

Ancient Japan



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Geography

Much of Japan's history has been shaped by its geography. Japan is naturally **isolated** (not in contact with other countries or cultures) from the rest of the world. This is because it is an **archipelago**, or a collection of **islands** (bodies of land that are surrounded on all sides by water). In fact, Japan is made up of more than 4,000 islands.



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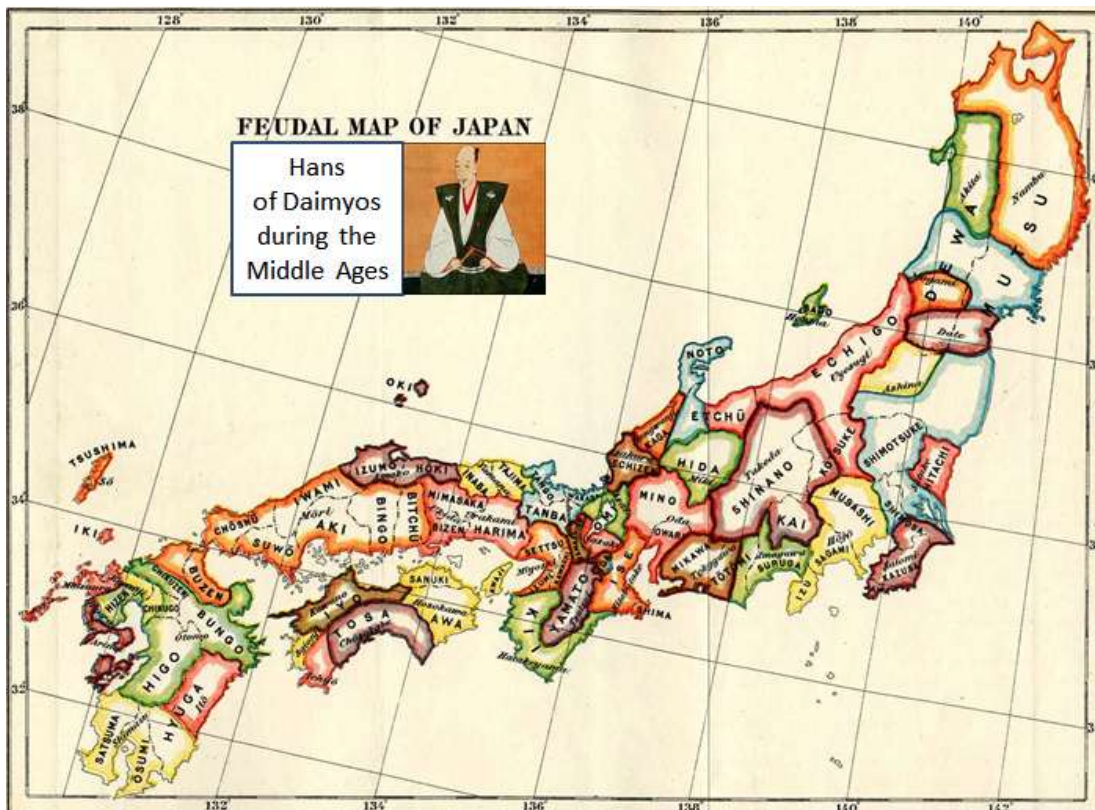
Question: Based on the map above, what things do you think will have an influence on Japan?

Although Japan is naturally isolated from the rest of the world, it is located only about 500 miles to the east of China. Because the sun rises in the east, China called Japan the “**land of the rising sun**”. Although Japan developed its own unique culture, the Japanese studied Chinese culture. The link between Chinese and Japanese cultures can be seen in the similarities between their languages and writing systems. Ancient Japanese culture will be discussed in more detail later.

Since Japan is small and made up of many islands, the amount of actual land is limited. Most of the land is also extremely mountainous and is not **arable** (good for growing food). Only about 20% of the land in Japan is suitable for farming. For this reason the Japanese depended heavily on rice and the sea for their food. Since farmable land was so limited in Japan, it was extremely valuable. The more land a **clan** had, the more powerful they were.

Question: Because land was so valuable, what do you think people might have done to get more of it?

Since the ownership of land was so important, clans would often go to war with each other over it. The constant fighting between clans for control of land threw Japan into a constant state of chaos and many **civil wars** (fighting between people in the same country) occurred. Eventually military leaders used force to put an end to the civil wars and took control. These military leaders were known as **shoguns**. Over time, the rule of these shoguns slowly faded away and the land was broken up into separate kingdoms. This marked the beginning of feudalism in Japan.

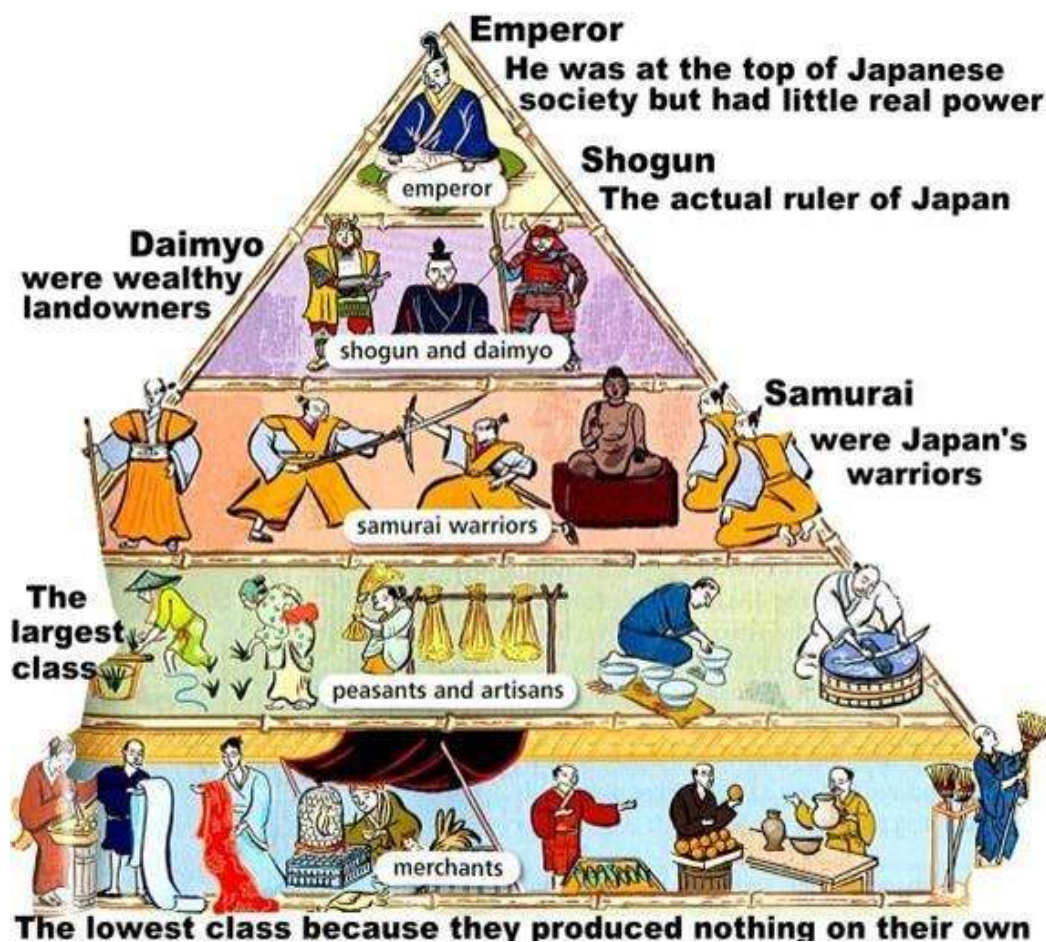


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Japanese Feudalism

Feudalism was basically a form of government in which people exchanged land for protection. Within the independent kingdoms of Japan, there were different positions. Each position was loyal to the position above them and offered a service for the kingdom. This is known as a **social hierarchy**.

Although there was an emperor, he was basically a **figurehead** (a leader that does not have any real power). The real power was held by the shogun because he had control over the entire military. A **daimyo**, or military lord, ruled their lands as independent kingdoms, but were loyal to the emperor and shogun. In order to protect their kingdoms, the daimyo hired **samurai** warriors. The samurai warriors were each given their own portion of land in exchange for their protection. Since the samurai were busy fighting to defend the land, peasants were used to farm the land.



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Question: Of the positions in this social hierarchy, which do you think is the most important? Do you think the feudalism was fair?

Although feudalism offered more security and protection for people, kingdoms were constantly going to war with each other trying to get more land. Despite the constant fighting, Japan's economy continued to grow.

Beliefs of Japan

Buddhism started in India and diffused (spread) to Southeast Asia and East Asia, including China and Japan. Buddhism teaches that desire (wanting things) is the cause of human suffering. It teaches that in order to end your suffering you have to get rid of your desires. There is no worshipping of a deity (or god) in Buddhism. Instead, it places great focus on man's actions, the ability to think clearly, and how to live in harmony with other forces in the universe. Buddhism also teaches reincarnation, or the idea that you will be reborn as something or someone else after you die. What, or whom, you come back as is determined by how you lived your life.



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Buddhism inspired many Japanese temples, paintings, poems and plays. **Zen Buddhism**, a form of Buddhism that focuses on meditation (focusing and concentrating for a period of time) was used to train the samurai warriors. Through mediation they learned how to control their bodies and their movements, making them better warriors.

The traditional religion of Japan was considered to be **Shintoism (Shinto)**. It began in Japan and is still practiced today. Shintoism teaches that everything in nature has kami. **Kami** is a nature god. Rocks, mountains, animals, the sun, humans and everything else in nature has kami. When a person dies, their kami becomes one with nature. They build shrines to kami, called a **Torii**, and perform ceremonies in which they ask kami to bless them. Shinto shrines were typically built near sacred natural features that were considered by the Japanese to be beautiful.

Since both major belief systems of Japan (Buddhism and Shintoism) focused on different needs in their lives, many Japanese followed the teachings of both. Both Shintoism and Buddhism heavily influenced the art, architecture and literature of Japan.



Torii, shrine of Shintoism.

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Japanese Culture and Achievements

Calligraphy

This is a form of art in which letters are written artistically. Great discipline is needed to master this art form. Calligraphy highlights the link between Japanese and Chinese cultures because it was done in both countries.



Origami

This is a Japanese form of art which paper is folded into decorative shapes. To the left you can see paper that has been folded into the shape of a bird.

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Art

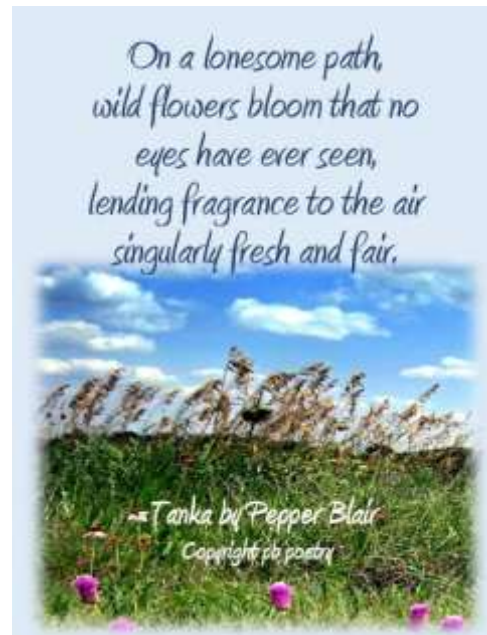
The Japanese were known for creating beautiful paintings of landscapes and other things in nature using watercolors and ink. The influence of Shintoism can be seen in much of their artwork.

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Tanka Poetry

This is a form of Japanese poetry that is typically about nature or is romantic. It was often written with a tiny brush with small bristles. Japanese nobles use to pride themselves on their tanka poetry writing skills. To the right is an example of a tanka poem.

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Furniture

Left is an example of Japanese furniture. The Japanese often used lacquer, a glossy and protective coating, to enhance the beauty of their furniture.

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Japan traded the items listed above as well as pottery, paper, textiles, swords, books and plays (largely dealing with warriors in battle), and porcelain. Its trade throughout Asia spread Japanese influence throughout the world and also made many Japanese nobles, merchants and artisans very wealthy.



Tea Drinking Ceremonies

Tea was (and still is) a very popular drink in Japan. Tea drinking ceremonies became a popular event in Japan because of this. Nobles often thought the quality of the tea they served was a reflection of their wealth and status. To the left is a picture of a tea drinking ceremony.

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