

The Influence of Neighboring Cultures on Japan

In what ways did neighboring cultures influence Japan?

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 between the 6th and the 9th centuries C.E.

Many ideas traveled to Japan by way of the Korean Peninsula, but 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. Similarly, the Japanese borrowed the style of their curved-roofed pagodas from China, which had adopted it from India's bell-shaped roofs.

In 593, a female ruler, Empress Suiko, came to power in Japan. Her nephew Prince Shotoku admired Chinese and Korean culture and 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 lesson, you will learn how cultural diffusion helped to shape medieval Japanese culture including its language, art, architecture, and music from India, China, and Korea. You will discover how the Japanese blended ideas from other cultures into their own unique civilization.

1. 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. However, 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, while 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 came from this line of rulers, as did Prince Shotoku, who ruled as regent under the empress.

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 before returning home with 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 did not 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.