shinto remains strong.

A variety of Buddhist sects were established, including Shingon – one of the few Vajrayana sects to arise in East Asia. Tendai, a form of Mahayana Buddhism, and the Lotus Sutra school were also influential. Buddhism introduced a doctrine of the afterlife to Japan, something that was not found in Shinto. The adoption of a Chinese style writing system in Japan was probably introduced by Buddhist monks. Early writings include the Kojiki – the 1st historical style of document, and the Nihongo Shoki, a longer and more detailed account of Japan. Also, from this era are the Fudoki – accounts of geography, history, and the economy.

The decline of the Tang China model in Japan can be seen in the development of the Shoen System – a reassertion of indigenous Japanese culture. The Shoen were private, tax free estates. Land was concentrated in these private estates, giving the nobility control over most agricultural lands. The court system protected Shoen interests. Dominance of the Shoen is indicative of the decline of central authority and the failing political power of the emperor. The Shoen system made it possible for the Fujiwara clan to assume a level of dominance over the court politics in Kyoto.

Fujiwara clan control occurred during the Heian era of Japan, from 794 up through 1185. Although Chinese influence continued to be important, the Japanese developed their own unique culture and civilization. The Japanese emphasis upon self-cultivation and refinement; Japanese-styled arts with a greater attention to line drawing in paintings that often tell a story; Japanese architecture that is less massive than in many cultures, and where wood is a preferred material rather than stone; and, the
dedication to gardens as sanctuaries for contemplation and as microcosms of the natural world – each is an example of the uniqueness of Japanese civilization.

![Image of Murasaki Shikibu at Ishiyama Temple](image)

**Figure 1.5 Novelist and poet Murasaki Shikibu at Ishiyama Temple, 1880 illustration.**

Any attempt to understand the court culture of Japan in the Heian Period must include *The Pillow Book*. A commentary on court culture, it is a witty and caustic look at lifestyles and behavior. It also is an indication that Japanese ladies were freer to express themselves than in China, and some women were more highly educated than their Chinese counterparts. The Pillow Book was written by Sei Shônagon, who recorded her thoughts while serving as court lady to Empress Consort Teishi in the 10th century. Another major contribution to literature in this era is *The Tale of Genji*, a literary masterpiece written by Lady Murasaki. Murasaki Shikibu was also a calligrapher, painter and a musician. In *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki writes about clothing styles, provides examples of the Japanese aesthetic sensitivities, and composes stories of amorous affairs, where adultery is more acceptable for men than for women.

As the court culture of Japan developed, Chinese influence continued. In the 9th century a new Buddhist doctrine, Pure Land Buddhism, was introduced from China. Pure Land Buddhism places great emphasis upon he doctrine of rebirth and had great appeal to the masses of the population. Chinese influence is also seen in the style of writing that developed in Japan, however the Japanese created their own unique style of Kana scripts. Kana are phonetic symbols. Chinese characters were simplified into a new set of symbols and three kinds of Kana scripts developed. Most Japanese poetry is written in a kana script.

The monastic system that developed with Buddhism, and the Shoen system of tax-free estates, contributed to the creation of private armies by the Japanese nobility. A samurai class of gentlemen warriors arose, enhancing the power of clan leaders. A feudalistic system was created in Japan. Samurai were hereditary nobility. They practiced bushido codes of martial virtues that detailed how a samurai should act and what they should believe. Samurai were vassals of a daimyo – a great lord, and the daimyo were vassals of the Shogun.
The Kamakura period replaced the Fujiwara Era that ended 1185, following the Genpei War – a battle between the Minamoto and Taira clans. A Kamakura Shogunate was established (1185-1333), and Japanese emperors were figureheads within the Japanese political system. In 1274, and then again in 1281, the Mongols attempted to invade Japan. The failed Mongol invasions are in part credited to the development of a Kamikaze – a divine wind that wiped out many of the Mongol ships. Although the invasion failed, it contributed to the decline of the Kamakura. Emperor Go-Daigo overthrew the Kamakura, but his control was brief. He was removed from power in 1336 by Ashikaga Takauji, the first shogun of the Ashikaga clan.

The Ashikaga period was one of political weakness and the loss of central control. Civil war was endemic, and Japanese piracy along coast of China grew so severe that it caused the Ming to move back from coasts. Although the Ashikaga Shogunate was an era of political unrest, and peasant rebellions were common, Japanese culture bloomed. The contemplative and mystical aspects of Zen Buddhism, Shin and Nichiren appealed to the Samurai and were popularized. Japanese architecture of the era attempted to integrate buildings with the natural surroundings. Literature included commentary on the political struggles, the idealization of rural life, and the beauty of nature. The tea ceremony became an important aspect of Japanese cultural identity. And, Noh drama – a type of precision theatrical dance performance inspired by Zen, became a popular form of entertainment.

It was also during the Ashikaga Shogunate that Europeans first arrived in Japan. The port city of Nagasaki gained importance as the Portuguese became intermediaries in trade with China, and introduced Christianity into Japan. The Portuguese were aggressive in proselytizing Catholicism, and their presence was disruptive. Portuguese traders lost their right to trade in Japan, and were replaced by the Dutch in the early 1600s, however the Dutch were prohibited from moving freely in Japan, and were limited to trading only at the city Nagasaki. The future ability of the Japanese to resist absorption into a European empire can be traced back to the decisions of this era.

This unit also includes information about Korean civilization. Among other things, when reading about the Koreans concentrate upon who they were, the nature of their environment, their relationship with China and the connection with Japan.
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