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Japan Before the Seventeenth Century

EARLY HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

There is no definitive evidence concerning when and from whence the original inhabitants arrived in Japan, but it is assumed that they came from different areas of the Asian continent and the South Pacific region. The predominant strain is Mongoloid, including a considerable mixture of people of Malayan origin. The Japanese language appears to be related to both the Polynesian and the Altaic languages. Evidence suggests that as early as 200,000 years ago, paleolithic humans (who used chipped stones for tools) inhabited the islands. Also among the early inhabitants of Japan were the ancestors of the Ainu, a people of proto-Caucasian origin who live in Hokkaido today. Currently only about 50,000 Ainu remain. Their early history and their relationship with the neolithic people who inhabited the islands are not known.

Jōmon and Yayoi Periods (ca. 8000 BC to AD 250)

The early stage of the neolithic age in Japan is known as the Jōmon period. It is believed that Jōmon culture started as far back as 7000 or 8000 BC and survived until about 250 BC. The term Jōmon (meaning cord-marking) describes the type of decoration found on potteries of this age. The people of the period were hunters and food gatherers, and they lived in pit-dwellings.

The next stage in neolithic Japan was the Yayoi period, which extended roughly from 250 BC to AD 250. This culture is believed to have been the product of a new wave of immigrants of Mongoloid stock who came to the islands in the third century BC. Yayoi pots (named after the place in which they were first found in 1884) were wheel-made and less elaborately decorated than

Jōmon pots. They were fired at a higher temperature and are technically superior to Jōmon pieces. Around the second century BC bronze and iron tools filtered into Japan from the continent. The rice culture, which originated in South China or Southeast Asia, filtered in around 100 BC. This latter development revolutionized the entire Japanese way of life, for it established the basis for the economy until the industrial age.

The first written accounts about Japan are found in two historical records of ancient China: *The History of the Kingdom of Wei* (a kingdom in north China, AD 220–265), written in AD 297, and *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, compiled around AD 445. According to these histories, Japan underwent a period of civil strife in the second century AD, but the land was eventually unified under a queen named Pimiku (Himiko in Japanese). Pimiku, as *The History of the Kingdom of Wei* relates, was a shaman who “occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people.” Whether Pimiku was related to the clan that established hegemony over Japan is impossible to verify, but in the years after the Second World War a great deal of speculation has taken place about the origin of the early Japanese rulers, in particular their links to Korea.

Yamato Period (ca. 300–710)

The period in which regional forces began to emerge in the Yamato area to roughly the time when a fixed capital was established in Nara is known as the Yamato period (ca. 300 to 710). It is also referred to as the age of Tomb Culture because huge keyhole-shaped tombs were constructed to bury the chieftains of the time. Numerous artifacts such as ornaments, tools, and weapons, as well as clay figurines known as *haniwa*, were buried with the dead.

From the fifth century on, Japan was exposed steadily to Chinese and Korean culture as immigrants from these countries arrived in fairly large numbers. Refugees from advancing Han Chinese armies probably displaced Koreans down that rocky peninsula. Some of those displaced Koreans probably migrated across the narrow Tsushima Straits to Japan. The social, material, political, intellectual, and cultural life of the Japanese was profoundly influenced by these immigrants. Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574–622) is traditionally credited with having played a major role in adopting Chinese civilization, strengthening the imperial authority, and propagating Buddhism. He is also credited with promulgating the “Constitution of Seventeen Articles,” a series of moral injunctions.¹ In 645 Nakatomi-no-Kamatari (614–669), the founder of the Fujiwara family, removed his rivals from the court and gained political supremacy. His descendants dominated the court down through the ages. Nakatomi and his followers are credited with having instituted the Taika Reforms, which involved the adoption of Chinese (Tang and Northern Wei) political institutions and policies as well as their land and tax policies.

Nara and Heian Periods (710–1185)

One of the practices adopted from China was the construction of a fixed capital city. In 710, Nara was made the seat of the imperial court, and it remained so until 784, when the capital was moved briefly to a community near Kyoto. In 794, the capital was moved again—this time to Kyoto, then known as Heiankyō. From then until 1185 the emperors resided in this city. The period from 794 to 1185 is known as the Heian period, or the era of the court aristocracy, because the court nobles led by the Fujiwara family dominated the political and cultural life of the society. Eventually cadet houses of the Fujiwara would dominate the imperial government during the feudal eras to follow. During the Nara and Heian periods Japan continued to adopt and assimilate Chinese culture and institutions as well as Buddhism. The Heian court aristocrats cultivated a highly refined taste in art and literature, and placed great emphasis on form, appearance, and decorum. Extravagant luxury, ostentatious display, and decadent sensuality prevailed at the court in its heyday.

Among the measures adopted from China during implementation of the aforementioned Taika Reforms was nationalization and equalization of landholdings. But this policy was not fully implemented, and land soon came to be concentrated in the hands of the court aristocrats and Buddhist monasteries. Eventually privately controlled estates, or *shōen*, came into existence. The estates were not taxed; they were also free from the jurisdiction of government officials. Estate managers, district officials, and local estate owners began to emerge in the form of local magnates with private coteries of warriors. Eventually major military chieftains, with large circles of warriors, managed to control numerous estates and challenge the authority of the central government.

In the 1160s, one of the samurai chieftains, Taira-no-Kiyomori (1118–1181), gained control of the imperial court and had himself appointed chancellor. The Taira clan (also known as the Heike) soon found its supremacy challenged by the leader of a rival military clan known as the Genji (or Minamoto) family, led by Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199).

Kamakura Period (1185–1333)

After Minamoto defeated the Taira forces, he established his headquarters in Kamakura in 1185. Theoretically, he performed the role of supreme military commander (*shōgun*) in the service of the emperor, a post to which he was appointed in 1192. But his Bakufu (tent headquarters) became the *actual* locus of power. He controlled a large part of the land as his own *shōen* and acquired the right to appoint constables and land stewards (whose chief function was to collect taxes) throughout the land. Minamoto's assumption of the position of *shōgun*, then, marked the beginning of rule by the warrior, or samurai, class.

Thenceforth, except for brief periods, power was retained by the shōgun until 1867, while the emperor remained in Kyoto as the nominal ruler and high priest of the Shinto religion.

After Minamoto died in 1199, actual power of the Bakufu was taken over by his wife's family, the Hōjō clan. Until 1333, the head of the Hōjō family wielded power as regent to the shōgun. Following an abortive attempt by the imperial court to regain power in 1221, the Hōjō family consolidated its control over the land both by confiscating the shōen of those who had supported the imperial cause and by tightening its surveillance over the imperial court.

With the emergence of the warrior class in the last years of the Heian period and during the years of warrior rule in the Kamakura period, political, social, and economic institutions and practices similar to those associated with European feudalism began to evolve. In 1232, the Hōjō government issued the Jōei Code, which defined property rights, land tenure, inheritance, and other social economic rights and obligations, thus laying the basis for later feudal laws and practices.

In the Kamakura period, popular Buddhism emerged and the code of the warriors began to take form (see Chapter 2). It was also during this period that the Mongols attempted to invade Japan in 1274 and again in 1282. Both attempts failed because devastating typhoons (known as *kamikaze*, or divine winds) destroyed the Mongol fleet.

Between 1333 and 1336, the imperial court led by Emperor Godaigo managed to regain power briefly with the assistance of certain disaffected military chiefs. But in 1336, one of these chiefs, Ashikaga Takauji (a relative of the Hōjō; 1305–1358), decided to take power himself; it was then that he drove the emperor out of Kyoto and established his own Bakufu. Godaigo fled south to the mountains of Kii Peninsula, while Ashikaga placed another member of the imperial family on the throne. As a result, until 1392 there were two imperial courts—one in the north and one in the south. In 1392, the two courts merged with the understanding that the two branches would alternate in occupying the throne. But this agreement was not kept, and the Northern Court members hold the throne to this day.

The Muromachi Period and the Era of Warring States (1336–1590)

The Ashikaga shogunate, also referred to as the Muromachi Bakufu (after the district in Kyoto where the shōgun resided), remained in existence until 1573. In that year the last Ashikaga shōgun was driven out by Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), a military chief who aspired to become shōgun himself. The Ashikaga family had failed to gain a firm grip on the land and was plagued by contentious lords. Eventually regional lords, known as *daimyō* (great lords), emerged. The country fell into a state of chaos as regional chiefs contended for

power. This dog-eat-dog period, known as the era of the Warring States (Sengoku), lasted from the later years of the fifteenth century until the nation was unified under Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1590. It was during this era that feudalism became firmly entrenched throughout the land. These feudal lords built castles to defend themselves from first the Ashikaga and eventually each other. Towns formed around these castles. The merchants and artisans who gathered there to provide for the samurai residents gave rise to urban professional classes that changed Japanese society.

During the same era, the economy expanded as a result of improvements in agriculture and increased trade with China. Money came to be used more widely, and commercial cities and market towns sprung up throughout the land. Some cities—notably, Sakai (near Osaka)—became autonomous political entities with their own military forces. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Portuguese traders arrived. They were soon followed by merchants from other European countries as well as by Christian missionaries led by the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier (1506–1552).

Oda Nobunaga, a daimyō in central Japan, managed to extend his power by making effective use of the firearms introduced by the West. He appeared to be on the way to establishing his hegemony over the land. In 1568 he succeeded in gaining control of Kyoto and soon deposed the last Ashikaga shōgun. However, he was attacked by one of his generals, preferring to commit suicide rather than be captured. Then Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), who rose from the peasantry, subdued the regional lords and completed the task of national unification. He subsequently decided to conquer Korea and China and launched an invasion of Korea in 1592. His grandiose plan was frustrated, however, when the Ming forces moved into Korea to stop his warriors.

Toyotomi came up from the peasantry himself. But in order to prevent the political order he had established from being disrupted by free-wheeling peasant-warriors, he launched a campaign to confiscate all weapons from the peasants. He also forbade them from moving off the land and instituted a nationwide cadastral survey for tax purposes, thereby establishing the social and economic policies that his successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), eventually adopted to ensure social stability in his regime.

Tokugawa was one of Toyotomi's major rivals. Because of Tokugawa's formidable power base in the Kanto region, Toyotomi did not try to eliminate him by force but, instead, allowed him to retain his holdings in return for recognition of Toyotomi as the suzerain lord. Tokugawa, through patience, cunning, and good fortune, gained power after Toyotomi's death. Thereafter, he established a sociopolitical system that enabled his descendants to remain in power for two and a half centuries, thus ushering in the Tokugawa period (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 2).

TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE PRE-TOKUGAWA YEARS

The social systems, the culture and literature, the intellectual currents, and the political institutions that evolved in the pre-Tokugawa years not only persisted but also profoundly influenced the lives of the Japanese people throughout the ages.

Shinto

The indigenous religion of Japan is known as Shinto (the way of the gods). Starting as an animistic religion, which incorporated the shamanism that came in from Southeast Asia as well as from the northern Tungus, Shinto eventually became a part of the Japanese culture. The people go to Shinto shrines to pray, and during harvest festivals they join with other villagers to celebrate and give thanks to the gods for their bountiful harvest. The Japanese, like the Chinese, see no conflict in paying homage to different deities in numerous shrines and temples.

Before the imperial clan established its hegemony over the land, a number of clans (*uji*) contended for supremacy. Each clan worshipped its own patron god. The patron god of the imperial family was the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu Ōmikami), and the emperor or empress served as the high priest or priestess of the cult of the Sun Goddess. To this day the emperor undergoes the ritual of planting rice seedlings every spring and harvesting a few ears of rice in the fall. It was not until the Meiji period that this cult was elevated to the level of State Shinto, when the government designated most Shinto shrines as state institutions.

In short, the inhabitants of ancient Japan believed that gods and spirits were present in all aspects of the natural world. Some were cosmic forces; others resided in the woods, streams, and rocks and in animals such as foxes and snakes. The ancestral spirits were also respected and revered. Great military and political leaders were enshrined as *kami* (gods or superior beings). Even modern leaders like Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) and General Nogi Maresuke (1849–1912), who captured Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, were honored in this way. Soldiers who died in the service of their country have been similarly enshrined (i.e., as *kami*) in Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo.

Shinto, in contrast to other major religions, is not founded on complex metaphysical and theological theories. Shinto has no body of divinely inspired written canon, no established ethical code, and until the late nineteenth century, not even a hierarchical priestly caste. A Western visitor once asked a Shinto priest about Shinto ideology, upon which the priest replied with a

smile, “We do not have ideologies, we do not have theology. We dance.”² Although his answer may be an oversimplification, Shinto is indeed based upon a sense of affinity with nature and the universe. As one scholar has explained it, “Where the Christian theologian explains Nature in the light of the numinous, the Japanese reach the numinous through their experience of nature.”³

Shinto rituals are rather austere: the priest simply waves a sacred wand (made of *sakaki* branches) over the worshippers’ heads to expel the evil spirits and thus to purify them spiritually. Purity and cleanliness are cardinal elements in Shinto thought; to this day, abhorrence of pollution by unclean things remains an important concern. This idea is reflected in the moral thought recorded through the ages. “To do good is to be pure; to commit evil is to be impure,” asserts a thirteenth-century Shinto tract. A good person, then, is a person with a “clean” mind and heart.

This emphasis on purity, of course, posits the presence of the unclean. And, indeed, it is the function of the many shamans of the village shrines to exorcise the darker forces that possess the spirit. Charms and amulets are also utilized to ensure good fortune and stave off evil spirits. To prompt the gods to cure a family member’s illness, a person might be advised to run around the compound of a shrine one hundred times each night; or, in the groundbreaking ceremony preceding construction of a new house, a Shinto priest will bless the site. (Such manifestations of “superstition” are not unique to Shinto, of course.)

Even after the members of the imperial clan gained political hegemony, they did not seek to compel others to worship their deity, the Sun Goddess; nor did they ban the worship of other gods. In fact, when Buddhism was introduced into the country, the struggle that occurred between the supporters of the new religion and their opponents had more to do with political control than with any effort to impose religious orthodoxy. The two religions coexisted down through the ages. Some effort was even made by the Shintoists to create a more philosophical religion by borrowing certain concepts from Buddhism. In this way, doctrinal Shinto came into existence. But common people continued to practice their traditional “folk” Shinto.

The Emperor System

The imperial family was closely linked to Shinto. The scholars of National Learning, who emerged in the Tokugawa period, made Shinto and the emperor system the core of their thinking. The emperors, after all, were the direct descendants of the Sun Goddess, who sent her grandson to Japan from heaven to rule over the land. Because of his “divine” descent, the emperor had a dual role to perform—a role both religious and political. In fact, these role functions were regarded as one and the same: political functions were called *matsuri*, a

word that means worship of or service to the gods. Shinto festivals are also called *matsuri*. Moreover, the state of being possessed by the gods when receiving their words is called *noru*. The noun of the word, *nori*, means law. Shinto prayers are called *norito*. Thus the laws themselves were divine decrees.

According to the mythological account, the founding of the imperial dynasty occurred in 660 BC, when the first emperor, Jimmu, the great grandson of Ninigi who descended from heaven, established his rule. In addition, the Shinto nationalists insisted (until the end of the Second World War) that the imperial dynasty persisted, unbroken, from that date to the present. These accounts of the founding of Japan and the history of the imperial rulers were taught in the schools before the Second World War as factual truths.

But the imperial clan did not rely on ancient myths alone to buttress its authority. Upon the advent of Chinese culture in the fifth century, and from that time on, Confucian concepts about loyalty to the lord were utilized to indoctrinate the people. For example, the “Constitution of Seventeen Articles,” ascribed to Prince Shōtoku, states, “When you receive the imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them. The lord is Heaven, the vassal is Earth. Heaven overspreads, and Earth upbears.” Then, too, “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.”⁴ It was in the early seventh century that the term *tennō* (heavenly prince) was adopted from China and used to refer to the emperor.

Even though the court authorities formulated an ideology that was designed to strengthen the imperial institution, the practice of personal rule by the emperor did not come about. Only in rare instances did the emperor seek to exercise authority directly. During the Heian period the heads of the Fujiwara family wielded power as regents while the emperor merely sat on the throne. When Taira-no-Kiyomori took power, he married his daughter to the emperor and exercised power himself. Once the shogunate had emerged, the emperor in Kyoto remained merely a ceremonial head. That situation, except for a short interregnum in 1333–1336, prevailed until the end of the shogunate in 1867. However, although the shōgun became the real wielders of power, no shōgun ever tried to eradicate the emperor system. Even Ashikaga Takauji, who turned against Emperor Godaigo, did not attempt to eliminate the institution but, instead, established a rival court in Kyoto. The Tokugawa rulers also kept alive the fiction that they were ruling on behalf of the emperor.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in northern India in the sixth century BC. The founder, referred to variously as Gautama, Shakyamuni, or Siddhartha Buddha, taught

that the way to overcome suffering was to rid oneself of the sense of the “self.” The self that we think of as being real, permanent, and absolute is merely an illusion. Rather, all things are in a constant state of flux; all things are ephemeral. Our suffering comes from the cravings of the self, to gratify the ego. To extinguish the ego one must follow the eightfold path as taught by the Buddha—that is, right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In this way we will become free of our illusion and thus able to achieve the state of bliss known as *Nirvana*.

Originally, the Buddha taught that enlightenment could be acquired only through self-effort. He did not speak of the existence of any gods or other superhuman beings. Later, however, there arose the Mahayana school—a school of Buddhism that posited the existence of many Buddhist deities. Gautama Buddha himself came to be looked upon as a divine being. Also assumed to exist were people who had achieved enlightenment but were postponing their entrance into the state of Nirvana in order to help others attain enlightenment. These compassionate beings are known as Bodhisattvas. The school is known as Mahayana Buddhism (the Greater Vehicle) because it opens the way to salvation for everybody. The tenets of this school spread into and flourished in Tibet, China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

When Buddhism was introduced from Korea in the sixth century, the ruling class of Japan was impressed by the beautiful artifacts, rituals, and scriptures associated with it; hence the religion received strong support from the rulers. Initially it was the magical aspects of the religion that were emphasized by the several sects that entered from China. The religion not only influenced the moral outlook of the people; it also had a significant effect on the art and culture of the society.

Two sects became prominent during the Heian period. One was the Tendai sect, whose founder, Saichō (767–822), emphasized the significance of the Lotus Sutra, taught that salvation was possible for all living creatures, and upheld Mahayana Buddhism over the Hinayana school, which preached salvation through self-knowledge and self-effort. The other sect was the Shingon sect, whose founder, Kūkai (774–835), taught that all forms of the Buddha emanated from the Dainichi Nyorai (the Great Illuminator). Kūkai also stressed the importance of mystic formulas by which one could achieve salvation and also gain mundane benefits.

During the Kamakura period several new sects emerged and gained acceptance among the masses. Among the Buddhist deities that gained a wide following was Amida (Amitabha)—Buddha of infinite light—who, it was said, resided in the Western Paradise where all the faithful can enter. Among the preachers of Amidism was Hōnen (1133–1212), who started a sect known as the Pure Land

sect. The Pure Land is where Bodhisattvas who are “pure in body, voice, and mind” reside. Hōnen taught that a person can enter the Pure Land by having complete faith in the Amida Buddha and by sincerely invoking his name.

For Hōnen’s disciple, Shinran (1173–1262), salvation was even more easily attained than was taught by his teacher: if a person has complete faith in the Amida Buddha, one sincere invocation of his name would be sufficient to permit the entry of that person into the Pure Land. Rituals, knowledge of the scriptures, and ascetic behavior, Shinran insisted, were not essential for salvation; indeed, people could eat meat and imbibe alcoholic drinks, and monks and priests could marry—and still be saved.

Shinran taught that salvation was easily attainable because he wanted to help the suffering masses. Appalled by the hardships, misery, and poverty of the peasants he encountered during his exile in the provinces, he concluded that it was senseless to preach self-denial to people who were leading a beggarly existence. Because the good and bad alike are being put through the crucible of hardship, they all deserve salvation. The only thing they need is faith in the saving power of the “external” being, the Amida Buddha. Wicked persons know that they cannot gain salvation on their own merit so they are more likely to rely totally on the mercy of the Amida Buddha. Thus Shinran said, “If even a good man can be reborn in the Pure Land, how much more so a wicked man.”⁵ Because his followers claimed that his was the “true” path to the Pure Land, his sect came to be known as the True Pure Land sect. Now that salvation was made possible for the humblest and the most ignorant of the masses, the two Pure Land sects gained a strong following, particularly among the peasants.

The other major sect was started by a monk named Nichiren (1222–1282). Nichiren taught that salvation could be achieved through the repeated invocation of the Lotus Sutra, a scripture that emphasizes the importance of the three forms of the Buddha—that is, the Body of Universal Law, the Body of Bliss (Amida Buddha), and the Transformation Body (historical Buddha, Shakyamuni). The other sects were in error, Nichiren claimed, because they emphasized only one of these forms. He too stressed faith—faith in the Lotus Sutra—as the only path to salvation.

Nichiren’s movement is unique among Buddhist sects specifically because of the extremely dogmatic, intolerant, and fervently nationalistic character of its originator. Nichiren not only proclaimed, “I will be the Pillar of Japan. I will be the Great Vessel of Japan”;⁶ he also believed that Japan was a unique and sacred land, the center of the true faith, his own sect. He too gained a wide following, and the Nichiren Sect remains a major movement today. Unlike other Buddhist sects, however, the Nichiren sect is aggressively proselytistic.

Zen Buddhism was another sect that won strong adherence, particularly among the samurai during the Kamakura period and after. This sect is distin-

guished by the fact that it emphasizes self-reliance and achievement of enlightenment (*satori*) through self-effort. Satori entails the gaining of insight into one's true or original nature and into the nature of reality, that "great void" underlying the surface manifestations. This insight is to be achieved through an intuitive grasp of reality, not by relying on the intellect or reasoned knowledge, nor by studying or performing rituals. Just as the hand that grasps cannot grasp itself, the reason that seeks to comprehend cannot comprehend itself. For "reality" is the Mind. As a Chinese Chan (Zen) master once said, "Buddha and sentient beings both grow out of One Mind. . . . This Mind is pure and like space has no specific form. As soon as you raise a thought and begin to form an idea of it, you ruin reality itself, because you then attach yourself to the form. Since the beginningless past, there is no Buddha who has ever had an attachment to form."⁷

A person who achieves satori cannot transmit it to others by words. Such is the message of Bodhidharma, who is said to have brought Chan Buddhism to China in the sixth century: "A special transmission outside the scriptures; No dependence upon words or letters; Direct pointing at the soul of man: Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood."⁸ To achieve satori, then, one must meditate, contemplate, or work out enigmatic statements (*kōan*) designed to break one's habit of ratiocination (e.g., "What is the sound of one hand clapping?").

The state of enlightenment is acceptance of nothing else but this world as it actually is. When asked what enlightenment was, the Chinese Zen master Yong-jia replied, "It is the flute behind the dead tree; it is the eyes behind a skeleton." Another Chinese Zen master, Hui Neng, said, "Walking is Zen, sitting is Zen."⁹

Zen's demand for stern discipline, total concentration and meditation, and a decisive approach to life appealed to the samurai, who, while constantly facing death on the battlefield, had to act resolutely and courageously. Zen also influenced Japanese art and culture in a profound way, as discussed later in the chapter.

Literary Tradition

The Japanese had no written history or literature until the Chinese writing system entered by way of Korea around the fourth or fifth century. The first extant written works, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, were compiled in the 670s and completed early in the eighth century. These "histories," including the stories of the imperial ancestors' descent from heaven, have been treated as authentic accounts by nationalist historians, although they are based as much on oral tradition, Chinese and Korean tales, and myths and legends as on actual events. The compilers, it is believed, tampered with the facts to legitimate and glorify the imperial ruling house.

An important literary work of the eighth century is the *Man'yōshū*, a collection of over 4,000 poems that have been regarded as expressions of “pure” Japanese sentiment in the time before Confucian “moralism” influenced Japanese literature. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), the seminal mind among scholars of National Learning (see Chapter 2), asserted that the *Man'yōshū* embodied the quintessence of the Japanese spirit. Recent scholars have argued, however, that the influence of Korean poetry in the collection was much greater than traditional Japanese literary scholars have been willing to admit.¹⁰ Be that as it may, its literary value is unquestioned, and the work itself is regarded as one of the world’s great collections of poetry.

As the Chinese cultural influence permeated the circle of the court aristocracy, efforts to compose poetry in the Chinese style became popular, and Tang poets such as Li Bo (701–762), Du Fu (712–770), and Bo Chuyi (772–846) were emulated. At the same time *waka*, a Japanese style of poetry wherein each poem takes thirty-one syllables, grew in popularity. This development was facilitated by the formulation of a Japanese phonetic writing system (*kana*). It was also partly the result of a movement to assert the indigenous tradition against the excessive dependence on Chinese culture. At the beginning of the tenth century, an anthology of *waka* called the *Kokinshū* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poetry) was compiled. As its editor, Ki-no-Tsurayuki, noted: “The poetry of Japan has its roots in the human heart and flourishes in countless leaves of words.”¹¹

The most extraordinary literary creation of the Heian period was *The Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki Shikibu (978–1016?), a lady-in-waiting to Empress Akiko. It is still recognized as one of the world’s masterpieces. Lady Murasaki’s story, set in the court life of her day, centers on the love life of Prince Genji and other members of his family circle. The author’s graceful, poetic style has been admired and emulated by all literary aspirants of Japan ever since. Other distinguished works of prose, poetry, essays, and diaries were produced in the Heian period; many of these were authored by women, who together created the golden age of Japanese literature.

The romantic war stories written during the Kamakura period reflected the turbulence of the late Heian and Kamakura years. The greatest of these is *The Tale of the Heike*, which depicts in melancholy tones the fall of the Taira clan. The Buddhist belief that all things are ephemeral permeates much of the writing of this period. For instance, *The Tale of the Heike* starts, “In the sound of the bell of the Gion Temple echoes the impermanence of all things. . . . The proud ones do not last long, but vanish like a spring night’s dream. And the mighty ones too will perish in the end, like dust before the wind.”¹²

The distinguished literary creations of the Ashikaga period are the Nō plays of Kan’ami Kiyotsugu (1333–1384) and his son, Seami Motokiyo (1363–1443).

The latter was strongly influenced by Zen, and his work is permeated with a sense of *yūgen*, or mystery—that which lies beneath the surface.

The Fine Arts

The beautiful natural environment of Japan undoubtedly fostered a sense of closeness to nature as well as an appreciation of natural beauty. But the Japanese did not simply imitate nature in their art. They added and subtracted from things in nature to create or reproduce the essential principles perceived there. The art of placement and design (i.e., decorative art) is an important aspect of Japanese life, as revealed not only in the fine arts but in everyday life as well.

In their fine arts the Japanese have also accentuated such qualities as the color, texture, and shape of natural objects. For example, in an art object constructed from a piece of wood, the grain will likely be accentuated and the natural color brought out by polishing. Although colorful and vibrant creations do occur in Japanese art, restraint and understatement are perhaps the most important elements in Japanese aesthetic taste. Simple, neat lines and forms, as well as plain, unmixed colors, are common characteristics as well. (Even in culinary dishes, meticulous attention is paid to the arrangement of form and color to make them aesthetically appealing!)

Another noteworthy characteristic of Japanese art is the careful attention paid to details—and, indeed, the miniature arts such as *bonsai* (dwarf trees cultivated in pots) and *netsuke* (miniature carvings), as well as flower arrangements, ceramics, and so on, have flourished. These creations are designed not so much for public display as for private appreciation. Aesthetic appreciation as a private matter is also evidenced in the beautiful gardens of the temples and private homes, which are enclosed behind walls and thus hidden from public view.

The aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese have been regarded by some observers as unique national characteristics. Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, called aesthetics “the unique Dharma of Japan.” And D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) contended that “if Japan did not produce any philosophical system of her own, she was original enough to embody in her practical life all that could profitably be extracted from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism and turn them into the material for her spiritual enhancement and artistic appreciation.”¹³

In the Japanese mode of thinking, the world is not seen in dualistic terms as it is in the West. As one scholar has noted, “Westerners tend to look at life, at the world, as though sitting in a helicopter above it, while the Japanese swim in the actual flow of events. This gives them great sharpness of intuition and the power to build things, to make things with their hands.”¹⁴ It

is this trait, perhaps, that accounts for the many superb artisans and craftspeople in Japan, whose work is elevated to the level of artistry and who, it might be said, are in total unity with—and completely immersed in—the material they are working with. In combination with the obvious concern for detail, craftsmanship, and quality, this trait may also account for the current Japanese economic success.

The origins of Japanese art can be traced back to the Jōmon and Yayoi pots, and to the *haniwa* (clay figurines) placed around the ancient burial mounds. In architecture the Shinto shrines, with their pure, clear lines and forms, their beauty of proportions, and their natural settings, remain distinctive features of the landscape. The arrival in Japan of Chinese and Buddhist cultures added new dimensions to the art and architecture of the country. The most visible consequence of the continental impact were the Buddhist temples and pagodas that were constructed first in the central region and then throughout the land. The most renowned of these is the Hōryūji, built in 607. Although the buildings were arranged in a relatively asymmetrical manner, they convey a sense of order, balance, and cohesion. Indeed, they were designed to blend harmoniously with the natural setting. The five-storied pagoda in particular has a stately dignity and grace.

Buddhist sculptures, paintings, scrolls, and images also became integral elements of Japanese life. The scroll paintings that originated in China, for instance, were modified through distinctive use of color, lines, forms, and concern for placement. These narrative picture scrolls, known as *Yamato-e*, depict events of the Heian era such as those related in the *Tale of Genji*. The art of calligraphy, too, came to be prized by the court aristocrats. Elegance in calligraphy was equated with good breeding and refinement of character.

In the Kamakura period, the influence from Song China (960–1279) and Zen Buddhism had a powerful impact on the culture. This dual impact is seen most strikingly in such art forms as black-and-white ink-painting (*sumi-e*). The greatest of the Japanese *sumi-e* painters was Sesshū (1421–1506), who emerged during the Ashikaga period. Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), a Western authority on Japanese art, describes Sesshū as “the greatest master of straight line and angle in the whole range of the world’s art.”¹⁵ The influence of Zen can also be seen in the art of flower arrangement, ceramics, landscape gardening, architecture, and Nō drama, and especially the tea ceremony. As Suzuki has noted, “What is common to Zen and the art of tea is the constant attempt both make at simplification.” The aesthetic qualities that Zen masters prized were *wabi* and *sabi*. *Sabi* is associated with “age, desiccation, numbness, chilliness, obscurity.” It is also the quality of mellowness and depth that comes from aging. *Wabi* is related to a sense of serenity, rusticity, solitude, and even melancholy. Both signify the “aesthetical appreciation of poverty.”¹⁶

As noted, the art of gardening that flourished in the Ashikaga period is associated with aesthetic principles linked to Zen. Again, it is the art of placement that is critical in the gardens constructed in Zen temples. A striking example is found in the rock garden of Ryōanji in Kyoto, which reveals nothing but sand and fifteen natural stones arranged in groups of five.

In the sixteenth century the daimyō contending for power built massive castles that served not only as fortresses but also as edifices by which to display their power and glory. Hideyoshi, for instance, built two such castles—one in Osaka and another in Fushimi-Momoyama near Kyoto. The Osaka castle featured forty-eight large towers; the main tower stood on a stone base 75 feet high, above which it rose 102 feet. The interiors of these castles were decorated elaborately with painted walls, sliding doors, folding screens, and wood carvings by way of the art style developed by Kanō Eitoku (1543–1590), who was called upon by Nobunaga and Hideyoshi to embellish the interiors of their castles. Kanō, departing from the monochrome style of his predecessors in the Kanō school, used bright colors against luminous gold backgrounds, and bold, simplified forms.

Although no abrupt shift in cultural development occurred in the transition from the pre-Tokugawa to the Tokugawa era (indeed, the social, political, and economic institutions that had evolved in the previous centuries provided the basis for the policies and institutions adopted by the Tokugawa rulers), the hegemony established by Ieyasu marked the beginning of an order of things that would leave a lasting imprint on Japanese life. The peace and stability that characterized this period lasted for two and a half centuries. The Tokugawa rulers had set about deliberately to freeze the political and social order, and they achieved their objectives with remarkable success. Virtually cut off from the rest of the world, Japan emerged as a small “world state.”

Notes

1. Some scholars have recently concluded that Shōtoku's role has been exaggerated and, indeed, that many of the reforms and policies attributed to him by the court historians may have actually been the work of the Soga family. See Kim Sok-hyong and Matsumoto Seichō, *Kodaishi no Naka no Chōsen to Nihon* (Korea and Japan in Ancient History), Chūō Kōron, December 1972, pp. 284–286. For the Korean influence on early Japan, see Gari Ledyard, “Gallop with the Horseriders,” *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1975, pp. 217ff.; Chong-sik Lee, “History and Politics of Japanese-Korean Relations,” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, October 1983, pp. 69ff.; Kim and Matsumoto, *Kodaishi no Naka no Chōsen to Nihon*; and Walter Edwards, “In Pursuit of Himiko: Postwar Archaeology and the Location of Yamatai,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 51, no. 1, spring 1996, pp. 53–79.

2. Joseph Campbell, *Oriental Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), p. 476.

3. Fosco Maraini, in Ronald Bell, *The Japan Experience* (New York: Weatherhill, 1973), pp. 13–14.