Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Japan is slightly larger than Germany, or just smaller than the U.S. state of Montana. It consists of four main islands: Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. These are surrounded by more than six thousand smaller islands and islets. Japan's terrain is largely mountainous, and most large cities are positioned along the coasts. The country's wildlife is diverse and includes animals such as bears, foxes, snow monkeys, rabbits, deer, and red-crowned cranes.

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. Volcanic eruptions are also fairly common in Japan.

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 side. Japan is subject to typhoons in August and September.

History

Imperial Origins and Feudal Period

Japan is known historically as the Land of the Rising Sun, as symbolized by its flag. Beginning with Emperor Jimmu in 600 BC (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, shōgun (feudal lords) held political control. 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.

Hirohito ruled as emperor from 1926 to 1989. His reign was called *Shōwa*, which means "enlightened peace," and the deceased Hirohito is now properly referred to as Shōwa. He was succeeded by his eldest son, Akihito, in 1989. Akihito's reign was called Heisei, meaning "achievement of universal peace." In 2019, due to the state of his health, Akihito stepped down as emperor, passing the throne to his eldest son, Naruhito, in Japan's first abdication since 1817. Japan's government chose *Reiwa*, meaning "beautiful harmony," as the name for the new imperial era.

Japanese Expansion and World War II

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.

Liberal Democratic Party Dominance

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 into recession. Japan's 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. The popular leader forced through major economic reforms and helped restore Japanese confidence in the political system. When Koizumi stepped down in September 2006, Shinzō Abe won the LDP's leadership election to succeed him as prime minister, but scandals and the party's loss of the legislature's upper house forced Abe to resign. The LDP chose Yasuo Fukuda to replace him in September 2007. Less than a year later, Fukuda resigned in the wake of political deadlock and persistently low approval ratings.

In September 2008, Tarō Asō became Japan's fourth prime minister in two years. In September 2009 elections, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won a majority of seats in parliament, ending 50 years of near-total LDP rule. Three separate prime ministers served during the DPJ's time in power. Abe and his party, the LDP, have been in power since 2012. The LDP's popularity is believed to have stemmed from Abe's successful set of economic policies, including fiscal stimulus and structural reforms, popularly known as "Abenomics."

3-11 Triple Disaster and Beyond

On 11 March 2011 (often referred to as 3-11), a 9.0-magnitude earthquake occurred roughly 45 miles (72 kilometers) from the Pacific coast of Japan, triggering a massive tsunami that washed as far as 6 miles (10 kilometers) inland. Waves from the tsunami reached heights of around 131 feet (40 meters) and devastated structures along the coast. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant was damaged in the tsunami, causing a meltdown that released radioactive materials. The effects of the combined triple disaster of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown claimed nearly 20,000 lives and left many more injured or displaced. Some estimates place the total cost of damages as high as $300 billion or more, making this the costliest natural disaster in history.

The disaster affected not only the lives of survivors but also Japanese economics and politics at large. The loss of life and productivity resulting from the disaster soon tipped Japan’s economy into one of a series of recessions. Japan stopped production at all of its nuclear energy plants and began to offset energy needs mostly by increasing gas imports, only gradually restarting some nuclear capacity from 2015 onward. The government has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on rebuilding projects, putting strain on an economy already under pressure from an aging and shrinking population. The LDP has remained in power since 2012 by promising economic reforms, but tax increases levied in 2014 and again in 2019 to help pay off massive national debt have resulted in economic downturns that stifle growth. Japan’s government faces uncertainty going forward as it attempts to stabilize and grow the economy while negotiating longstanding national issues like nuclear energy policy, Japan’s relationships with South Korea and China, and the constitutional ban on having a standing army.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The majority of the population lives 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's population is largely ethnically homogenous, with a small number of Koreans and Chinese. The Ainu (an Indigenous ethnic group whose habitation of Japan predates the migration of ethnic Japanese) live mostly on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Language

Japanese is the official language. Although spoken Japanese is not closely related to spoken Chinese, kanji, the written language, is related to Chinese characters. Each *kanji* has at least two "readings," or ways of pronouncing the word: one based on the ancient Chinese pronunciation and the other based on the Japanese pronunciation. The Japanese also use two phonetic alphabets—hiragana and katakana—simplified from these characters and learn to read and write Japanese words in romaji (Roman characters). As people rely more on computers, they are losing their ability to write the complex *kanji*. Japanese can be written vertically from right to left or horizontally from left to right. English language instruction is mandatory for elementary school grades five and six; English is also taught in all secondary schools and is often used in business.

Some core components of Japanese culture are evident in Japanese language and usage. For example, a traditional sense of social status is reflected in linguistic differences used to convey different levels of politeness (plain, polite, and honorific or humble). Furthermore, direct language is often seen as impolite and therefore avoided. For example, the polite Aishite imasu (I love you) is more direct than most people are typically comfortable with, so even among couples, it is more common to use less direct language.

Religion

Japan's two major religions are 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 Bushido (the Code of the Warrior), 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 Japanese continue to integrate aspects of Shinto and Buddhism into their lives. For example, marriages often follow Shinto traditions, and funerals, Buddhist ones. Additionally, *butsudan* (Buddhist altars used to pay respects to deceased family members) are common in homes, and *kamidana* (small Shinto shrines) are common in homes as well as some shops. For most, however, this is done more out of respect for social tradition than out of religious conviction. A small portion 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 business, 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. Devotion to the group is central to the Japanese lifestyle. For example, someone with a cold usually wears a face mask to help ensure nobody else catches their cold. Japanese tend to avoid conversation topics that can be divisive, especially topics such as politics and religion. It is uncommon for people to discuss their personal lives with coworkers, except among those they consider to be close friends.

Customarily, most 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 commonly respected trait that carries one through personal hardship. Politeness is considered 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. One is often expected to sense another person's feelings on a subject by picking up on the person's tone of voice, even if what is being said only hints at the truth (or is the opposite of the truth). 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.

Many Japanese feel that consumerism, periods of economic insecurity, less filial piety (devotion to ancestors), and lower moral standards have all damaged social cohesion, and they question the country's future course. Even as many traditions remain strong, Japan's rising generation is revising society's views of family relations, politics, and male and female roles.

Japanese saying

Saru mo ki kara ochiru. ("Even monkeys fall from trees.")

Personal Appearance

Conformity, even in appearance, is a common characteristic of the Japanese. The general rule is to act similar to, or in harmony with, the crowd. For youth this includes wearing the latest fashions (U.S. and European).

Businessmen wear suits and ties in public. Businesswomen generally wear pantsuits or blazers with skirts; bare legs are not acceptable, and stockings or knee-high socks are commonly worn.

Proper dress is necessary for certain occasions. Traditional Japanese clothing, or wafuku, can be worn for social events or special occasions, but it is equally common for people to wear suits and formal dresses. Traditional clothing includes the kimono, a long robe with long sleeves that is wrapped with an obi (a special sash). The *kimono* is worn by women and men, though most commonly by women. The designs in the fabric can be simple or elaborate. The *yukata* is similar to the *kimono*; it is made of lighter fabric and worn in summer, particularly to summer festivals and parties. Professional entertainers, such as a *maiko* or *geisha*, wear *kimono* as well as *okobo* (tall wooden shoes).

For celebrations, women wear dresses or *kimono*; married women wear muted colors with short sleeves, while unmarried women wear brighter colors with long sleeves. For weddings, men wear dark suits and white ties or, less commonly, *kimono*. To funerals, women wear black *kimono* or, alternatively, simple black dresses with strings of pearls. Men wear black suits with black ties to funerals.

Outside work or formal occasions, Japanese tend to dress casually and conservatively; jeans and T-shirts, button-down shirts worn with slacks or skirts, and dresses are common. Plunging necklines or bare arms are usually avoided, and baring the midriff (even on accident) is taboo. Dressing in multiple layers is very common as well.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A bow is the traditional greeting between Japanese. A bow is correctly performed by standing with the feet together and arms straight at one's side (women may fold their arms in front of them) and bending at 45 degrees from the waist. While performing a bow, people do not look directly in the other person's eyes. Workers in the service industry may bow with one palm on the stomach and the other on their back, with elbows extending straight out. 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 usually greet strangers and superiors formally, and titles are important in introductions. A family name is used with the suffix -san. For example, members of the Ogushi family would individually be called Ogushi-san in Japan. The use of first names is reserved for family and friends; however, a suffix is still generally used. Close friends

and family of children will call them by their first name with a different suffix: -chan is used for girls and -kun for boys.

The greetings Japanese use depend on the relationship. A worker might greet a superior with Ohayou gozaimasu (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). Between business representatives, the exchange of business cards (offered and accepted with both hands) most often accompanies a greeting. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu (Please consider me favorably) is a common phrase said at the outset of group activities such as a sports match or the beginning of a work project. Konnichi wa ("Hello" or "Good day") is a standard greeting. Ohayou (an informal "Good morning") and Genki? (How's it going?) are common casual greetings among youth.

Gestures

The 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." A slight bow accompanied by a chopping motion of the hand in front of the face while walking down an aisle of seats signifies "Please excuse me, coming through."

Making an X with the index fingers at chin level or with forearms in front of the chest indicates "no" or "not allowed." For example, a waiter might make the X sign at closing time, indicating to incoming customers that no more service will be provided that evening. Alternatively, the sign indicating "yes" is made by forming an O with the hands and placing them in front of the face or raising the arms high above the head. These gestures are used somewhat like the "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" sign is used in the West. 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.

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 genkan (small entry area) between the door and living area, where one stands to remove the shoes; shoes are placed together pointing toward the outdoors, or they may be placed in a closet or on a shelf in the *genkan*. Slippers are typically worn inside, but they are not worn in rooms with tatami (straw-mat floors). People normally take off their coats before stepping into the *genkan*. Guests usually are offered the most comfortable seat. The Japanese traditionally emphasize modesty and reserve. When offered a meal, they express slight hesitation before accepting it. Light refreshments are accepted graciously. In business settings, the host generally offers either tea or coffee; it is polite to take a sip, but the drink does not have to be finished.

Out of modesty, the Japanese typically demur compliments. 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. Sweets or rice crackers are common gifts, as are seasonal fresh fruit, frying oil, or coffee. Gifts of hand towels or cleaning products are commonly given to welcome new neighbors. 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 to do so. Therefore, snack foods sold at street stands are usually eaten at the stand. In a traditional meal, people typically eat from a bowl while holding it at chest level, instead of bending down to the table. It is not impolite to drink soup directly from the bowl or to make slurping sounds. Japanese use hashi (chopsticks) to eat most meals but generally eat Western-style food with Western utensils. The main meal is eaten in the evening. Because many Japanese work late hours, they may eat dinner in office-building restaurants or may grab a prepackaged meal on the way home. The family might also save dinner for the father and sit with him while he eats.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

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, and as people are often called by their family name, they are continually reminded of that. Affection, spending time together, and spousal compatibility are less important than in other cultures.

Japanese society's emphasis on work and career greatly affects family life. Employers have rigid expectations as to the amount of time employees devote to their jobs, making it difficult for full-time employees to spend time with their families. Parental leave is difficult to take without jeopardizing a career.

Long commutes, long work hours, and business obligations outside of working hours often make it difficult for urban fathers to spend time with their children. In rural families where fathers may not have such obligations, fathers are able to spend more time with their children. Divorce and

single parenthood are rare but increasing, and there are economic pressures and social stigmas associated with both. Society, however, is becoming more accepting of single parents.

Parents and Children

Families generally have one child. Before children start school, they are relatively free and are disciplined only gently. As children grow, discipline usually becomes more strict, and children are taught and disciplined to be aware of the collective good. Often the school plays a primary role in disciplining a child and may not refer infractions to the child's parents. Families place great emphasis on their children's education and make it possible for children to entirely devote themselves to their studies. Children are often given only light chores because their primary responsibility is to study. Though rare, some high school students may move into a small apartment closer to their high school. Parents might pay for juku (cram schools) to help their children get better scores on the standardized entrance exams. Most parents pay for the entirety of their children's college education. Children tend to move out of the parental home only upon marriage or in the event of a job transfer.

The declining birth rate, coupled with the population's high life expectancy, is changing the structure of the family. Traditionally, elderly parents were cared for at home, which also enabled them to be an influence in the lives of their grandchildren. Most adult children, especially an oldest son, feel an obligation to live with and take care of their parents as they age. However, many obstacles (including time and ability) pose problems to caring for the elderly, who may live a long time with chronic diseases. The demographic changes are beginning to be a source of tension for individual families and the entire society. Nursing homes are becoming a more viable option for long-term care of the elderly.

Gender Roles

While the father is the head of the home, the mother is responsible for managing household affairs, including finances, and raising children. Traditionally, it was considered improper for a woman to have a job. Today, about half of working-age women work, though their positions are usually lower than those held by men. Young women often quit work after marrying, and those married women who do work outside the home often have part-time or temporary positions as opposed to the full-time permanent positions that men are expected to commit to.

Housing

Urban

Living situations are usually cramped in cities. Many urban residents live in apartments. Apartments come in a variety of sizes and layouts, but a typical urban apartment has two bedrooms. The main room is a combination living room, dining room, and kitchen. Apartment complexes are made with concrete or wooden exteriors of varying design.

Rural

Homes are more spacious in suburban and rural settings, where there might be room for a vegetable garden or a Japanese garden (which often features water, small bridges, rocks or stones, and lanterns) with well-manicured trees. A small plot of land can produce a good deal of rice, so flat land is quite valuable. Rural homes are usually made of wood with tiled roofs and are painted white. They generally consist of an open kitchen and dining area, which is divided from bedrooms and guest rooms by *fusuma* (sliding paper doors). Older rural homes often feature a glass-enclosed veranda, which functions as a sunroom.

Home Life

Many homes feature some elements of traditional Japanese décor, such as a *tokonoma* (a wall alcove in which flowers or hanging scrolls are displayed) and *fusuma* (doors that can be opened to turn two small rooms into a larger one). A traditional bed, called a *futon*, lies on tatami (woven mat) flooring. To increase space during the day, the *futon* is folded up and kept in a closet. While many people still use a *futon*, Western-style beds are becoming increasingly popular, especially in urban areas.

Homes usually contain an entryway, where shoes are removed and stored. Floors are slightly elevated from the entryway, so guests and residents step up when they enter a house or an apartment, after putting on slippers. Bathrooms contain a shower—usually installed close to the ground and used while sitting—and a deep bathtub. Bathtubs are used for post-shower soaking, and a whole family might use the same water. Toilets are located in a separate room, in which one wears a specific pair of slippers. Washers may be located in bathrooms, and clothes are generally hung outside to dry. Most kitchens have gas stoves and a small gas grill for cooking fish. Ovens are rare; instead, people may use toaster ovens or microwaves with an oven function for baking.

Most homes are not equipped with central heat or air conditioning. People purchase their own fans, space heaters, or air conditioners. Rooms may also be heated with a *kotatsu* (a table with an electric heating unit underneath and a duvet that wraps around the table and covers the legs of people sitting around it). A room with a *kotatsu* is most likely decorated in traditional Japanese style—that is, walls with a muted color and furniture that is low to the ground.

Ownership

In cities, residents tend to be renters, and in rural areas, residents tend to be owners. Over half the population owns a home. Many young people save money for a house while living with their parents, and parents often help children pay the large deposits banks require to secure a mortgage. Very often the eldest son inherits his parents' home. The upkeep of older homes can be expensive, and deteriorating materials that are required to meet continually improving earthquake standards make older homes undesirable. Land is worth more than houses, so people tend to either tear down old houses and rebuild or buy new homes.

Japanese companies tend to employ people for life but transfer them to new offices every three to four years. The expectation of constant relocation means that families tend to buy homes where they intend to retire, rather than homes that are close to their places of work. Mothers and children might live in such a house while fathers commute long distances or rent small apartments near the office, coming home only on weekends.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Some Japanese youth begin dating around age 15, though most have little free time or spending money at that age. In college, people have more time and opportunity to date. Couples meet through school, clubs, and friends who set up *gokon*. A *gokon* is a group blind date in which a couple invites a small group of their friends to a restaurant for drinks and to get to know one another. Some people turn to a matchmaker (generally an older female relative or friend) to introduce them to local singles looking to marry. After a series of formal introductions in which parents and the matchmaker are present, couples who like each other continue dating on their own. In the past, people may have met using an *omiai* (introduction service), but today internet dating is becoming more popular. Most couples avoid public displays of affection.

Engagement

A *yuino* (engagement ceremony) involving the couple's parents occurs after the groom has asked the bride to marry him. The groom and his parents visit the bride and her parents at her home or a restaurant. According to tradition, the groom's family offers *yuinomon* (gifts that are decorated with origami turtles and cranes, symbols of eternity and long life) to the bride's family. *Yuinohin* is money traditionally offered to the bride's family during the *yuino*. While some families follow these traditions, more commonly the families share a meal to get to know each other and decide on the details of the wedding. If the families live far apart, they may simply meet the day before the wedding ceremony to have a meal or drinks together.

Marriage in Society

Men and women usually marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Marriages are legalized once the couple submits a marriage certificate at a local municipal government office. Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in Japan. In 2015, Tokyo's Shibuya ward (municipality) issued its first certificate recognizing a same-sex union; however, such certificates are not legally binding.

Weddings

A wedding is a serious event that celebrates the joining of two families. Weddings can be elaborate and expensive. The cost of a wedding is usually split evenly between the groom's and bride's families, although guests also contribute cash gifts—presented in elaborately decorated envelopes to the bride—to offset the costs. Some of these cash gifts, especially those given by family members, may be returned to compensate guests for travel costs.

The bride and groom commonly give gifts such as plates or glasses to their guests. Couples navigate complex traditional wedding etiquette and the symbolism of gift giving with the help of wedding planners and etiquette guides. Wedding ceremonies generally consist of three major events: *kekkonshiki* (the wedding ceremony), attended by family and sometimes friends; *hiroen* (the reception party), attended by family, close friends, and selected coworkers; and finally, *nijikai* (the "after party" or "second party"), which includes all wedding guests plus friends and coworkers who could not attend the reception).

Although Western-style white weddings are very common in Japan, many couples are married in Shinto ceremonies, which can take place at temples or, more commonly, at hotels or wedding halls with small Shinto temples built in them. A Shinto priest officiates at the ceremony, which is attended only by close family. The couple is ritually purified, drinks *sake* (a rice-based alcoholic beverage), exchanges rings, and makes a ceremonial offering to the gods. The couple wear traditional kimono for the ceremony.

After the ceremony, the couple is announced at the reception, where friends, coworkers, and family have gathered. At the reception, friends and relatives give speeches, sing songs, and enjoy a formal meal. It is common also for the bride and groom to invite their bosses to give a speech about what kind of work they do and what kind of workers they are. Receptions may also include more recent additions such as slideshows of the bride and groom as children and games and prizes for guests. The bride and groom often change outfits several times, including Western wedding outfits for photographs and socializing and different clothing for an evening party. Female guests wear either *kimono* or dresses, and men wear dark suits.

Life Cycle

Birth

During the fifth month of pregnancy, a family might go to a Shinto shrine and ask the gods for a safe birth. The priest presents the mother with a *haraobi* (a long white sash with a picture of a dog on it), which represents an easy birth. The sash is wrapped around and under the pregnant woman's stomach to support her back and keep her belly warm. The sash is replaced or re-blessed every 12 days. Babies are delivered in hospitals and stay with the mother there for about a week. Traditionally, the new mother goes to her parents' house for 20 to 30 days after leaving the hospital. During this time the baby's grandmother looks after the mother.

On the seventh day after the birth, called *oshichiya*, the baby's name is announced and family and friends gather for a meal. Among more religious families, a plaque with the baby's name written in calligraphy is hung on the wall. Naming a baby in Japanese is complicated because many considerations must be weighed, such as the number of kanji (Chinese characters) in the name, their pronunciation (based on the different readings *kanji* can have), the number of strokes in the *kanji*, and how they sound and look with the last name. Some families consult Shinto shrines to determine the most auspicious name for their child. Girls' names tend to be taken from nature, for example, *Yukiko* (child of snow), while concepts like justice, peace, or *Noboru* (abundance) are common for boys. When a newborn is a month to one hundred days old, his or her parents bring the child to a Shinto shrine for a ceremonial blessing. The blessing, called *omiyamairi,* is performed to thank the gods for a healthy birth and to ask the local deity (associated with natural objects like trees, rivers, and mountains) to bless and accept the baby as part of the local shrine.

Milestones

Each year on 15 November, a festival called *Shichigosan* (which literally means "seven five three") celebrates the

well-being of young children. Boys take part when they are three and five years old, girls when they are three and seven. Parents dress their children in *kimono* and take them to Shinto shrines, where families pray for the children's good health. Children are given long paper bags filled with candy and decorated with turtles and cranes (which represent longevity). A family portrait is often taken at a photo studio.

Young people are considered adults at age 20. After this age, a person can legally purchase alcohol and smoke. The second Monday in January is Coming of Age Day, when those who have turned 20 within the last year are honored as becoming adults in a ceremony called *Seijinshiki*. Young women have their hair professionally styled and wear *furisode* kimono (elegant *kimono* with long sleeves). Men wear *kimono* or suits. At the *Seijinshiki*, which takes place at city hall, the new adults listen to speeches by government officials about their responsibility to be proper members of society. Afterward, the young people pose for pictures and attend parties.

One's sixtieth birthday, or *kanreki*, is cause for a special celebration. The person wears a traditional red sleeveless *kimono* jacket and is presented with gifts by his or her children and grandchildren. It is common for a 60-year-old to take a trip or to enjoy a nice meal out with the family.

Death

Traditional funerals are formal affairs, though there is a trend toward more casual gatherings where people reminisce about the deceased. Funeral guests are expected to contribute money, presented in a special black-and-white envelope, to offset the cost of the funeral. The family gives guests a gift in return, usually a household item (such as a blanket or plate) that will remind them of the deceased. The body of the deceased is generally returned to its home, where it remains for one night while a Buddhist monk prays and burns incense. Bodies are cremated, not buried. After a funeral, a Buddhist monk comes to the home to pray for the deceased weekly for 49 days. After the 49th day, the ashes of the deceased are moved from the home to the graveyard. The family might also clean the grave on the anniversary of the death and on the Obon holiday, in August. White chrysanthemums are commonly used for decorations at funerals. The family generally buys a *butsudan* (altar) for their home, on which they place offerings and a photo of the deceased.

Diet

The Japanese diet consists largely of rice, fresh vegetables, seafood, fruit, and small portions of meat. Most dishes use soy sauce, fish broth, or sweet *sake* (alcohol made from fermented rice). Rice and tea are part of almost every meal. Western food (such as U.S. fast food) is increasingly popular, especially among the youth. Popular Japanese foods include miso (bean paste) soup, noodles (ramen egg noodles, udon wheat noodles, and soba buckwheat noodles), curry and rice, sashimi (thinly sliced raw fish), tofu, and pork. *Shabu-shabu*, Japanese hot pot, is a popular meal eaten at a restaurant or home. Sushi is made usually with a combination of fish (cooked or raw) and lightly vinegared rice. Sometimes a vegetable, such as cucumber, or an egg roll is added to the dish or used instead of fish. Sushi wrapped in nori (dried seaweed) is called norimaki. While sushi can be bought at *kaiten* sushi bars (restaurants that serve sushi from a conveyor belt) for as little as one U.S. dollar, good quality sushi and *sashimi* is expensive and usually reserved for special occasions.

Recreation

Sports

Badminton, soft tennis (a kind of tennis played with a soft white ball), table tennis, soccer, and basketball are all popular sports. Students learn how to play most sports at school. Baseball, brought to Japan in the 1870s by a professor from the United States, is the country's most popular sport. It is highly competitive at all levels. The entire country follows the annual national high school championships. Teams often bow to the field or court at the beginning and end of practice. Hiking and mallet golf (like miniature golf but played with croquet-like mallets and a hard ball slightly bigger than a tennis ball) are popular with retired couples. Golf, while expensive, is popular among men. The Japanese also enjoy traditional sports such as sumo wrestling (a popular spectator sport), judo, kendo (fencing with bamboo poles), and karate.

Leisure

During their leisure time, people enjoy television, karaoke, movies, video games, and nature outings. Employees with intense jobs might use their leisure to time catch up on sleep or spend time with family. Many enjoy reading books, comics, and magazines; simply standing and reading magazines at the store is a popular pastime. Pachinko parlors can be found in many parts of Japan. Cities usually have community education centers where classes are offered, and elderly people in particular enjoy pursuing artistic hobbies such as ceramics, woodblock print making, painting, calligraphy, flower arranging, and traditional Japanese dance.

Some activities vary according to the season. In the spring, people enjoy picnics under the cherry blossoms in public parks. In the summer, there are large firework displays and festivals. In the fall, people often visit parks to see the leaves changing colors. Winter activities include skiing and snowboarding and regional festivals. During the winter, some schools flood the soccer field to turn it into a skating rink.

Vacation

Because annual school holidays are fairly uniform across the country, most of the country takes vacation at the same time, typically in the summer. Local destinations fill up quickly, and the price of plane tickets increases significantly at this time. Popular domestic destinations include the shrines and temples of Kyoto and package tours of theme parks, such as Tokyo Disney and Universal Studios Japan. Urban families often take trips to the beach or visit relatives.

The Arts

In Japan, Western arts such as symphonic music and ballets are common, but many important traditional arts exist. Older adults favor bunraku (puppet theater) and highly stylized drama, like noh and kabuki. *Kabuki* is known for spectacular sets and costumes. Like *noh*, it blends dance, music, and acting. The Japanese also attend musical concerts. *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, in which writers portray scenes from Japanese life and nature, is also popular. *Ikebana* (flower arranging) has been evolving since the sixth century. The *sado* (tea ceremony), prescribing precise details of the tea's preparation and serving, is an art form originating in the 16th century. *Ukiyoe* (woodblock printing) is another traditional art form that has been around since the 17th century. Modern art includes *manga* (comics) and *anime* (animation), both of which are immensely popular.

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's, Coming of Age Day (also called Adults' Day, second Monday in January), National Foundation Day (11 February), Emperor Naruhito's Birthday (23 February), Vernal Equinox (in March), Golden Week (29 April–5 May), Maritime Day (third Monday in July), Respect for the Aged Day (third Monday in September), Autumnal Equinox (in September), Fitness Day (second Monday in October), Culture Day (3 November), and Labor Thanksgiving Day (23 November).

Importance of Holidays

Japan's three major holiday seasons are the New Year, Golden Week, and the Obon festival. Golden Week (29 April–5 May) combines the holidays of Shōwa Day (29 April, honoring Emperor Hirohito), Constitution Day (3 May), Greenery Day (4 May, celebrating nature's beauty), and Children's Day (5 May). Aside from these three major holiday seasons, many national holidays are relatively modern and hold little significance for the average Japanese, besides providing a welcome day off from school or work. For example, few people celebrate Maritime Day or Respect for the Aged Day.

New Year's

People generally take several days off from work surrounding New Year's. People also visit shrines and relatives during this time. Many people also send out New Year's cards to friends and family. The post office collects these cards and delivers them all on the first of January. Children receive money from their parents or grandparents. Families put up special decorations and eat special foods, such as *mochi* (pounded sticky rice).

Obon Festival

The Obon festival takes place over several days in mid-August, with dates varying by region. Traditionally, Obon is the time of year when the spirits of deceased ancestors returned home. While some families have household shrines for their deceased ancestors where they can make frequent offerings, Obon is important because the family gathers to make an offering at the burial site. The family often cleans the grave and places there incense or an offering of food and drink the deceased liked. Obon is also a time to meet up with friends from childhood.

Other Festivals

In addition to national holidays, hundreds of festivals are held around the country, at which stalls are set up to sell street food and house games for kids. Children's dance troupes are commonly featured as well. During spring there are festivals celebrating the cherry blossoms, and during the summer, those that celebrate the rice harvest. Some festivals include the procession of a Shinto deity in a portable shrine, carried by men wearing jackets called *happi*. Other popular festivals include *Hadaka Matsuri* (Naked Festival, where participants wear a minimum of clothing), *Onbashira* (The Log Festival, during which participants cut down a tree and erect the log near a Shinto shrine), and *Honen Matsuri* (Harvest Festival, celebrating fertility). Some are held yearly, while others (like Onbashira) occur only every six or seven years. Most holidays are rooted in religious tradition, but some are modern inventions. Some cities declare days off for the festivals, while other festivals are held on the weekend.

Other Holidays

A growing number of Japanese celebrate Christmas, Valentine's Day, and White Day. Though few Japanese are Christian, it is not uncommon for people to celebrate Christmas by getting together with friends and eating Christmas cake (cream-filled sponge cake decorated with strawberries) and sometimes fried chicken (both of which are viewed as common Western Christmas foods). On Valentine's Day (14 February), girls give chocolates to boys in whom they are interested. Boys reciprocate their interest on White Day (14 March) by giving girls chocolates or decorated boxes of cookies.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

Japan is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary government. Emperor Naruhito is head of state but has no governing power, though the emperor is deeply respected by the Japanese people. The monarchy is hereditary. Traditionally, the emperor's line was allowed to pass only through men, but in recent years, there have been discussions about amending the succession laws to include women, because the number of men in line for the throne has drastically decreased. The prime minister is head of government. The legislature designates the prime minister, who is usually the leader of the majority party there.

Japan's legislature, called the Diet, consists of a 242-seat House of Councillors (the upper house) and a 465-seat House of Representatives (the lower house). Councillors are directly elected to six-year terms; representatives are directly elected to four-year terms. The *Diet* is filled through a combination of majoritarian and proportional representation elections. More than one hundred seats in the *Diet* are held by second or third generations of a family, as voter loyalty to local political families is often stronger than a desire for qualified candidates.

Political Landscape

Several political parties are active in Japan, though the rightist Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has maintained firm power in Japanese politics for all but a few years since the end of World War II. Other active political parties include the center-right Komeito Party and the center-left Constitutional

Democratic Party of Japan (CDP)

Party ideologies in Japan are sometimes not very well defined, which means that individuals within a party may share quite different views on how to address important issues in Japanese politics. These issues include the status of the country's nuclear energy program following the Fukushima disaster in 2011; years of slow economic growth; an aging population and low birth rate; and differing interpretations of Article 9 of the constitution, which prohibits Japan from engaging in war.

A major political dynamic of Japanese politics is known as the "iron triangle," which describes the relationship between the *Diet* (practically speaking, the LDP), the government bureaucracy, and Japan's business conglomerates. Close relationships among these three groups have allowed Japan to become an economic superpower but have also contributed to corruption and a lack of transparency.

Government and the People

Japan's constitution protects a variety of freedoms and prohibits many forms of discrimination. The government generally respects constitutional freedoms and combats unconstitutional discrimination. The government is able to provide a range of goods and services to its citizens. Corruption surrounding the relationship between big business and the government in Japan has historically been a problem, though recent efforts have been made to reduce such practices. Elections are generally free, fair, and transparent. In recent years, voter turnout has averaged below 60 percent. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Japan has one of the world's largest economies even though it has few natural resources and imports most raw materials. Also, because only about 11 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 fruit. Japan is a leading supplier of fish. Nearly all exports are manufactured items, including automobiles, electronic equipment, and televisions. Major industries include machinery, metals, engineering, electronics, textiles, and chemicals. The United States is one of Japan's biggest trading partners.

An economic downturn of the 1990s badly damaged the economy, leading to a "lost decade" of missed growth and productivity. A series of recessions have followed, including ones related to the 2008 global economic crisis and the 2011 triple disaster of an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. Though the economy has stabilized between recessions, growth has remained low overall. Most recently, a tax increase and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic have pushed the economy toward yet another recession. The currency is the yen (JPY).

Transportation and Communications

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

Its communications system is modern and well developed. Most people have cellular phones and are regular internet users. Newspapers and magazines are widely read. The press is generally free of direct government interference, though close relationships between media, government, and business sometimes lead to self-censorship.

Education

Structure and Access

Education is highly valued in Japanese society. Students are expected to try their hardest in school and take academics seriously. Primary school begins at age six and lasts six years. Secondary schooling lasts from ages twelve to seventeen. Education is compulsory and free in public schools from ages six to fourteen. After age fifteen, students must pay tuition to continue their studies in high school. Parents must cover expenses such as uniforms, textbooks, school trips, and, if necessary, fees for private juku (cram schools, which focus on making sure individual students perform at their expected level while preparing them for difficult secondary-school entrance exams).

Most children attend three years of *ho-iku-en* (day care) before entering the official school system. Because education is such a large part of childhood, beginning *yochi-en* (kindergarten) is a big step in a child's life. Kindergarten students walk to school by themselves and are expected to be responsible for their behavior at school. Once children have entered school, they are expected to be prepared and prompt.

Almost all children go to public schools. Some private schools focus on teaching students who did not perform well on standardized tests. Other students attend prestigious private schools, provided they pass difficult entrance exams (even at the kindergarten level). Some prestigious public or private high schools are "attached" to competitive universities, which gives graduates from these schools an advantage during the application process (for example, by allowing them to bypass standard entrance exams) and can aid in finding a job in the future.

School Life

The public school curriculum is set at the national level and is generally uniform across the country. This uniformity can lead to inflexibility, preventing teachers from adjusting their teaching for students with different learning styles. In elementary school, much of the focus is on learning the difficult reading and writing system. At all levels, the curriculum stresses math and sciences and places heavy emphasis on standardized testing. Students must pass an exam in order to enter a public high school. Those students who do not pass usually enter a private high school instead. Parents often enroll their children in *juku* schools (which hold lessons after regular schools hours and on weekends) to help them prepare for these tests. While technically it is legal to enter the work force at the end of junior high school, it is virtually impossible to find a job, so the majority of students attend senior high school.

In junior high, students spend much of their time at school participating in clubs and activities intended to foster group spirit. It is not unusual for students to practice sports or attend activities before school, on the weekend, and in the evenings. Elementary schools do not have clubs and a student's extracurricular time during high school is dedicated to preparing for entrance exams, so junior high is the time when life-long friends are made.

Higher Education

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 at that school. Once a student passes the right tests and enters a junior technical college (resulting in an associate-level degree) or university (a bachelor's and advanced degree–issuing institution), the academic expectations are less strenuous. Graduation from the nation's top universities usually guarantees students well-paying jobs.

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. Medical facilities are very good. Companies are generally responsible for providing insurance benefits to employees and their families. In addition to a yearly physical offered by the employer, cities provide screening exams for people based on their age and gender. A government health insurance plan exists for the self-employed and unemployed. Pollution in urban centers ranks among the nation's major health concerns.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Japan, 2520 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 238-6700; web site https://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itprtop_en/index.html. Japan National Tourist Organization, phone (212) 757-5640; web site www.jnto.go.jp.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Tokyo
Population	124,687,293 (rank=11)
Area (sq. mi.)	145,914 (rank=61)
Area (sq. km.)	377,915
Human Development Index	19 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	23 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	$41,400
Adult Literacy	NA
Infant Mortality	2 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	81 (male); 87 (female)
Currency	Yen

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