

# Feudal Powers in Japan

## MAIN IDEA

**RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS** Japanese civilization was shaped by cultural borrowing from China and the rise of feudalism and military rulers.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

An openness to adapting innovations from other cultures is still a hallmark of Japanese society.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Shinto
- samurai
- Bushido
- shogun

**SETTING THE STAGE** Japan lies east of China, in the direction of the sunrise. In fact, the name Japan comes from the Chinese word *ri-ben*, which means “origin of the sun” or “land of the rising sun.” From ancient times, Japan had borrowed ideas, institutions, and culture from the Chinese people. Japan’s genius was its ability to take in new ideas and make them uniquely its own.

## The Growth of Japanese Civilization

Japan’s island location shaped the growth of its civilization. About 120 miles of water separates Japan from its closest neighbor, Korea, and 500 miles of water separates Japan from China. The Japanese were close enough to feel the civilizing effect of China. Yet they were far enough away to be reasonably safe from invasion.

**The Geography of Japan** About 4,000 islands make up the Japanese archipelago (AHR•kuh•PEHL•uh•GOH), or island group, that extends in an arc more than 1,200 miles long. Historically, most Japanese people have lived on the four largest islands: Hokkaido (hah•KY•doh), Honshu (HAHN•shoo), Shikoku (shee•KAW•koo), and Kyushu (kee•OO•shoo).

Japan’s geography has both advantages and disadvantages. Southern Japan enjoys a mild climate with plenty of rainfall. The country is so mountainous, however, that only about 12 percent of the land is suitable for farming. Natural resources such as coal, oil, and iron are in short supply. During the late summer and early fall, strong tropical storms called typhoons occur. Earthquakes and tidal waves are also threats.

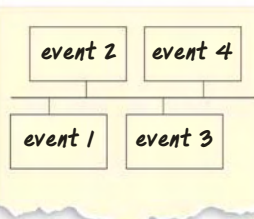
**Early Japan** The first historic mention of Japan comes from Chinese writings of the first century B.C. Japan at this time was not a united country. Instead, hundreds of clans controlled their own territories. Each clan worshiped its own nature gods and goddesses. In different parts of Japan, people honored thousands of local gods. Their varied customs and beliefs eventually combined to form Japan’s earliest religion. In later times, this religion was called **Shinto** (SHIHN•toh), meaning “way of the gods.”

Shinto was based on respect for the forces of nature and on the worship of ancestors. Shinto worshipers believed in *kami*, divine spirits that dwelled in nature. Any unusual or especially beautiful tree, rock, waterfall, or mountain was considered the home of a *kami*.

## TAKING NOTES

### Following Chronological Order

Use a time line to record the main periods and events in Japanese history from 300 to 1300.





**The Yamato Emperors** By the A.D. 400s, the Yamato clan had established itself as the leading clan. The Yamato claimed to be descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu. By the seventh century, the Yamato chiefs called themselves the emperors of Japan. The early emperors did not control the entire country, or even much of it, but the Japanese gradually accepted the idea of an emperor.

Although many of the Yamato rulers lacked real power, the dynasty was never overthrown. When rival clans fought for power, the winning clan claimed control of the emperor and then ruled in the emperor's name. Japan had both an emperor who served as a figurehead and a ruling power who reigned behind the throne. This dual structure became an enduring characteristic of Japanese government.

## Japanese Culture

During the 400s, the Japanese began to have more and more contact with mainland Asia.

They soon came under the influence of Chinese ideas and customs, which they first learned about from Korean travelers.

**Buddhism in Japan** One of the most important influences brought by Korean travelers was Buddhism. In the mid-700s, the Japanese imperial court officially accepted Buddhism in Japan. By the eighth or ninth century, Buddhist ideas and worship had spread through Japanese society. The Japanese, however, did not give up their Shinto beliefs. Some Buddhist rituals became Shinto rituals, and some Shinto gods and goddesses were worshiped in Buddhist temples.

**Cultural Borrowing from China** Interest in Buddhist ideas at the Japanese court soon grew into an enthusiasm for all things Chinese. The most influential convert to Buddhism was Prince Shotoku (shoh•toh•ku), who served as regent for his aunt, the empress Suiko. (A regent is someone who rules when a monarch is absent, ill, or too young to rule.) In 607, Prince Shotoku sent the first of three missions to China. His people studied Chinese civilization firsthand. Over the next 200 years, the Japanese sent many such groups to learn about Chinese ways. **A**

The Japanese adopted the Chinese system of writing. Japanese artists painted landscapes in the Chinese manner. The Japanese also followed Chinese styles in the simple arts of everyday living, such as cooking, gardening, drinking tea, and hairdressing. For a time, Japan even modeled its government on China's. Prince Shotoku planned a strong central government like that of the Tang rulers. He also tried to introduce China's civil-service system. However, this attempt failed. In Japan, noble birth remained the key to winning a powerful position. Unlike China, Japan continued to be a country where a few great families held power.

The Japanese adapted Chinese ways to suit their own needs. While they learned much, they still retained their own traditions. Eventually, the Japanese imperial court decided it had learned enough from Tang China. In the late ninth century, it ended formal missions to the Tang Empire, which had fallen into decline. Although Chinese cultural influence would remain strong in Japan, Japan's own culture was about to bloom.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Synthesizing

**A** How did Chinese culture spread to Japan?

## Life in the Heian Period

In the late 700s, the imperial court moved its capital from Nara to Heian (HAY•ahn), the modern Kyoto (kee•OH•toh). Many of Japan's noble families also moved to Heian. Among the upper class in Heian, a highly refined court society arose. This era in Japanese history, from 794 to 1185, is called the Heian period.

Gentlemen and ladies of the court filled their days with elaborate ritual and artistic pursuits. Rules dictated every aspect of court life—the length of swords, the color of official robes, forms of address, even the number of skirts a woman wore. Etiquette was also extremely important. Laughing aloud in public, for example, was frowned upon. And everyone at court was expected to write poetry and to paint.

The best accounts of Heian society come from the diaries, essays, and novels written by the women of the court. One of the finest writers of the period was Lady Murasaki Shikibu. Lady Murasaki's 11th-century masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*, is an account of the life of a prince in the imperial court. This long prose narrative is considered the world's first novel.

### Vocabulary

*etiquette*: the code governing correct behavior and appearance

## Feudalism Erodes Imperial Authority

During the Heian period, Japan's central government was relatively strong. However, this strength was soon to be challenged by great landowners and clan chiefs who acted more and more as independent local rulers.

**Decline of Central Power** For most of the Heian period, the rich Fujiwara family held the real power in Japan. By about the middle of the 11th century, however, the power of the central government and the Fujiwaras began to slip.

Large landowners living away from the capital set up private armies. The countryside became lawless and dangerous. Armed soldiers on horseback preyed on farmers and travelers, and pirates took control of the seas. For safety, farmers and

### > Analyzing Art

#### Women of the Heian Court

*The Tale of Genji* picture scroll—an illustrated version of the story—provides insights into the life of women at the Heian court. Since servants did almost all domestic chores, upper class women had much leisure time. How did they spend this time?

- 1 Because women were expected to look attractive, they spent time on personal grooming, such as hair care.
- 2 Women spent much time reading, usually the *monogatari*, or prose fiction, popular at the time. As the prince notes in *The Tale of Genji*, "Without these monogatari how on earth would [women entertain themselves] during these tedious hours?"

#### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources

1. **Drawing Conclusions** From what you have read about Heian court life, why do you think women spent so much time in personal grooming?
2. **Making Inferences** Based on what you have read, in what other ways might the women of the Heian court have spent their time?





## Japanese Samurai

Samurai were members of Japan's warrior class. Early samurai protected local aristocratic landowners. In the late 1100s, however, the warrior class secured national power and dominated Japanese government until 1868.

Samurai warriors followed an unwritten code that emphasized honor, bravery, and loyalty. This code came to be known as Bushido. Their reputation as fearsome warriors has become legendary.



### ▲ Female Samurai

Samurai were not always men. Here, Lady Tomoe Gozen, a famous female warrior of the 1180s, enters bravely into battle.



**Helmets** were made from iron plates to repel sword blows.

**An iron mask** was sometimes worn not only to protect the face, but to frighten the samurai's enemy as well.

**Samurai swords** were made by skilled artisans. The curvature of the blade makes the weapon more effective when slashing.

**Individual iron plates** provided protection and freedom of movement when in combat. As you can see, a samurai's armor was often richly decorated.

### ◀ Samurai Warrior

In combat, a samurai's life depended on his skill and his equipment. Here you can see how the samurai's weapons and armor aided him or her in battle.

#### **SKILLBUILDER:** **Interpreting Visual Sources**

- 1. Comparing and Contrasting** *What are some similarities or differences between Japanese samurai and European knights?*
- 2. Hypothesizing** *How might the code of the Samurai help them in battle?*

small landowners traded parts of their land to strong warlords in exchange for protection. With more land, the lords gained more power. This marked the beginning of a feudal system of localized rule like that of ancient China and medieval Europe.

**Samurai Warriors** Since wars between rival lords were commonplace, each lord surrounded himself with a bodyguard of loyal warriors called **samurai** (SAM•uh•RY). (*Samurai* means “one who serves.”) Samurai lived according to a demanding code of behavior called **Bushido** (BUSH•ih•DOH), or “the way of the warrior.” A samurai was expected to show reckless courage, reverence for the gods, fairness, and generosity toward those weaker than himself. Dying an honorable death was judged more important than living a long life.

**The Kamakura Shogunate** During the late 1100s, Japan’s two most powerful clans fought for power. After almost 30 years of war, the Minamoto family emerged victorious. In 1192, the emperor gave a Minamoto leader named Yoritomo the title of **shogun**, or “supreme general of the emperor’s army.” In effect, the shogun had the powers of a military dictator.

Following tradition, the emperor still reigned from Kyoto. (Kyoto was rebuilt on the ruins of Heian, which had been destroyed in war.) However, the real center of power was at the shogun’s military headquarters at Kamakura (KAHM•uh•KUR•uh). The 1200s are known in Japanese history as the Kamakura shogunate. The pattern of government in which shoguns ruled through puppet emperors lasted in Japan until 1868. **B**

The Kamakura shoguns were strong enough to turn back the two naval invasions sent by the great Mongol ruler Kublai Khan in 1274 and 1281. However, the Japanese victory over the Mongols drained the shoguns’ treasury. Loyal samurai were bitter when the government failed to pay them. The Kamakura shoguns lost prestige and power. Samurai attached themselves more closely to their local lords, who soon fought one another as fiercely as they had fought the Mongols.

Although feudal Japan no longer courted contact with China, it would continue to absorb Chinese ideas and shape them into the Japanese way. As you will read in Section 5, China’s culture also influenced Korea and kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Drawing Conclusions**

**B** What advantages were there to preserving the imperial dynasty, even if it lacked real power?

**SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT**

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Shinto
- samurai
- Bushido
- shogun

**USING YOUR NOTES**

2. What event would you consider the most important turning point in Japan’s early history? Why?



**MAIN IDEAS**

3. Why were Japanese missions to Tang China so important?
4. What was life like in the Heian court?
5. What purpose did the samurai serve?

**CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING**

6. **FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS** “The Japanese selectively borrowed from Chinese culture.” Use information from the text to support this statement.
7. **EVALUATING COURSES OF ACTION** Why do you think the shoguns chose to rule through puppet emperors rather than simply seizing the imperial throne themselves?
8. **DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** Was the rise of the shogun beneficial for Japan overall? Explain.
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS** Write a **dialogue** between two members of a Japanese family on why they have decided to convert to Buddhism.

**CONNECT TO TODAY** **PREPARING AN ORAL REPORT**

After World War II, the Japanese adopted aspects of American culture such as baseball. Find information about baseball in Japan, noting how the Japanese have adapted the game to suit their own traditions. Present your findings in a brief **oral report**.