



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Japan has an area of 145,913 square miles (377,915 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 four thousand 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 side. Japan is 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 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, feudal lords (or *Shoguns*) 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. The current emperor, Akihito, took the throne in 1989. Akihito's father, Hirohito, was emperor from 1926 to 1989. His 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.

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, Shinzo 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, Taro Aso became Japan's fourth prime minister in two years. In September 2009 elections, the Democratic Party of Japan won a majority of seats in Parliament, ending 50 years of near-total LDP rule. Party leader Yukio Hatoyama became prime minister, but he resigned in 2010 after failing to keep his election promise to remove the U.S. military base in Okinawa. Naoto Kan became the fifth prime minister in three years.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Japan's population of 126.8 million is shrinking by 0.24 percent annually. About 66 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 98.5 percent ethnic Japanese, with a small number of Koreans (0.5 percent) and Chinese (0.4 percent). The Ainu (an indigenous ethnic group whose habitation of Japan predates the migration of ethnic Japanese) live mostly on Hokkaido.

### Language

Japanese is the official language. Although spoken Japanese is not closely related to spoken Chinese, the written language (*kanji*) is related to Chinese characters. 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.

### 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 2 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 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 reaches all ages. For instance, even members of a youth baseball team are expected to always place the team's interests above their own.

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. 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. 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.

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, consumerism, periods of economic insecurity, less filial piety (devotion to parents), and lower moral standards 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 Japanese clothing, or *wafuku*, is worn for social events or special occasions. This clothing includes the *kimono*, a long robe with long sleeves that is wrapped with a special sash (*obi*). 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.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

A bow is the traditional greeting between Japanese. Much can be said with a proper bow. 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*. So, Mr. Ogushi would be 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 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.” 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 small entry area (*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*). The 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. Out of modesty, the Japanese deny 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. 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, people typically eat from their 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 chopsticks (called *hashi*) to eat most meals but generally eat Western-style food with utensils. 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 nearly 50 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.

### Housing

In cities, families live in high-rise apartments or small homes. Larger homes are found in less-crowded areas. A typical urban apartment has two bedrooms. The main room is a combination living room, dining room, and kitchen. 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* (sliding doors, which can be opened to turn two small rooms into a larger one). A traditional bed, called a *futon*, lies on *tatami* 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.

### Dating and Marriage

Japanese youth typically begin dating at around age 15 and enjoy dancing, going to movies, shopping, and eating out. Many 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 or wedding halls. The couple may wear traditional *kimono* for the ceremony, Western wedding outfits for photographs and socializing, and different clothing for an evening party. Guests bring gifts, often cash, and leave with gifts from the couple. Although rare, arranged marriages still occur.

### Life Cycle

Each 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 continued 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.

The second Monday in January is Coming of Age Day, when those who have turned 20 are honored as becoming adults in a ceremony called *seijin shiki*. The event takes place at the city hall and features a speech by a government official. Young women have their hair professionally styled and rent *kimono*. Men wear *kimono* or suits. After the ceremony, the young people celebrate at parties. One's sixtieth birthday, or *kanreki*, is also 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.

Traditional funerals are formal affairs, though there is a trend toward more casual gatherings where people reminisce about the deceased. Bodies are cremated, not buried. Funeral guests are expected to contribute money. The family gives them a gift in return, usually a household item.

### 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 food (such as U.S. fast 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 made usually with 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 country's 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 musical 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 Japanese 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 Obon 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 Showa Day (29 April, honoring Emperor Hirohito), Constitution Day (3 May), Greenery Day (4 May, a day to celebrate nature's beauty), and Children's Day (5 May). Obon 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. Other national holidays include Coming of Age Day (also called Adults' Day, second Monday in January), National Foundation Day (11 Feb.), Vernal Equinox (in March), Maritime Day (third Monday in July), Respect for the Aged Day (third Monday in September), Autumnal Equinox (in September), Health and Sports Day (second Monday in October), Culture Day (3 Nov.), Labor Thanksgiving Day (23 Nov.), and Emperor Akihito's Birthday (23 Dec.).

## SOCIETY

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### Government

Japan is a constitutional monarchy. Emperor Akihito is head of state but has no governing power. The prime minister

(currently Naoto Kan) is head of government. The prime minister and a cabinet form the executive branch. Japan's legislature, called the *Diet*, consists of a 242-seat House of Councilors (the upper house) and a 480-seat House of Representatives (the lower house). Councilors are elected to six-year terms; representatives are elected to four-year terms. 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. The voting age is 20.

**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 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 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 Japan's biggest trading partner. An economic downturn of the late 1990s badly damaged the economy. The 2008 global economic crisis led to a sharp decline in world demand for Japan's exports, a factor in pushing the economy into 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. Bullet trains (*Shinkansen*) 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.

**Education**

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. Medical facilities are very good. Companies are generally responsible for providing insurance benefits to employees and their families. 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 [www.us.emb-japan.go.jp](http://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp). Japan National Tourist Organization, 11 West 42nd Street, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10036; phone (212) 757-5640; web site [www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp).

**POPULATION & AREA**

Population	126,804,433 (rank=10)
Area, sq. mi.	145,913 (rank=62)
Area, sq. km.	377,915

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	11 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	12 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$32,600
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	3 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	79 (male); 86 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).