



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ ASIA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Japan has an area of 145,882 square miles (377,835 square kilometers), making it just smaller than Montana. It consists of four main islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. These are surrounded by more than 4,000 smaller islands. Japan's terrain is largely mountainous, and most large cities are positioned along the coasts. The nation has a few active and many dormant volcanoes. Mount Fuji, located west of Tokyo on Honshu Island, is Japan's highest point, with an elevation of 12,388 feet (3,776 meters). Mild earthquakes are fairly common, and more destructive earthquakes hit every few years.

The nation experiences all four seasons. On Hokkaido and in northern Honshu, winters can be bitterly cold. To the south, a more tropical climate prevails. Otherwise, the climate is temperate with warm, humid summers and mild winters. The western side of the islands is usually colder than the eastern (Pacific) side. The islands are subject to typhoons in August and September.

History. Japan is known historically as the Land of the Rising Sun, as symbolized by its flag. Beginning with Emperor Jimmu in 600 B.C. (according to legend), Japan has had a line of emperors that continues to the present. From the 12th century until the late 19th century, however, feudal lords, or *Shoguns*, held political control. These Shoguns expelled all foreigners in the 17th century on the suspicion they were spies for European armies. Japan adopted a policy of strict isolation and remained closed to nearly all foreign trade until 1853, when Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed into the harbor of Edo (now Tokyo) to demand a treaty. The Shoguns lost power in the 1860s and the emperor again took control. The current emperor, Akihito, took the throne in 1989. Akihito's father,

Hirohito, was emperor from 1926 to 1989. Hirohito's reign was called *Showa*, which means "enlightened peace," and the deceased Hirohito is now properly referred to as Emperor Showa. Akihito's reign is called *Heisei*, meaning "achievement of universal peace."

Japan established itself as a regional power through military victories against China (1895) and Russia (1905). Involvement in World War I brought Japan enhanced global influence, and the Treaty of Versailles expanded its land holdings. The postwar years brought prosperity to the rapidly changing nation. It soon began to exercise considerable influence in Asia and subsequently invaded Manchuria and much of China. On 7 December 1941, Japan launched a successful air attack on U.S. naval forces at Pearl Harbor. Its military machine swiftly encircled most of Southeast Asia. But in 1943, the tide of the war turned against Japan. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945. Complete collapse of the empire and surrender ensued. A military occupation, chiefly by U.S. forces, lasted from 1945 to 1952. In 1947, Japan adopted a new constitution under U.S. direction, renouncing war, granting basic human rights, and declaring Japan a democracy. The United States and Japan have since maintained close political and military ties despite periodic trade tensions.

Japan's postwar focus was on economic development, and the country experienced rapid change and modernization. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) generally controlled politics after World War II, although scandals in the 1980s and 1990s led to high-level resignations and splinter parties. The LDP was briefly the opposition party in 1995, but it regained power in 1996. Facing severe economic woes in 1998, the nation slid

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into recession. The currency nearly collapsed under the strain of bad bank loans and in conjunction with a wider Asian economic crisis. By 1999, the LDP had to form a coalition government to have the votes necessary to pass legislation.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of the LDP came to office in April 2001 after the previous prime minister was ousted on charges of corruption and poor leadership. Koizumi's priorities have been to stabilize the economy, attack corruption, and restore Japanese confidence in the political system. He has encouraged citizens to be patient during the long process of economic recovery.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Japan's population of 127.4 million is growing at a rate of only 0.05 percent annually. Japan is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. About 80 percent of all people live in urban areas. Almost half are concentrated in three major metropolitan areas: Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. As a result, Japan suffers from a high cost of living and a lack of affordable urban housing.

Japan is 99 percent ethnic Japanese, with a small number of Koreans (about 0.5 percent) and Chinese. The Ainu (an indigenous ethnic group whose habitation of Japan predates the migration of ethnic Japanese) live mostly on Hokkaido. All non-Japanese must register annually with the police and do not have full citizenship rights.

Language. Japanese is the official language. Although spoken Japanese is not closely related to spoken Chinese, the written language (*kanji*) is related to Chinese ideographs (characters), which were adopted in ancient times. The Japanese also use two phonetic alphabets (*hiragana* and *katakana*) simplified from these characters. A third phonetic alphabet (*romaji*) uses Roman letters. People are losing their ability to write the complex *kanji* as they rely more on computers. Japanese can be written vertically from right to left, or horizontally from left to right. English is taught in all secondary schools and is often used in business.

Japanese place great worth on nonverbal language and communication. For example, much can be said with a proper bow. In fact, one is often expected to sense another person's feelings on a subject without verbal communication. Some Westerners misinterpret this as a desire to be vague or incomplete. The Japanese may consider a person's inability to interpret feelings as insensitivity.

Religion. Traditionally, most Japanese practiced a combination of Buddhism and Shinto. Shinto has no recognized founder or central scripture but is based on ancient mythology. It stresses a person's relationship to nature and its many gods. All Japanese emperors are considered literal descendants of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. Shinto was important historically in ordering social values, as illustrated by the Code of the Warrior (*Bushido*), which stressed honor, courage, politeness, and reserve. Shinto principles of ancestor veneration, ritual purity, and a respect for nature's beauty are all obvious in Japanese culture. Many households observe some ceremonies of both Shinto and Buddhism, such as Shinto marriages and Buddhist funerals, and most have small Shinto shrines in their homes. For most, however, this is done more out of respect for social tradition than out of religious conviction. About 1 percent of the population is Christian.

General Attitudes. Japanese society is group oriented. Loyalty to the group (business, club, etc.) and to one's superiors is essential and takes precedence over personal feelings. In busi-

ness, loyalty, devotion, and cooperation are valued over aggressiveness. Companies traditionally provide lifetime employment to the "salary-man" (full-time male professional), who devotes long hours of work to the company. This tradition has been undermined by the economic decline but is still a pillar of society. Devotion to the group reaches all ages; even members of a youth baseball team will place the team's interests above their own.

Politeness is extremely important; a direct "no" is seldom given, but a phrase like "I will think about it" can mean "no." Also out of politeness, a "yes" may be given quickly, even though it only means the person is listening or understands the speaker's request. The Japanese feel an obligation to return favors and gifts. They honor age and tradition. "Losing face," or being shamed in public, is very undesirable. *Gaman* (enduring patience) is a respected trait that carries one through personal hardship.

Even as many traditions remain strong, Japan's rising generation is revising society's views and reforming negative aspects of family relations, politics, and male and female roles. By contrast, greater economic insecurity, less filial piety (devotion to parents), lower moral standards, and consumerism have all damaged social cohesion and have led many Japanese to question the country's future course.

Personal Appearance. Conformity, even in appearance, is a characteristic of the Japanese. The general rule is to act similar to, or in harmony with, the crowd. Businessmen wear suits and ties in public. Women wear dresses or slacks. Proper dress is necessary for certain occasions. Conformity takes on a different meaning for the youth, however. They wear the latest fashions (U.S. and European) and colors, as long as these fashions are popular. Traditional clothing, called a *kimono* or *wafuku*, is worn for social events or special occasions. The *kimono* is a long robe with long sleeves, wrapped with a special sash (*obi*). The designs in the fabric can be simple or elaborate.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. A bow is the traditional greeting between Japanese. Persons wishing to show respect or humility bow lower than the other person. The Japanese shake hands with Westerners. While some appreciate it when Westerners bow, others do not, especially when the two people are not acquainted. Therefore, a handshake is most appropriate for foreign visitors. The Japanese are formal, and titles are important in introductions. A family name is used with the suffix *-san*. Mr. Ogushi in North America is called *Ogushi-san* in Japan. The use of first names is reserved for family and friends. Between business representatives, the exchange of business cards (offered and accepted with both hands) most often accompanies a greeting.

The greetings Japanese use depend on the relationship. A worker might greet a superior with *Ohayougozaimasu* (Good morning), but he or she would greet a customer with *Irasshaimase* (Welcome). When business representatives meet for the first time, they may tell each other *Hajimemashite* (Nice to meet you). *Konnichiwa* ("Hello" or "Good day") is a standard greeting. *Ohayou* (an informal "Good morning") and *Genki?* (How's it going?) are common casual greetings among the youth. *Yaa* (Hi) generally is used among men.

Gestures. Japanese regard yawning in public as impolite. A person should sit up straight with both feet on the floor. Legs may be crossed at the knee or ankle, but placing an ankle over a knee is considered improper. One beckons by waving all fingers with the palm down. It is polite to point with the entire

hand rather than the index finger. Shaking one hand from side to side with the palm forward means “no.” People refer to themselves by pointing an index finger at their nose. Laughter does not necessarily signify joy or amusement; it can also be a sign of embarrassment. Chewing gum in public is generally considered ill-mannered. One covers one’s mouth when using a toothpick.

Visiting. Visits usually are arranged in advance; spontaneous visits between neighbors are uncommon in urban areas. The Japanese remove shoes before stepping into a home. There is usually a small hallway (*genkan*) between the door and living area where one stands to remove the shoes and place them together pointing toward the outdoors—or in a closet or on a shelf in the *genkan*. People take off their coats before stepping into the *genkan*. Slippers often are worn inside but not in rooms with straw-mat floors (*tatami*). Japanese traditionally emphasize modesty and reserve. Guests usually are offered the most comfortable seat. When offered a meal, they express slight hesitation before accepting it. Light refreshments are accepted graciously. The Japanese deny compliments out of modesty. Guests avoid excessive compliments on items in the home because they would embarrass the hosts.

Guests customarily take a gift (usually fruit or cakes) to their hosts. People give and accept gifts with both hands and a slight bow. Some, especially the elderly, may consider it impolite to open the gift right away. Gift-giving is extremely important, especially in business, because a gift says a great deal about the giver’s relationship to, and respect for, the recipient. Food and drink are the most common gifts, as other kinds of gifts would quickly clutter small homes. Gift-giving reaches its peak twice a year, in midsummer and at year’s end. During these seasons, giving the right-priced present (the price is considered more important than the item) to all the right people (family, friends, officials, and business contacts) sets the tone for the rest of the year.

Eating. Although many young Japanese eat while walking in public, it is generally considered bad manners for adults to do so. Therefore, snack foods sold at street stands are eaten at the stand. In a traditional meal, the Japanese typically eat from their bowl while holding it at chest level, instead of bending down to the table. People eat most meals with chopsticks (*hashi*) but generally eat Western food with utensils. U.S. fast food is popular among the youth. The main meal is eaten in the evening. Because many men work late hours, they may eat dinner in office-building restaurants or on the way home.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The family is the foundation of Japanese society and is bound together by a strong sense of reputation, obligation, and responsibility. A person’s actions reflect on the family. Affection, spending time together, and spousal compatibility are less important than in other cultures. While the father is the head of the home, the mother is responsible for managing household affairs and raising children. Traditionally, it was considered improper for a woman to have a job. Today, women comprise 40 percent of the workforce. While many women today work outside the home, their positions mostly are inferior to those held by men. Divorce and single parenthood are rare compared to other nations, due mostly to economic pressures and negative stigmas associated with both. Families generally have fewer than three children. In cities, families live in high-rise apartments or small homes. Larger homes are found in less-crowded areas.

Dating and Marriage. Youth in Japan are much like youth in the United States. They begin dating at around age 15 and enjoy dancing, going to movies, shopping, or eating out. They like Western music and fashion trends. The average marriage age is 27 for men and 26 for women. Weddings can be elaborate and expensive. Marriage ceremonies usually take place in hotels. The couple may wear traditional *kimonos* for the ceremony, Western wedding outfits for photographs and socializing, and different clothing for an evening party. Wedding guests bring gifts, often cash, and leave with gifts from the couple. Although rare, arranged marriages still occur.

Diet. The Japanese diet consists largely of rice, fresh vegetables, seafood, fruit, and small portions of meat. Most dishes use soy sauce (a fish broth) or sweet sake (alcohol made from fermented rice). Rice and tea are part of almost every meal. Western-style food is increasingly popular, especially among the youth. Popular Japanese foods include *miso* (bean paste) soup, noodles (*ramen*, *udon*, and *soba*), curried rice, *sashimi* (uncooked fish), tofu, and pork. Sushi is usually a combination of fish (cooked or raw) and rice. Sometimes a vegetable, such as cucumber, is added to the dish or used instead of fish. Sushi wrapped in dried seaweed (*nori*) is called *norimaki*. Sushi is expensive and usually reserved for special occasions.

Recreation. Baseball, soccer, volleyball, tennis, skiing, and jogging are all popular in Japan. The Japanese also enjoy traditional sports such as sumo wrestling (a popular spectator sport), judo, *kendo* (fencing with bamboo poles), and karate. Baseball, brought to Japan in the 1870s by a professor from the United States, is the most popular sport. It is highly competitive at all levels. The entire country follows the annual national high school championships. Golf, while expensive, is popular among men. For leisure, people enjoy television, karaoke, movies, or nature outings.

The Arts. In Japan, Western arts such as symphonic music and ballets are common, but many important traditional arts exist. Older adults favor puppet theater (*bunraku*) and highly stylized drama (*noh* and *kabuki*). *Kabuki* is known for spectacular sets and costumes. Like *noh*, it blends dance, music, and acting. The Japanese also attend music concerts and theater. *Gagaku* is one of the oldest types of Japanese music. It is played with string and wind instruments and drums. Pop music is a major part of Japanese culture.

Shodo (calligraphy) is well respected. Haiku, a form of poetry developed in the 17th century, is also popular. Writers portray scenes from life and nature. Flower arranging (*ikebana*) has been evolving since the sixth century. The tea ceremony (*sado*), prescribing precise details of the tea’s preparation, is an art form originating in the 16th century.

Holidays. Japan’s three major holiday seasons are the New Year, Golden Week, and Bon Festival. At the New Year, Japanese take an extended holiday from the last day or two in December to about the third of January. Businesses and government offices close while people visit shrines and relatives. Golden Week (29 April–5 May) combines the holidays of Greenery Day (*Midori No hi*, 29 April, a day to celebrate nature’s beauty), Constitution Day (3 May), and Children’s Day (5 May). Bon Festival takes place over several days in mid-August, with dates varying by region. During this time, people take vacations and return to their ancestral homes to welcome visiting ancestral spirits with bonfires.

Other holidays include Adults’ Day (second Monday in January), when those who will turn 20 during the year are honored as coming of age; National Foundation Day (11 Feb.); Vernal

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Equinox (in March); National Day (4 May); Marine Day (20 July); Respect for the Aged Day (15 Sept.); Autumnal Equinox (in September); Sports Day (10 Oct.); Culture Day (3 Nov.); Labor Thanksgiving Day (23 Nov.); and Emperor Akihito's Birthday (23 Dec.).

Commerce. Most businesses are open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Small shops and large urban shopping areas may stay open much later and do not close for lunch. Business dealings are conducted formally. Time is often required for decisions and agreements. The Japanese may be more interested in the person or company with which they are dealing than in the actual details of the deal. Many Japanese work late into the evening and suffer from the stress inherent in an emphasis on work. Overtime is a common necessity.

SOCIETY

Government. Japan is a constitutional monarchy. Emperor Akihito is head of state but has no governing power. The prime minister (currently Junichiro Koizumi) is head of government. The prime minister and a cabinet form the executive branch. Legislative power is vested in the *Diet*, consisting of the 480-seat House of Representatives (lower house) and the 242-seat House of Councillors (upper house). Representatives are elected to four-year terms; councillors are elected to six-year terms. Japan has 47 prefectures (provinces), each administered by an elected governor. The voting age is 20.

More than one hundred seats in the *Diet* are held by second or third generations of a family, as voter loyalty to a local political family is often stronger than a desire for qualified candidates. Hence, when former prime minister Keizo Obuchi died, his daughter interrupted her college studies to stand for his legislative seat in 2000 elections. Though she had no previous political experience, her victory was assured by her father's and grandfather's possession of the seat.

Economy. Japan is one of the world's largest economies. Nevertheless, Japan has few natural resources and imports most raw materials. Also, because only about 12 percent of the land is suitable for cultivation, Japan imports nearly half of its food supply. Major local crops include rice, sugar, vegetables, tea, and various fruits. Japan is a leading supplier of fish.

Nearly all exports are manufactured items, including automobiles, electronic equipment, televisions, and other items. Major industries include machinery, metals, engineering, electronics, textiles, and chemicals. The United States is Japan's biggest trading partner. Although a trade imbalance and conflicts over market access are sources of friction between the two allies, they support each other in major economic difficulties. For example, when the *yen* (JPY) nearly collapsed in 1998, the United States moved to support it and to encourage necessary reforms. The economic downturn has led to record-high unemployment, slipping productivity, low consumer spending, and a high bankruptcy rate. Growth has been minimal despite government programs to stimulate the economy. Lack of economic reform has inhibited recovery and growth.

Transportation and Communications. A highly developed, efficient mass-transit system of trains and buses is the principal mode of transportation in urban areas. Bullet trains (*Shinkansen*) provide rapid transportation between major cities. Subways are also available. Many people have private cars. Traffic is often heavy in Tokyo and other large cities. Japan has

POPULATION & AREA

Population	127,417,244 (rank=10)
Area, sq. mi.	145,882 (rank=60)
Area, sq. km.	377,835

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	11 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	14 of 140 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$27,967
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	3 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	78 (male); 85 (female)

five international airports. Its communications system is highly modern and well developed. Newspapers and magazines are widely read.

Education. Japan has a high literacy rate; education is compulsory and generally free from ages six to fifteen. Individuals must pay tuition for education thereafter. The curriculum stresses math and sciences. Many students attend private schools, provided they pass difficult entrance exams (even at the kindergarten level). Parents often enroll their children in *juku* (cram) schools to help them prepare for these tests. University entrance exams are rigorous, and competition among students is intense. Students study for years and cram for months to take them. Getting into the most prestigious schools is more important than one's ultimate performance. Graduation from the nation's top universities usually guarantees students well-paying jobs. These universities are affiliated with specific high, middle, and elementary schools; hence, getting into the right elementary school can help guarantee one's future success.

Health. The Japanese enjoy one of the highest standards of health in the world, with a very low infant mortality rate and a high life expectancy rate. Companies are generally responsible for providing insurance benefits to employees, but the government also sponsors some social welfare programs. Medical facilities are very good. Pollution is a major problem in Tokyo.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- Prime Minister Koizumi's LDP coalition won a landslide victory in September 2005 elections for the House of Representatives. His coalition secured a two-thirds majority in the lower house of the *Diet*, giving him the ability to override challenges in the upper house to proposed reform legislation. The privatization of Japan's post office was a key issue in the elections.
- In April 2005, Prime Minister Koizumi met with Chinese president Hu Jintao in an effort to reduce tensions between their nations. China had been angered by new Japanese school textbooks that, according to China, failed to properly acknowledge Japan's World War II aggression.

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