Japan’s population is one of the most homogeneous of any population of the major countries in the world. Japanese leaders have stated that Japan has no minority groups. In fact, all but a very small percentage of the population is of the same ethnic origin. Their ancestors have been in Japan for hundreds of years.

**Minority Groups**

- **Ainu**
  
  Among the few non-Japanese people in the country are the 12,000 Ainu. As you read, the Ainu are fair-skinned and live mainly on the northern island of Hokkaido. They are slowly becoming a part of the mainstream of Japanese culture.

- **Koreans**
  
  More numerous are the Koreans. In 1990, there were about 70,000 Koreans living in Japan. Most came to Japan during World War II (1941–1945) to work in the factories there. However, some Koreans trace their roots in Japan to the period around 1910 when Korea was taken from China by the Japanese, and some Koreans moved to Japan.
  
  In some ways, the Koreans are almost invisible in Japan. They look like the Japanese, and many second-and third-generation Koreans have taken Japanese names and speak Japanese as their native language. Despite this, Koreans suffer discrimination in housing, jobs, and their social lives.
  
  Koreans must register as aliens and must carry alien registration cards with their fingerprints on them at all times. Koreans born in Japan are not automatically citizens of Japan. Japanese citizenship has always been based on bloodlines and ethnic background, but in 1985 Japan’s nationality law was changed and Koreans can now become naturalized citizens of Japan.

- **Burakumin**
  
  Another minority group is known as the *burakumin* (hamlet, or small village, people). The burakumin are ethnic Japanese. Originally, they lived in small villages or hamlets. They worked at tanning leather and as butchers, slaughtering cattle. These jobs are considered unclean by Japanese tradition. As a result, the burakumin are, even today, regarded as outcasts, the “untouchables” of Japan, which means that other Japanese will have nothing to do with them. There are between one and three million burakumin in Japan and they are discriminated against in housing, jobs, education, and their social lives. They live in segregated sections in the slums of the big cities of Japan. Although burakumin can pass as ordinary Japanese, the fact that they live in or travel to and from a “ghetto” neighborhood gives their identity away.

**The Japanese Language**

The Japanese are united by a common spoken and written language. This has made it easier for the Japanese to achieve political and cultural unity more quickly than other Asian nations.

The Japanese language is mainly polysyllabic (most words are composed of several syllables). But Japanese is not difficult to speak and pronounce, and spelling is simpler than English or French. There is no accent on any syllable in a Japanese word; all syllables are stressed equally, with very few exceptions.

The Japanese borrowed their system of writing from the Chinese, adapting it to Japanese needs. (The knowledge of Chinese writing came to Japan from Korea, not directly...
from China.) For centuries the Japanese had no way to write down their language. The Japanese people memorized events and traditions and passed them on by word of mouth. After a time, through their contacts with China, they discovered the advantages of writing, and began to adopt the Chinese system. In this system, each character stands for an idea or object, rather than a sound, as in the Roman alphabet. However, the Japanese did not accept the Chinese spoken language. The result is that the spoken language of Japan differs greatly from Chinese. For example, “Japan” is written 日本, in Chinese characters. The Chinese pronunciation is “jih-pen,” but the two characters are pronounced “ni-hon” (or Nippon) by the Japanese. ( 日 meaning origin, 太 meaning sun, 本 meaning where the sun has its origin, or “Land of the Rising Sun.”)

To the Chinese written system the Japanese later added their own written system, based on syllables or tables of syllables called Kana, unlike the English system that is based on individual letters. Written Japanese is ordinarily formed by a combination of Chinese characters, Kanji, and Kana syllables.

The Japanese also use the Roman alphabet for certain limited purposes. Along the railways, for instance, the names of stations are often shown in three systems of writing—Chinese, Kana, and Roman letters. Since all Japanese schoolchildren study English from the seventh grade through high school, such signs are not at all confusing to most riders. It is also important to note that Japan has the highest rate of literacy in Asia and possesses the best-developed educational system.

**Religion**

Shrines and temples can be found everywhere in Japan. They are the places of worship of Shintoism and Buddhism, the principal religions of the Japanese people. In the last 100 years thousands of Japanese have become Christians. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution of 1947, and no particular religion can receive preference over another. In addition, no one religion can be the state religion. This is an important change because before 1945 Shintoism was the state religion.

**Shintoism**

Shintoism as a religion developed only in Japan. Shinto means “the way of the gods” from two Chinese words—shin meaning “good spirits” and tao meaning “the way.” Shintoism is based on the worship of nature and good spirits called kami. This religion has no bible. It is based on the feelings of human beings toward the world around them.

The kami are powers or spirits loosely referred to as gods but they are actually “superior or extraordinary forces.” The kami live in shrines, animals, birds, plants, mountains, waterfalls, storms, and in most natural things. There are thousands of them. The light and heat of the sun and the waves of the sea are caused by the power of the kami. These spirits are never looked on with fear but with friendly closeness, love, and thankfulness.

Shinto has no formal prayer book. Norito (prayers), in poetic form, are presented by priests at the hundreds of shrines throughout Japan.
The great Kamakura Buddha was built in the 13th century and is made of copper and gold. Buddhism is the main religion of the Japanese people.

Three-storied pagoda of the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto was built in the 17th century.

Great Torii (gate) of Itsukushima Shrine. The torii (in the water) is found in front of all Shinto shrines. Before entering the shrine, one must pass through the torii to become purified. Note the stone lanterns in the foreground.
Shinto has three important symbols: a sword which represents the virtue of wisdom and correct action; a string of jewels which represents kindness, generosity, and obedience; and a mirror which stands for truthfulness and reflects all things good and bad. The Japanese believe that without these three basic virtues—wisdom, kindness, and truthfulness—peace, happiness, and a good life cannot exist for individuals or for the nation.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism is the major religion of Japan today. More than half the people of Japan are Buddhists. Many Japanese practice Buddhism and also follow Shinto custom and ceremony at life-originating events such as births and marriages. However, a Buddhist priest would officiate at a funeral. Buddhism was founded in India 2,500 years ago. It was brought to Japan by the Chinese about 1,500 years ago, and spread rapidly among the nobles and the upper classes. The common people did not accept Buddhism at first because they found it hard to agree with a religion that prohibited the marriage of priests, and that was not light and happy. As Buddhism was adapted to the needs and feelings of the Japanese, more people became Buddhists. New sects, including Zen, made Buddhism Japanese. As a result, thousands embraced the religion.

**Zen Buddhism**

The Zen sect of Buddhism came to Japan from China in the Kamakura period (1192–1333). The main idea of Zen is to find self-understanding, called satori or enlightenment. Believers in Zen feel that prayer and religious worship are a waste of time. Personal character and discipline are important. Meditation (thinking) is the main form of worship. The Chinese who brought Buddhism to Japan came to Japan from Korea, not directly from China.

The goal of Zen is to bring the person to satori—to help people go from thinking to knowing. Satori comes to a fortunate few—often in a sudden flash. To develop the proper frame of mind, one must use koans (Zen riddles). Here are some examples of koans: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” “What happens to the fist when the hand is open?” When the Zen believer feels that reasonable analysis and logic do not help in finding the answer (for in reality there are no answers), progress toward satori has been made. Zen followers lead a simple life close to nature.

Zen has influenced Japanese education, literature, painting, foreign affairs, history, theater, and many other parts of Japanese life.

**Other Religions**

Confucianism, the complicated moral code of China, has strongly influenced Japanese thought and behavior. Christianity ranks behind Shintoism and Buddhism. It first came to Japan in the 1500s, but was banned from 1637 to 1873. Since the ban was lifted, many Japanese have decided to become Christians. Today, about 1.5 million Japanese are Christians.

Although Christians make up only about 1 percent of the population, their influence is important. Many Christians are well educated and as a result, they have gained positions of leadership in government and business. (It is interesting to note that there are many excellent private Christian secondary schools and universities in Japan today. Some of these date back to the late 19th and early 20th century.)
Between 10 and 15 percent of the Japanese people belong to what has become known as the “new religions.” (Actually several of the “new religions” are over 100 years old.) Most of these religions are related to Shintoism or Buddhism, but there are elements in each sect (group) that make them quite different from the traditional Japanese religions.

All of the new religious movements have “charismatic” (colorful, magnetic) leaders in the style of Fundamentalist Christian ministers in the United States. The new religions promise happiness on earth and deliverance from earthly suffering, if members faithfully follow its beliefs. Most of the members of the “new religions” are lower middle class, or poor. Many of them spent their youth in rural-farming areas and moved to the cities for economic reasons. The “new religions” seem to provide a family-like environment for their members.

The largest of the new religious sects is Soka Gakkai which means “value creation society.” The Soka Gakkai is part of the Buddhist Nichirin sect. The main ideas of the sect are that Nichirin (a 12th-century reformer of Buddhism) should be honored above Buddha, and all religions are in error except Soka Gakkai. (Soka Gakkai is quite controversial because of this second teaching.)

Religion plays a positive role in Japanese life and culture. It provides people with a common set of customs and traditions. Historically, there has been peaceful coexistence among the various religious groups. Only during the Tokugawa period was there persecution of Christians. Religion has changed with the times, yet it continues to meet the needs of the Japanese people.

Life in Japan

The Blending of the Old and the New

The most important aspect of life in Japan is the blending of the old and the new. Although willing to adopt better ways of doing things from other cultures, the Japanese retain much that is traditional.

In the past, the Japanese glorified the family and discouraged individual action. There were certain approved patterns of behavior. The father was master of the house and demanded complete obedience. Women had a low position in Japanese society. Many changes in Japanese family life occurred after 1945. The absolute power of the Japanese male as head of the household no longer existed.

The Influence of China on Japanese Culture

After many centuries of isolation from the rest of the world, the Japanese began to expand their borders across the Sea of Japan to Korea. In the late 4th century and early 5th century, the Yamato emperors set up colonies in Korea. Here, for the first time, the Japanese came into contact with Chinese culture that was more advanced than their own. They sent scholars and diplomats to China to study Chinese customs, traditions, and institutions. Koreans and Chinese were invited to Japan to teach the Japanese new skills and to explain their way of life. Many aspects of Chinese culture were adopted by the Japanese. Weaving, silk making, tanning, and metalwork were introduced. The Chinese calendar was also adopted. More importantly, the Chinese system of writing was introduced.
The Japanese made a conscious decision to learn all they could from the Chinese. This period of cultural borrowing lasted from the 500s through the 700s. The best-known scholar of Japan, Edwin O. Reischauer, describes Japan’s efforts to learn from the Chinese as the, “first organized program of foreign study in the world.”

The Yamato emperors sent the best young men to the magnificent Chinese capital of Ch’ang-an (today Sian). There they studied China’s arts, sciences, philosophy, laws, architecture, government structure, and even how cities were organized. According to Reischauer, this period of the Tang Dynasty in China “was a time of unprecedented grandeur, might, and brilliant cultural success. China was the richest, most powerful, and technologically most advanced nation in the world.”

Malcolm Kennedy, a British historian, wrote, “The passion for learning, the insatiable thirst for knowledge and the aptitude for choosing, adopting and adapting to their own use the ideas and techniques of foreign countries, which has been so characteristic of the Japanese people in modern times, were equally marked in the 7th century.”

It is interesting to note that the Japanese again adopted many aspects of a foreign culture in the period between 1870 and 1910. During those years, the Japanese studied England, France, Germany, and the United States to learn about Western culture, much as their ancestors had studied Tang China ten centuries earlier.

The Role of Women in Modern Japan

When Japan was mainly a nation of farmers and warriors, the extended family was the norm. In the traditional Japanese family, several generations lived in one house. Wives were subservient to their husbands and mothers-in-law. Most marriages were arranged.

Old Japanese laws and traditions gave Japanese women few if any legal rights. They were supposed to spend their lives taking care of their homes and families.

In traditional Japan, husband, wife, older relatives, and children usually worked together as farmers or owners of small businesses. When a younger son or daughter in a family married, often he or she moved in with the in-laws. Then they were no longer considered members of the original family.

As Japan has become more urbanized and industrialized, family structure has become similar in many ways to the United States and Western Europe. Fewer than 10 percent of Japanese families live on farms in the 1990s.

At present, about 40 percent of the Japanese labor force is made up of women. In addition, women outnumber men working in agriculture. However, the majority of Japanese women who have children still stay at home. Wives have wide decision-making powers regarding family matters. Japanese wives now often control the family finances and budgets. It is not uncommon for Japanese husbands to turn their wages over to their wives and in turn to receive an allowance.

Even though almost half of the women of Japan now work, opportunities for good jobs are quite limited for women. In a recent government survey of 5,000 companies, only 22 percent offered positions to women university graduates. Women earn about one-half the salary of men in similar jobs.

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