

# JAPANESE CULTURE

## LOCATION

Japan is an East Asian country formed by four large islands and many small ones. From north to south the main four islands are Hokkaido, Honshu (the largest island, where the capital and most major cities are located), Shikoku, and Kyushu. Today, Japan has a population of more than 124 million inhabitants.

## HISTORY

According to legend Japan was founded in 660 BC by the emperor Jimmu, a descendant of the sun goddess. In the first centuries the country was occupied by clans or tribal kingdoms ruled by priest-chiefs. The Yamato clan became the most powerful of these and opened the way to the unification of Japan. The Yamato priest-chief became the first emperor, and a capital city was created in Kyoto.

In the 9th century AD, the Minamoto family became the rulers of Japan. Their leader, Yoritomo, took the title of 'shogun' and established his capital in Kamakura. His military dictatorship lasted 700 years.

The first European contact with Japan was made by Portuguese sailors in 1542. This began trade with the West. Christianity was introduced by Saint Francis Xavier, who reached Japan in 1549.

In the late 16th century three warriors, Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu, established military control over the whole country. They built their palaces in Yedo (later Tokyo) and set up an efficient but repressive government. Years of peace and stability followed, but Japan became isolated and cut their trading ties with the West. Only Holland was allowed to continue trading with Japan.

The society was divided into a strict hierarchy. At the top were the daimyo, and then the next most powerful were the samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants. Trade expanded, and money and credit were introduced; cities grew and the merchants became wealthy and powerful.

In 1867 the shogunate collapsed. After brief fighting, the boy emperor Meiji came to power, and the imperial capital was transferred from Kyoto to Tokyo. Japan's new rulers realized quickly that they could not isolate themselves from other countries anymore. Japan began trading with the West again and it became a great military and industrial power.

In 1894, Japan went to war with China. After their victory Japan's power and territory increased greatly. In 1904 Japan went to war with Russia which increased Japan's power as well. In 1910 Japan officially took control of Korea. During World War I the Japanese supported the German interests and received in return the German-owned islands in the Pacific. When World War II began in 1939, Japan joined forces with Germany and Italy, and sent troops to Indochina. Japan then attacked the United States and Great Britain. During the war, Japan lost its territory to the Allies island by island; warfare reached Japan itself with great bombing raids. Finally in 1945 the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki; soon after, Japan surrendered.

Since 1945 Japan has grown to have one of the most powerful economies in the world. It has become wealthy mostly due to the technology and heavy machinery industry, of which it has been a leader for many years.

## RELIGION

The main religions in Japan are Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto (which literally means: "the way of the gods") is the native religion of the Japanese people, and is deeply rooted in the Japanese tradition. Shinto is based on the worship of nature and ancestors. The essence of Shintoism is "kami", the divine spirit found in all things in heaven and earth. People, as well as all living things, are essentially the children of the kami.

The Shinto faith has many gods- the most popular is the Sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami. It is thought that all humans are fundamentally good, and that all evil is caused by evil spirits. The purpose of most of the rituals is to avoid evil spirits by purification, offerings and prayers. The places of worship, called 'shrines', are the homes of the kami. The shrines are marked by Torii, special gateways for the gods. When entering these Torii, visitors leave the finite world and enter the infinite world of the gods. During a visit, a believer purifies himself and then returns to the finite world through the Torii. Shinto priests perform the rituals of purification.

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, some conflicts arose between the two religions. Followers of Buddhism believe that human life is full of suffering due to earthly desires, illness, death and loss. By getting rid of desires and attachments, one can achieve a higher state of enlightenment (Nirvana) and escape suffering known on earth. The two religions soon were able to co-exist peacefully and even complemented each other.

In Japan today many people follow both religions. They seek support in Shinto and visit shrines in order to pray for good luck and to avoid evil spirits. Birth and wedding ceremonies are often celebrated in the Shinto tradition. Death, however, is considered evil in Shinto; therefore funerals are normally carried out in the Buddhist tradition in temples.

## **SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS**

By the late 19th century Japan was completely industrialized. The textile industry was the most important for the country then. Japan's economy collapsed after its defeat in World War II, and its fleet of ships, one of the world's largest in the 1930s, was almost totally destroyed. In the late 1950s, however, the nation was reborn as a major industrial power. By the 1970s it had become the most industrialized country in Asia and the second greatest economic power in the world after the United States.

In the 1950s and 1960s the production of heavy machinery expanded. Japan is one of the world's leading producers of machinery, motor vehicles, and steel, and by the 1980s it had become a leading exporter of high technology products, including electrical and electronic appliances, and computer hardware.

Agriculture, once a main occupation is now less important to the Japanese economy. In the early 1990s it employed only about 8% of the total population. Land is scarce and intensively farmed, with rice and other grains as the main crops. Fishing is very developed; the yearly catch is one of the largest in the world.

The Japanese educational system is one of the most comprehensive and effective in the world. Children have to go to school for nine years at least, and most Japanese young people stay in school much longer.

## **CULTURE**

Japan has preserved its independence and culture while it was isolated for so many years. Today Japan is a society that cherishes its ancient cultural traditions but at the same time is a highly modern industrialized nation. On one hand, traditional values in education, family honor and ancestry worship are still very present in people's lives today. On the other hand, urbanization and industrialization have deeply changed present society. Japanese values have also changed as generations are born and raised in the city rather than brought up in the villages.

The role of women in society is also gradually changing. Important women such as the socialist leader Doi Takako and Princess Masako (the Harvard-educated diplomat who married Crown Prince Naruhito in 1993) have helped make professional women more acceptable. Women now account for about two-fifths of the workforce, but most occupy temporary or part-time positions. Women are still expected to run the household and raise the children, while the men devote themselves to their work. Japanese divorce rates are rising but remain low compared to the West standards. The Japanese have a strong family structure, which forms the basis of the social system.

