

UNIT 5



Japan During Medieval Times

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Neighboring
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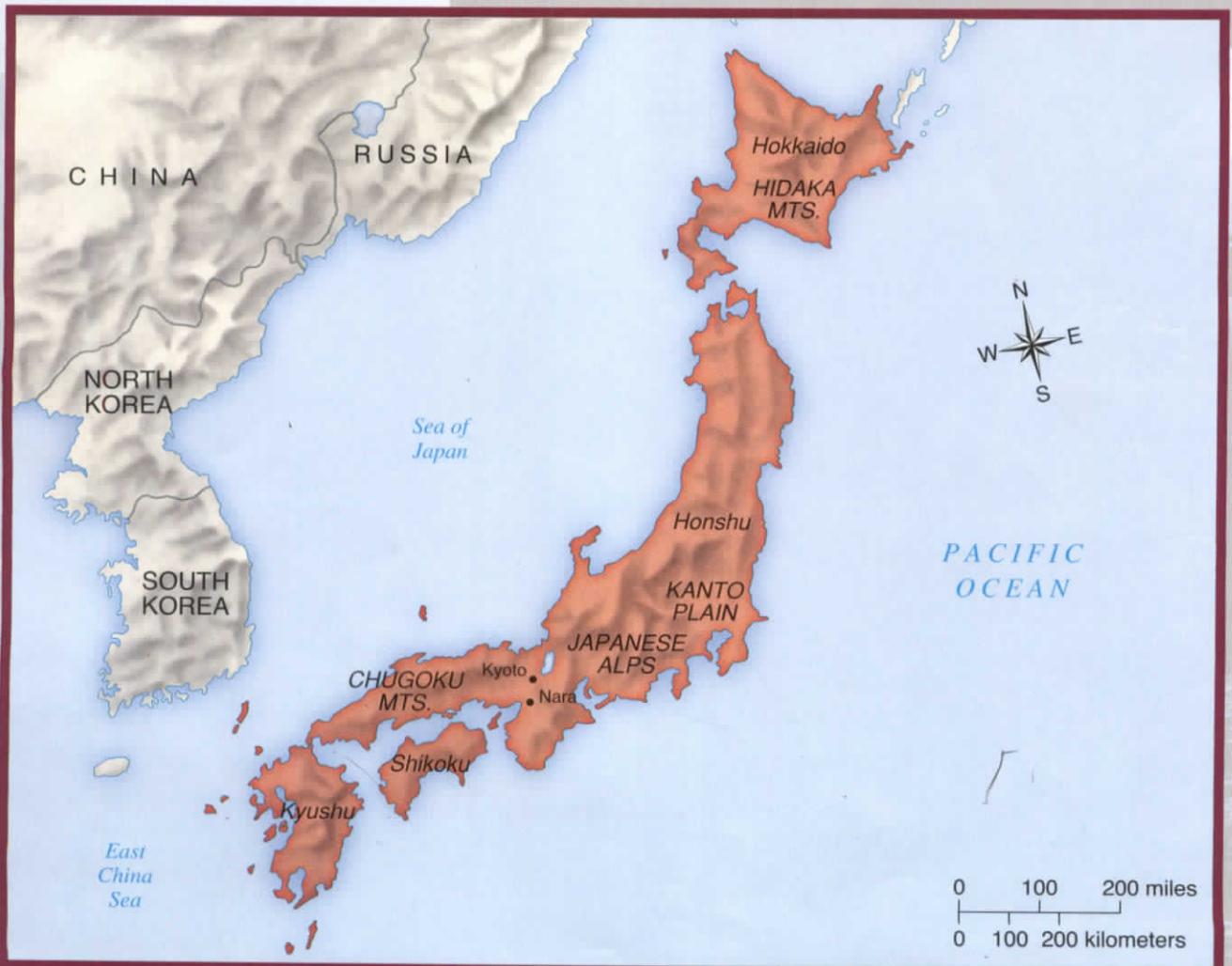
Setting the Stage

Japan During Medieval Times

In the last unit, you learned about imperial China. In this unit, you will explore the civilization of Japan from 500 to 1700 c.e.

One ancient legend says Japan was created by a god who reached down from the sky and dipped a spear into the ocean. As he drew the spear back up, drops of water fell from the sky and became the islands of Japan. When you look at a map, it is easy to see how such a story could have been told. Japan is a series of islands in the Pacific Ocean, off the northeast coast of Asia. There are four large islands and 3,900 smaller ones. The large islands—Hokkaido, Honshu (the largest), Shikoku, and Kyushu—form the shape of half-moon.

Natural disasters are common on the islands of Japan. Typhoons begin

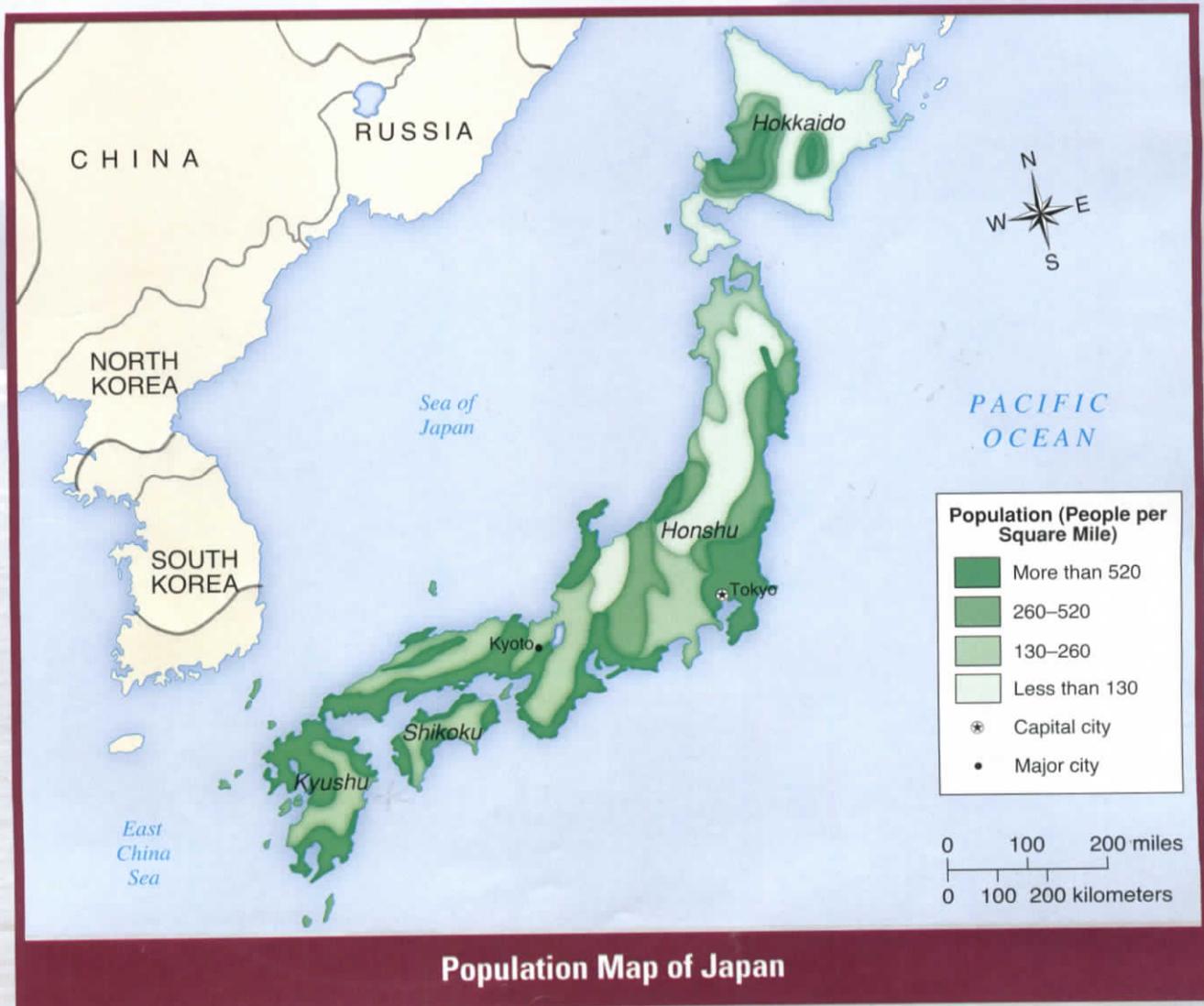


Physical Map of Japan

over the ocean and then hit the land. There are many active volcanoes on the islands. And earthquakes occur frequently.

There is not a lot of land for growing crops in Japan. Mountains cover three fourths of the land, and lush forests grow on their slopes. But the land between the mountains is fertile plain. Rain falls frequently. It is a good environment for growing crops that need a lot of water, such as rice.

Japan's culture is very old. Scholars can trace Japanese history back to about 10,000 B.C.E. This unit focuses on the period from around 500 C.E., when Japan began to develop a unified civilization, through the 1600s, when warriors known as samurai lived in castles.





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

The Influence of Neighboring Cultures on Japan

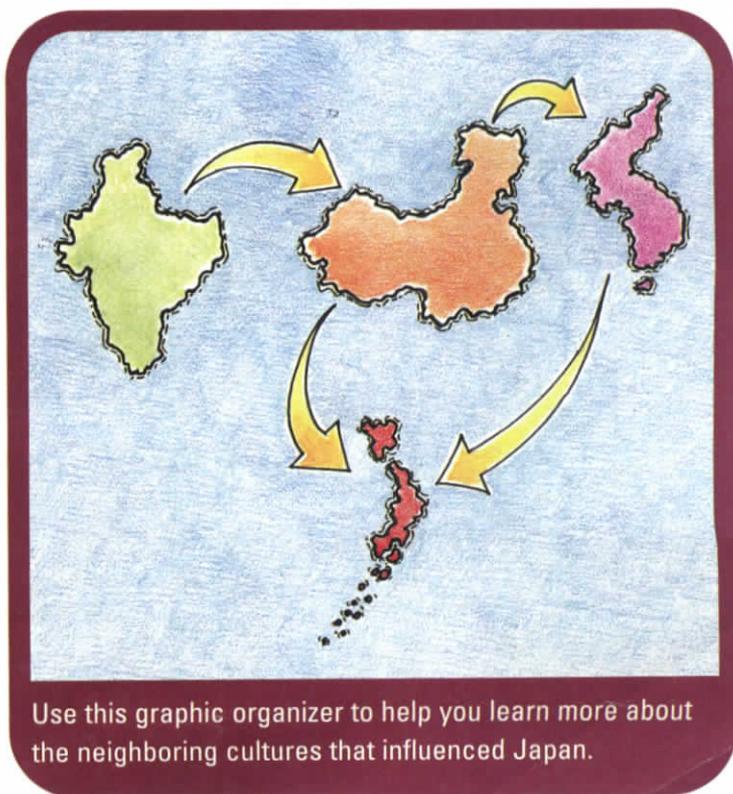
20.1 Introduction

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

Many cultural ideas traveled to Japan by way of the Korean Peninsula. Some of these ideas had originally come from China and India. For example, Japan learned about Confucianism from a Chinese scholar who came to Japan from a Korean kingdom. In the mid 500s, Buddhist priests from Korea visited Japan. In this way, Japan was introduced to Buddhism, a religion that had begun in India 1,000 years earlier.

In 593, a young man named Prince Shotoku came to power in Japan. The prince admired Chinese and Korean culture, and he encouraged contact with the mainland. In 607, he sent an official representative to the Chinese court. Upper-class Japanese began traveling to China, where they learned about Chinese literature, art, philosophy, and government.

Over the next 300 years, Japan eagerly absorbed **elements of culture**—objects, ideas, and customs—from the Asian mainland. The spread of cultural elements from one society to another is called **cultural diffusion**. In this chapter, you will learn how cultural diffusion helped to shape Japanese culture. You'll also discover how Japan blended ideas from other cultures into its own unique civilization.



20.2 Cultural Influences of India, China, and Korea on Japan

By the time 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. Visitors from Korea had also introduced Japan to Confucianism and Buddhism. But as Shotoku and later rulers sought out contact with the mainland, the pace of cultural diffusion quickened.

The Japan of Prince Shotoku's day was an 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.

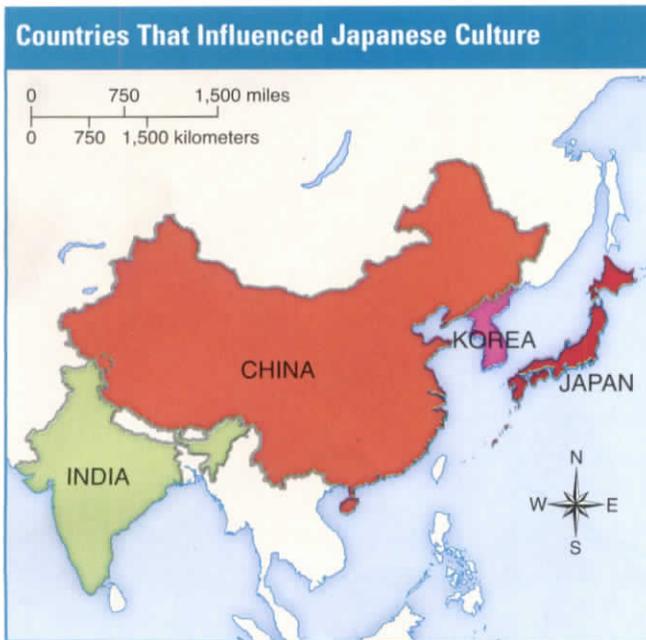
Japan at this time was far from being a unified country. Power was divided among the chiefs of a number of clans called *uji*. But one ruling family

in the region of Yamato, on the island of Honshu, had grown powerful enough to loosely control much of Japan. Prince Shotoku, who ruled as **regent** under the Empress Suiko, came from this line of rulers.

Under Shotoku and later rulers, 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 objects of art, 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 thousands of people—officials, students, translators, and monks—on flimsy ships across the sea to China. Often these people stayed 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. 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.



regent one who rules in the name of another

20.3 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. In China, the emperor was the sole ruler. In Japan, the emperor had only loose control over semi-independent clans, the 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 seventh and eighth centuries, Japanese rulers adopted a Chinese style of government. Japanese tradition credits Prince Shotoku with starting this development. Borrowing Confucian ideas, the prince created a set of 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 country's 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 645, the future emperor Tenchi created the Taika Reforms. A major purpose of the reforms was to strengthen 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 like China's. 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 ninth 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 with his two sons.

imperial belonging or related to an emperor

aristocracy a ruling class of noble families



The Horyuji Temple in Nara contains Japan's oldest existing wooden structures.

20.4 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 buildings.

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.

20.5 Religion: Buddhism Comes to Japan by Way of China and Korea

Nara's Buddhist temples were another result of cultural diffusion. Buddhism began in India in the 500s B.C.E. About 1,000 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*. Impressive natural objects are *kami*, 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 painful 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 through 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*, buddhas who can enter nirvana but choose instead to help others reach enlightenment. These godlike spirits live in different paradises. Worshipers pray to them in hopes of being reborn into one of these paradises themselves. It is this form of Buddhism that spread along trade routes to China. The influence of Chinese culture brought Buddhism to Korea.

Mahayana 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 worshiped or not?"

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 magical protector of families and the nation. Later rulers, such as Prince Shotoku, learned more about Buddhism through contact with China.

Buddhism did not replace Shinto. Instead, both religions thrived and even blended together. 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.

meditation a spiritual discipline that involves deep relaxation and an emptying of distracting thoughts from the mind

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



20.6 Writing: Applying Chinese Characters to the Japanese Language

Kana was used by many women writers. This scroll is called “Questions of a Virtuous Woman.”



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 (symbols) to write their own language.

First, Japanese scholars began using *kanji*, or “Chinese writing,” to write Japanese words. Kanji enabled 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* (“borrowed letters”). This way of writing used simplified Chinese characters to stand for **syllables** in Japanese words. 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 today.

syllable a unit of sound in a word; for example, *unit* has two syllables, “u” and “nit”

20.7 Literature: Adapting Chinese Poetic Form

The earliest literary works in Japan are poems that date from the seventh and eighth centuries. Using Chinese characters, Japanese poets developed a form of poetry called *tanka*. This poetic form was modeled after Chinese poetry.

Tanka is based on having a set number of syllables in each line of a poem. Each short poem had 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.

20.8 Sculpture: Carving Techniques

Travel to Japan from China and Korea

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

Archeologists have found examples of early Japanese sculpture around burial mounds that date to the fourth and fifth centuries. The sculptures are clay figures of armored warriors, saddled horses, robed ladies, and objects like 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 here.

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 fifth century. Notice the faint smile, the way the hand touches the face, and the waterfall pattern of the folds in the clothing. 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. How is this statue similar to the stone carving from China? In what ways is it different?

From the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the seventh century, Chinese and Korean immigrants created most of Japan's religious art. Japanese artists learned new techniques from them.

The third statue is located near Horyuji Temple in Nara. It was carved by a Japanese artist in the seventh century. Although the Japanese understood bronze working, sculptors in Japan preferred to work in wood. In this case, the artist has covered the wooden statue with gold leaf. As in the other statues, the Buddha's clothing falls into a waterfall pattern. But the Japanese artist has added original touches, like the sweetness of the Buddha's smile and the gentle, graceful way he touches his chin.



These three statues of the Buddha were created by Chinese (top), Korean (center), and Japanese artists. What similarities and differences can you see in the statues?



This five-storied pagoda, part of Horyuji Temple, is over 100 feet tall.

pagoda a tower-shaped structure with several stories and roofs

20.9 Architecture: Adapting Temple Designs with Roots in India and China

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 upside-down 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 were soon built all over the capital. They were intended to contain relics of the Buddha and bodhisattvas.

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, they had raised floors and thatched roofs. Unpainted and undecorated, they blended in with their natural surroundings.

20.10 Music: Adopting New Music and Instruments from China

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 rest of Asia, especially China. *Gagaku*, a form of Chinese court music, arrived in Japan in the sixth 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 pronounced the name *sho*. The *sho* was 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 modern-day quartet is playing some of the traditional musical instruments of *gagaku*.



20.11 Chapter Summary

From the sixth to the ninth centuries, the Japanese acquired and adapted elements of other Asian cultures. Objects, ideas, and customs came to Japan from India, China, and Korea.

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.

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

Koreans introduced the Japanese to Chinese writing. 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.

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. Finally, new kinds of music and instruments came to Japan from China.

All of these cultural elements blended into Japan's unique civilization. In the next chapter, you will learn about the Golden Age of Japanese culture.

This scroll from the 12th century illustrates a Japanese minister's trip to China.

