



Chapter 19

The Influence of Neighboring Cultures on Japan

In what ways did neighboring cultures influence Japan?

19.1 Introduction

The island country of Japan lies just off the eastern coast of the Asian mainland. Japan's culture was enriched by borrowing from other places in Asia. In this chapter, you will explore how Japan's neighbors influenced Japanese culture from the 6th to the 9th centuries C.E.

Many ideas traveled to Japan by way of the Korean Peninsula. Some of these ideas originally came from China and India. For example, in the mid-500s, Buddhist priests from Korea visited Japan. In this way, the Japanese were introduced to Buddhism, which had begun in India about one thousand years earlier.

In 593, a female ruler, Empress Suiko, came to power in Japan. Her nephew Prince Shotoku admired Chinese and Korean culture, and he encouraged contact with these mainland countries. In 607, he sent an official representative to the Chinese court. Upper-class Japanese began traveling to China and Korea, where they learned about Chinese literature, art, philosophy, and government. Groups of Koreans also came to Japan, bringing with them their extensive knowledge of Chinese culture.

Over the next 300 years, Japan absorbed elements of culture—objects, ideas, and customs—from the Asian mainland. As you may remember, the spread of cultural elements is called *cultural diffusion*. In this chapter, you will learn how cultural diffusion helped to shape medieval Japanese culture. You will also discover how the Japanese blended ideas from other cultures into their own unique civilization.

◀ This scroll illustrates the exchange of products and ideas between China and Japan.



This pagoda in Nara, Japan, was based on an architectural style originally used in China.

Prince Shotoku a Japanese ruler who encouraged cultural diffusion from countries on the Asian mainland

19.2 Cultural Influences on Japan

By the time Empress Suiko and **Prince Shotoku** came to power in 593, cultural influences from the Asian mainland had been reaching Japan for hundreds of years. For example, craftspeople from the Korean Peninsula had brought knowledge of bronze casting and advanced ironworking to Japan. Immigrants and visitors from Korea had also introduced Japan to Confucianism and Buddhism. But as Suiko, Shotoku, and later rulers sought out contact with the mainland, the pace of cultural diffusion quickened.

Japan in Empress Suiko's and Prince Shotoku's day was a **rural**, agricultural society. People grew rice and other crops. The upper classes owned slaves and lived in houses with wooden floors and roofs of wood or thatch. The common people lived in huts with dirt floors and thatched roofs. Family life centered on the mother, who raised the children. Fathers often lived apart from their families. Compared to later eras, women enjoyed relatively high status.

Japan at this time was far from being a unified country. Power was divided among chiefs of a number of clans called *uji* (OOH-jee). But one ruling family in the region of Yamato, on the island of Honshu, had grown powerful enough to loosely control much of Japan. Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku, who ruled as regent under the empress, came from this line of rulers.

Under Suiko, Shotoku, and later rulers, the government of Japan took an active interest in Korean and Chinese culture. Sometimes, knowledge of mainland culture came from Japanese who traveled to China. Sometimes, it came in the form of gifts, such as books and art objects, sent from the mainland to Japan. Sometimes, it came from

Korean workers who settled in Japan, bringing their knowledge and skills with them.

During the next three centuries, Japan sent officials, students, translators, and monks on ships across the sea to China. These people often remained in China for years. When they returned home, they brought with them what they had learned. They also brought many examples of mainland culture, including paintings, religious statues, and musical instruments. As a result of these contacts, the Japanese **acquired** new ideas in government, the arts, architecture, and writing.

The Japanese didn't just change their old ways for new ways, however. Instead, they blended new ideas with their own traditions to create a unique culture. Let's look at several areas in which this happened, beginning with government.

The cultures of China, India, and Korea were major influences on the culture of medieval Japan.



19.3 Government: Imitating the Chinese System

Starting with Prince Shotoku, Japanese rulers adopted new ideas about government from China. China's form of government was both like and unlike Japan's. For example, the emperors in China and Japan had quite different powers. The emperor in China was the sole ruler. In Japan, the emperor had only loose control over the semi-independent *uji*. Each *uji* controlled its own land. The *uji* leaders struggled among themselves for the right to select the emperor and influence his decisions.

While Japanese emperors depended on local leaders, the Chinese emperor ruled with the help of a bureaucracy of government officials. At least in theory, appointments to government jobs were based on merit. Any man who did well on an examination could become an official.

During the 7th and 8th centuries, Japanese rulers adopted a Chinese style of government. Japanese tradition credits Prince Shotoku with starting this development. Borrowing Confucian ideas, the prince created ranks for government officials. In 604, he issued a set of guidelines called the Seventeen Article Constitution.

The guidelines stated that the emperor was the supreme ruler: "In a country there are not two lords; the people have not two masters. The sovereign is the master of the people of the whole country."

Later rulers went much further in bringing Chinese-style changes to Japan. In the late 7th century, Emperor Tenmu and his wife and successor Empress Jitō reformed and strengthened the central government. Control of the land was taken away from clan leaders and given to the emperor. The emperor then redistributed the land to all free men and women. In return, people paid heavy taxes to support the imperial government.

By the 700s, Japan's imperial government looked much as China's did. It was strongly centralized and supported by a large bureaucracy. Over time, however, one key difference emerged. Prince Shotoku had called for government officials to be chosen on the basis of their ability, as in China. But during the 9th century, a powerful aristocracy developed in Japan. As a result, members of noble families held all the high positions in the government.



Prince Shotoku was the first Japanese ruler to borrow ideas about government from China. Shotoku is shown here between his two sons.

Shinto a Japanese religion that expresses love and respect for nature

meditation a spiritual discipline that involves deep relaxation and clearing the mind of distracting thoughts

The buildings at Nara, Japan, with their upturned roofs, reflect the influence of Chinese architecture and the religious influence of Indian Buddhism.



19.4 City Design: Adapting Chinese Ideas for a Magnificent City

With a stronger central government and a large bureaucracy, Japan needed a new capital city. In 710, the imperial government built a Chinese-style capital on the site of the modern city of Nara.

The new city was a smaller version of Chang'an, China's capital. Chang'an had an area of 35 square miles and a population of 2 million people. Nara, with about 8 square miles, had no more than 200,000 people. As in Chang'an, Nara's streets were laid out in an orderly checkerboard pattern. A wide boulevard ran down the center. In the northern section, Buddhist temples and monasteries clustered near the imperial palace.

There was one major difference between the two capitals. Chang'an was surrounded by a wall as protection against enemies. Nara did not have a wall.

19.5 Religion: Buddhism Comes to Japan

Nara's Buddhist temples were another result of cultural diffusion. Buddhism began in India in the 500s B.C.E. About one thousand years later, it came to Japan from China by way of Korea.

Japan's original religion was **Shinto**. This religion expresses the love and respect of the Japanese for nature. Its followers worship spirits called *kami*. Kami are impressive natural objects, such as wind, lightning, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, large trees, and unusual stones. So are the emperor and other special people.

Instead of emphasizing a code of morality, Shinto stresses purifying whatever is unclean, such as dirt, wounds, and disease. Touching the dead also makes one unclean. Most of all, however, Shintoists celebrate life and the beauty of nature.

In contrast, Buddhists see life as full of pain and suffering. The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, taught that life is an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. To escape this cycle, one must follow a moral code called the Eightfold Path. Buddhism's moral code emphasizes showing respect for others, acting rightly, and achieving wisdom through **meditation**. Following the path leads to **enlightenment**, or seeing the world as it really is. Those who achieve enlightenment can enter *nirvana*, a state of perfect peace. They will never be born again into a life of suffering.

By finding the path to enlightenment, Siddhartha became the *Buddha*, or "enlightened one." As Buddhism spread throughout India, a new form arose, called Mahayana, or "Greater Vehicle." This name symbolizes a core teaching of Mahayana: that all people can reach nirvana. Its followers believe in *bodhisattvas*, Buddhists who can enter nirvana but choose instead to help others reach enlightenment. These godlike spirits live in different paradises. Worshippers pray to them in hopes of being reborn into one of these paradises. It is this form of Buddhism that spread along trade routes to China. The influence of Chinese culture brought Buddhism to Korea.

Mahayana Buddhism arrived in Japan in 552 when a Korean king sent the Japanese emperor a statue of the Buddha and a recommendation for the new religion. The statue arrived at the emperor's court surrounded by chanting monks, books of prayer, gongs, and banners. The emperor was not quite sure what to make of it. "The countenance [expression] of this Buddha," he said, "is of a severe dignity such as we have never at all seen before. Ought it to be worshipped or not?" The members of an uji clan called the Soga, who were originally from Korea, were the main supporters of the new religion.

After a fierce controversy, the emperor and his court adopted the new religion. They admired its wisdom and rituals, and they considered the Buddha a protector of families and the nation. Later rulers, such as Prince Shotoku, learned more about Buddhism through Korean monks and teachers.

Buddhism did not replace Shinto. Instead, both religions thrived and even blended. Buddhists built shrines to kami, and Shintoists enshrined bodhisattvas. Even today, ceremonies to celebrate birth and marriage often come from Shinto, the joyful religion. Funeral ceremonies are Buddhist, the religion that acknowledges suffering and pain.

In this painted scroll from Nara, people sit in meditation or prayer at a Buddhist temple.



The kana system of writing, shown here, was used by many women writers in medieval Japan.



19.6 Writing: Applying Chinese Characters to the Japanese Language

Ancient Japanese was only a spoken language. The Japanese had no writing system of their own. Written documents were in Chinese, a language the Japanese had learned from Korean scholars. Over time, however, the Japanese adapted Chinese characters, or written symbols, to write their own language.

First, Japanese scholars began using *kanji*, or “Chinese writing,” to write Japanese words. Kanji allowed the Japanese to keep records, record legends, and develop their own literature. But using Chinese characters to read and write Japanese was difficult. The two languages have different grammar, sounds, and pronunciations.

By 900, the Japanese invented *kana*. In Japanese, *kana* means “borrowed letters.” In kana, simplified Chinese characters represent Japanese syllables. Kana allowed the Japanese to spell out the sounds of their own language. As a result, they were able to write freely in Japanese. Both kanji and kana are still part of written Japanese.

19.7 Literature: Adapting Chinese Poetic Form

The earliest literary works in Japan are poems that date from the 7th and 8th centuries. Using Chinese characters, Japanese poets developed a form of poetry called *tanka*. This form developed out of songs from Japan’s oral tradition.

Tanka is based on the number of syllables in each line. Each short poem has 31 syllables, divided into five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables. The poems are often devoted to love and to the beauty of nature.

Try to count the syllables in this Japanese tanka. On the right is an English translation. Has the translator kept to the tanka form?

*Haru tateba
Kiyuru koori no
Nokori naku
Kimi ga kokoro mo
Ware ni tokenan*

*When spring comes
The melting ice
Leaves no trace;
Would that your heart too
Melted thus toward me.*

19.8 Sculpture: Carving Techniques Travel to Japan

Like Buddhism, new techniques and subjects of sculpture came to Japan from Korea and China. Like Buddhism, these sculptural ideas began their journey in India and Central Asia, and spread through Korea and China to Japan.

Archeologists have found examples of early Japanese sculpture around burial mounds that date to the 4th and 5th centuries. The sculptures are clay figures of armored warriors, saddled horses, robed ladies, and objects such as houses and boats. They were probably meant to accompany or protect the dead.

Meanwhile, Buddhism was inspiring new subjects for sculpture on the Asian mainland. As these ideas moved east, sculptors’ techniques and materials gradually changed. You can see this in the work of three different artists—one Chinese, one Korean, and one Japanese—shown at the right.

At the top, from China, is a stone image of the Buddha. The Chinese began carving images like these on cave walls near the end of the 5th century. Notice the faint smile, the way the hand touches the face, and the positions of the arms and legs. The figure’s position and gestures identify him as the Buddha of the future, whose arrival will begin a golden age.

The second statue was fashioned by a Korean artist. This time, the Buddha has been cast in bronze and covered in gold leaf. How is this Buddha statue similar to the stone carving from China? In what ways is it different?

The third Buddha statue is located near the Horyuji Temple in Nara. It was carved by a Japanese artist in the 7th century. Artistic styles change as artists travel from place to place, as do materials, depending on what is locally available. This sculpture is made of wood. Using wood allowed the artist to make the figure look more natural, especially in the upper body and the folds of the clothing.

From the middle of the 6th century to the middle of the 7th century, Chinese and Korean immigrants created most of Japan’s religious art. Japanese artists learned new techniques from them.



These Buddhas were created by a Chinese artist (top), a Korean artist (center), and a Japanese artist (bottom). How are they alike? How are they different?

Photograph © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



The Heian-Jingu Shrine in Kyoto, Japan, is a fine example of the pagoda, an architectural form imported from China.

19.9 Architecture: Adapting Temple Designs

New forms of temple design came to Japan from India by way of China. Like sculpture, temple architecture evolved as it moved east. In India, Buddhist monasteries featured shrines called *stupas* with roofs shaped like bells or inverted bowls. The Chinese replaced the bell shape with a series of stories and curved roofs, creating structures called **pagodas**. These towerlike buildings always had three, five, seven, or nine roofs.

When Buddhism arrived in Japan, the Japanese adopted the pagoda design. For Buddhist worship, Prince Shotoku founded the Horyuji, a magnificent temple in Nara. Its wooden buildings included a hall for worship and a pagoda. Lofty pagodas soon appeared all around the capital city. They were intended to contain relics of the Buddha and of bodhisattvas, as well.

Buddhist pagodas may have inspired Shinto priests to build their own permanent shrines. Shinto shrines reflected Japan's agricultural society and the Japanese love of nature. Based on the idea of the raised storehouse, a symbol of plenty, these shrines had raised floors and thatched roofs. Unpainted and undecorated, they blended in with their natural surroundings.

pagoda a tower-shaped structure with several stories and upturned, tiled roofs

19.10 Music: Adopting New Music and Instruments

Japan's native music consisted of chanted poems, war songs, folk songs, and Shinto prayers. All were recited, using just a few notes. Sculpted clay figures from early Japan show musicians playing the cither (a stringed instrument), flutes, and percussion instruments.

As contacts with the Asian mainland increased, the Japanese imported music from the region, especially from China. *Gagaku* (gah-GAH-koo), a form of Chinese court music, arrived in Japan in the 6th century. Gagaku is still sometimes played in Japan, much as it was in China 1,500 years ago.

New kinds of music required new musical instruments. One of the most interesting was a wind instrument the Chinese called a *sheng*. The Japanese pronounce the name *sho*. The sho is a type of mouth organ. It was designed to look like a phoenix, a **mythical** bird. Its sound was said to imitate the call of the phoenix.



This quartet, in traditional costume, is playing gagaku music with medieval instruments, including a sho (far left).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how, from the 6th to the 9th centuries, the Japanese acquired and adapted elements of other Asian cultures, creating a unique civilization.

Cultural Influences on Japan Objects, ideas, skills, and customs flowed to Japan from India, China, and Korea, encouraged by Prince Shotoku and other early Japanese rulers.

Government and Cities From China, the Japanese borrowed the idea of a strong central government supported by a bureaucracy. To house the imperial government, they built a new capital modeled after China's capital city.

Religion Buddhism, which began in India, came to Japan from China by way of Korea. Buddhism strongly influenced Japanese religion, art, and architecture.

Writing and Literature Koreans introduced Chinese writing to Japan. The Japanese invented kanji and kana to write Japanese words and sounds with Chinese characters. Poets used Chinese characters to write tanka, a type of poetry based on Chinese models.

Sculpture, Architecture, and Music Like Buddhism, ideas about sculpture traveled from India to Korea and China, and then to Japan. Similarly, India's stupas inspired Chinese pagodas. Japan then adapted this architectural style. New kinds of music, such as gagaku, and instruments came to Japan from China.