

4

Feudal Powers in Japan

TERMS & NAMES

- Shinto
- samurai
- Bushido
- shogun

MAIN IDEA

Japanese civilization was shaped by cultural borrowing from China and the rise of feudalism and military rulers.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

An openness to adapting innovations from other cultures is still a hallmark of Japanese society.

SETTING THE STAGE Japan lies east of China, in the direction of the sunrise. In fact, the name *Japan* comes from the Chinese words *ri ben*, which mean “origin of the sun.” From ancient times, Japan had borrowed ideas, institutions, and culture from the Chinese people. Japan’s genius was its ability to take in new ideas and make them uniquely its own.

The Growth of Japanese Civilization

Japan’s island location shaped the growth of its civilization. About 120 miles of water separate Japan from its closest neighbor, Korea, and 500 miles separate Japan from China. In their early history, the Japanese were close enough to feel the civilizing effect of China. Yet they were far enough away to be reasonably safe from invasion.

The Geography of Japan About 4,000 islands make up the Japanese archipelago (AHR·kuh·PEHL·uh·GOH), or island group, that extends in an arc about 1,200 miles long. If Japan were superimposed over eastern North America, the islands would extend from Montreal, Canada, to Tallahassee, Florida. Most Japanese people have always lived on the four largest islands: Hokkaido (hah·KY·doh), Honshu (HAHN·shoo), Shikoku (shih·KOH·koo), and Kyushu (kee·OO·shoo).

Japan’s geography has both advantages and disadvantages. Southern Japan enjoys a mild climate with plenty of rainfall. The country is so mountainous, however, that only 15 percent of the land is suitable for farming. Natural resources such as coal, oil, and iron are in short supply. During the late summer and early fall, strong tropical storms called typhoons occur. Earthquakes and tidal waves are also threats.

Early Japan The first historic mention of Japan comes from Chinese writings of about A.D. 300. Japan at this time was not a united country. Instead, hundreds of clans controlled their own territories.

Each clan worshiped its own nature gods and goddesses. In different parts of Japan, people honored thousands of local deities. Their varied customs and beliefs eventually combined to form Japan’s earliest religion. In later times, this religion was called **Shinto** (SHIHN·toh), meaning “way of the gods.”

Shinto had no complex rituals or philosophy. Instead, it was based on respect for the forces of

Vocabulary

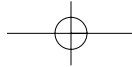
typhoons: tropical cyclones that occur in the western Pacific or Indian oceans. (Cyclones in the Atlantic and Caribbean are called hurricanes.)



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER:

Interpreting Maps

1. **Location** How far is the southern end of Japan from Korea? from China?
2. **Location** On what island did Japan’s major cities develop?



nature and on the worship of ancestors. Shinto worshipers believed in *kami*, divine spirits that dwelled in nature. Any unusual or especially beautiful tree, rock, waterfall, or mountain was considered the home of a *kami*.

CONNECT to TODAY



The Rising Sun

The Japanese flag depicts a red sun on a white ground. According to the Japanese origin myth, the people are descended from Amaterasu, the sun goddess. When she sent her grandson to Earth, she gave him three sacred objects. One was a bronze mirror, a symbol of the sun. The other two were an iron sword and a jeweled necklace.

The emperors of Japan traced their descent from the sun goddess. All three of Amaterasu's sacred gifts remain the symbols of imperial authority today.

The Yamato Emperors By the fifth century, the Yamato clan had established itself as the leading clan. The Yamato claimed to be descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu. By the seventh century, the Yamato chiefs called themselves the emperors of Japan. The early emperors did not control the entire country, or even much of it, but the Japanese gradually accepted the idea of an emperor.

Although many of the Yamato rulers lacked real power, the dynasty was never overthrown. When rival clans fought for power, the winning clan claimed control of the emperor and then ruled in the emperor's name. Japan had an emperor who reigned as a figurehead and a power behind the throne who actually ruled. This dual structure became an enduring characteristic of Japanese government.

The Japanese Adapt Chinese Ideas

About the year 500, the Japanese began to have more contact with mainland Asia. They were soon influenced by Chinese ideas and customs, which they first learned about from Korean travelers. During the sixth century, many Koreans migrated to Japan, bringing Chinese influences with them.

Buddhism in Japan One of the most important influences brought by Korean travelers was Buddhism. In the mid-700s, the Japanese imperial court officially accepted Buddhism in Japan. By the eighth or ninth century, Buddhist ideas and worship had spread through Japanese society. Buddhism was more complex than Shintoism. Its teachings, as well as the beauty and mystery of its ceremonies and art, impressed many Japanese. The Japanese, however, did not give up their Shinto beliefs. Some Buddhist rituals became Shinto rituals, and some Shinto gods and goddesses were worshipped in Buddhist temples.

Cultural Borrowing from China Interest in Buddhist ideas at the Japanese court soon grew into an enthusiasm for all things Chinese. The most influential convert to Buddhism was Prince Shotoku (shoh-toh-ku), who served as regent for his aunt, the empress Suiko. In 607, Prince Shotoku sent the first of three missions to Tang China. His people studied Chinese civilization firsthand. Some 600 scholars, painters, musicians, and monks traveled on each mission. Over the next 200 years, while the Tang Dynasty was at its height, the Japanese sent many such groups to learn about Chinese ways.

The Japanese adopted the Chinese system of writing, which first reached Japan through the Koreans. Japanese artists painted landscapes in the Chinese manner. The Japanese even followed Chinese styles in the simple arts of everyday living, such as cooking, gardening, drinking tea, and hairdressing.

For a time, Japan even modeled its government on China's. Prince Shotoku planned a strong central government like that of the Tang rulers. Shotoku also tried to introduce China's examination system. However, this attempt failed. In Japan, noble birth remained the key to winning a powerful position. Unlike China, Japan continued to be a country where a few great families held power.

The Japanese adapted Chinese ways to suit their own needs. While they learned much, they still retained their own traditions. Eventually, the Japanese imperial court decided it had learned enough from Tang China. In the late ninth century, it ended formal missions to the Tang empire, which had fallen into decline. Although Chinese cultural influence would remain strong in Japan, Japan's own culture was about to bloom.

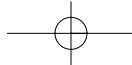
Vocabulary

regent: one who rules on behalf of another.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

A. Synthesizing

How did Chinese culture spread to Japan?



Life in the Heian Period

In 794, the imperial court moved its capital from Nara to Heian (HAY-ahn), the modern Kyoto (kee-OH-toh). Many of Japan's noble families also moved to Heian. Among the upper class in Heian, a highly refined court society arose. This era in Japanese history, from 794 to 1185, is called the Heian period.

Gentlemen and ladies of the court filled their days with elaborate ritual and artistic pursuits. Rules dictated every aspect of court life—the length of swords, the color of official robes, forms of address, even the number of skirts a woman wore. Etiquette was also extremely important. Loud laughter or mismatched clothing, for instance, caused deep embarrassment. Noble women wore their hair down to their ankles, blackened their teeth with cosmetics, and dyed their clothing to match the seasons. Everyone at court was expected to write poetry and to paint. Japanese aristocrats looked down on the common people, who could not share in court refinement.

The best accounts of Heian society come from the diaries, essays, and novels written by the women of the court. Two of the finest writers of the period were Lady Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon. Lady Murasaki's 11th-century masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*, is an account of the life of a prince in the imperial court. This long prose narrative, full of detail and emotion, is considered the world's first novel. Sei Shonagon wrote vivid sketches of court life in her diary, called *The Pillow Book*. Here she lists some things that gave her pleasure:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

I greatly enjoy [conversing with] someone who is pleased with himself and who has a self-confident look, especially if he is a man. It is amusing to observe him as he alertly waits for my next repartee; but it is also interesting if he tries to put me off my guard by adopting an air of calm indifference as if there were not a thought in his head.

I realize that it is very sinful of me, but I cannot help being pleased when someone I dislike has a bad experience.

Entering the Empress's room and finding that ladies-in-waiting are crowded around her in a tight group, I go next to a pillar which is some distance from where she is sitting. What a delight it is when Her Majesty summons me to her side so that all the others have to make way!

SEI SHONAGON, *The Pillow Book*

Feudalism Erodes Imperial Authority

During the Heian period, Japan's central government was relatively strong. However, this strength was soon to be challenged by great landowners and clan chiefs who acted more and more as independent local rulers.

Decline of Central Power For most of the Heian period, the rich Fujiwara family held the real power in Japan. Members of this family held many influential posts. By about the middle of the 11th century, however, the power of the central government and the Fujiwaras began to slip. Court families grew more interested in luxury and artistic pursuits than in governing.

Vocabulary

etiquette: the code governing correct behavior and appearance.

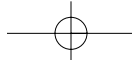
THINK THROUGH HISTORY

B. Making Inferences

Based on the excerpt from Shonagon's book, what personality characteristics does the writer admire?



One maid combs her lady's hair while another reads to her in this print depicting a scene from *The Tale of Genji*.



Samurai Warrior News

Latest Uniforms



This suit of armor is made of steel, wood, bronze, deerskin, and bear pelts.

A samurai's armor consists of leather shin guards and thigh guards, billowing knickers, a kimono, metal-cased shoulder guards, a chest protector, an iron collar, a cotton skullcap, an iron facemask, and a visored helmet with leather horns.

Don't Leave Home Without It

A proper samurai would rather die than part with his sword. No wonder.

Extraordinary craftsmanship goes into each weapon. Swordsmiths prepare themselves by undergoing purification rites.

Then they work dressed all in white. To give the blade superior strength, the swordsmith uses clay to protect the broad back of the sword from the hammering, heating, and cooling that produces the razor-sharp edge. For beauty, swordsmiths add inlaid hilt guards, scabbard ornaments, and handgrips made of sharkskin.



Lady Tomoe Gozen, a famous female warrior of the 1180s, enters bravely into battle.

Samurai vs. Knights

A class of elite warriors similar to the samurai is forming in Europe. Here is how the two groups compare.

Japanese Samurai

- Live by code of honor called Bushido, which values bravery and loyalty to their lord above all else. Will commit ritual suicide rather than face defeat or dishonor.
- Fight for lord in exchange for an allowance.
- Expect women to live up to same values of honor and courage.
- Enter into battle with iron and leather armor, swords, and bows and arrows.

European Knights

- Live by code of honor called chivalry, which values bravery and loyalty to heavenly God, earthly lord, and chosen lady. Code also demands that knights show humility.
- Fight for lord in exchange for land.
- Regard women as weak creatures to be idolized and defended.
- Enter into battle with chain mail or plate armor, broadsword, and lance.

The Zen Way

The Zen school of Buddhism is becoming popular among the samurai class. The Zen emphasis on spirituality through self-discipline and meditation appeals to this group of warriors.

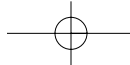
Connect to History

Making Inferences What qualities did samurai most prize?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK PAGE R16

Connect to Today

Research Find out what happened to the samurai in Japan's later history. How long did this warrior class last? Did it change in any way?



Large landowners living away from the capital set up private armies. The countryside became lawless and dangerous. Armed soldiers on horseback preyed on farmers and travelers, and pirates took control of the seas. For safety, farmers and small landowners traded parts of their land to strong warlords in exchange for protection. With more land, the lords gained more power. This marked the beginning of a feudal system of localized rule like that of ancient China and medieval Europe.

Samurai Warriors Since wars between rival lords were commonplace, each lord surrounded himself with a bodyguard of loyal warriors called **samurai** (SAM·uh·RY). (*Samurai* means “one who serves.”) Samurai lived according to a demanding code of behavior. In later centuries, this code was called **Bushido** (BUSH·ih·DOH), or “the way of the warrior.” A samurai was expected to show reckless courage, reverence for the gods, fairness, and generosity toward those weaker than himself. Dying an honorable death was judged more important than living a long life.

The Kamakura Shogunate During the late 1100s, Japan’s two most powerful clans fought for power. After almost 30 years of war, the Minamoto family emerged victorious. In 1192, the emperor gave a Minamoto leader named Yoritomo the title of **shogun**, meaning “supreme general of the emperor’s army.” In effect, the shogun had the powers of a military dictator. Officials, judges, taxes, armies, roads—all were under his authority.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

C. Drawing Conclusions

What advantages were there to preserving the imperial dynasty, even if it lacked real power?

Following tradition, the emperor still reigned from Kyoto. (Kyoto was rebuilt on the ruins of Heian, which had been destroyed in war.) However, the real center of power was at the shogun’s military headquarters at Kamakura (KAHM·uh·KUR·uh). The 1200s are known in Japanese history as the Kamakura shogunate. The pattern of government in which shoguns ruled through puppet emperors lasted in Japan until 1868.

Under the early shoguns, the local lords still held great power. A lord who loyally served the shogun received almost a free hand in ruling his own province. At the same time, the shoguns strengthened their own control by assigning a military governor to each province. These governors, called daimyo (DY·mee·OH), or “great lords,” were responsible for maintaining peace and order. Over time, the daimyo came to exercise great power, as you will see in Chapter 19.

The Kamakura shoguns were strong enough to turn back the two naval invasions sent by the great Mongol ruler Kublai Khan in 1274 and 1281. However, the Japanese victory over the Mongols drained the shoguns’ treasury. Loyal samurai were bitter when the government failed to pay them. The Kamakura shoguns lost prestige and power. Samurai attached themselves more closely to their local lords, who soon fought one another as fiercely as they had fought the Mongols.

Although feudal Japan no longer courted contact with China, it would continue to absorb Chinese ideas and shape them into the Japanese way. As you will read in Section 5, China’s culture also influenced Korea and certain kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

Section 4 Assessment

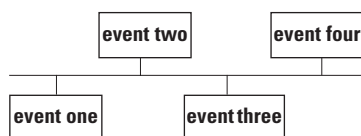
1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Shinto
- samurai
- Bushido
- shogun

2. TAKING NOTES

Create a time line showing the main periods and events in Japanese history between the years 300 and 1300.



What event would you consider the most important turning point in Japan’s early history? Why?

3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Was the rise of the shogun beneficial for Japan overall? Explain.

THINK ABOUT

- problems developing in feudal Japan
- powers of the shogun
- achievements under the Kamakura shoguns

4. THEME ACTIVITY

Religious and Ethical Systems

Work with a small group to create a short play, set in the 600s, about a Japanese family’s decision to adopt Buddhism. Consider what changes occurring in Japanese society might make individuals more receptive to beliefs that came from China. Indicate how the family blends Buddhism with its traditional Shinto beliefs.