



◀ This scene from *The Tale of Genji* illustrates the luxurious lifestyle of the Heian period.

# Heian-kyo: The Heart of Japan's Golden Age

## 21.1 Introduction

In Chapter 20, you learned that other Asian cultures influenced Japan. Now you'll see how a uniquely Japanese culture flowered from the 9th to the 12th centuries.

As you have learned, Japan is close enough to the mainland of Asia to be affected by cultural ideas from the continent. At the same time, the waters separating Japan from the mainland helped protect the Japanese from conquest by other Asian peoples. As a result, Japan remained politically independent and had the chance to develop its own civilization.

For most of the 8th century, the city of Nara was Japan's imperial capital. During this time, contacts with China brought many new cultural ideas to Japan. Then, in 794, the emperor Kammu moved the capital to Heian-kyo. (*Kyo* means city in Japanese.) This event marks the start of the **Heian period**, which lasted until 1185.

The Heian period is often called Japan's **Golden Age**. During this time, aristocrats led a great flourishing of Japanese culture. The aristocrats prized beauty, elegance, and correct manners.

Over time, they developed new forms of literature and art. Poets wrote delicately about feelings and the fragile beauties of nature. Court women composed diaries and other types of nonfiction. Painters and sculptors invented new styles of art. Performers entertained the court with new kinds of music, dance, and drama.

The brilliant culture of the Heian period still influences Japanese art and life today. In this chapter, you will learn more about Japan's Golden Age. You'll look at how Heian aristocrats lived and how they created new kinds of Japanese art and literature.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help remember what life was like for a Japanese noble during Japan's Golden Age.



Phoenix Hall was once part of a grand temple near Heian-kyo.

## 21.2 A New Capital

During the 8th century, the Buddhist priests of Nara gained a great deal of influence over the Japanese court. In 784, the emperor Kammu decided to move his capital away from Nara, in part because he thought the priests' power was damaging to the government. The emperor also wanted a larger, grander city for his capital.

The first site Kammu chose was Nagaoka, about 30 miles from Nara. But the move was troubled from early on. As money poured in to build the new city, rumors of **corruption** flew. People said the land had been acquired through a deal with a rich Chinese family. The site also seemed to be unlucky, because the emperor's family suffered illnesses at this time. In 794, the emperor stopped work on the city. Once again he ordered that the capital be moved.

This time Kammu chose a village on the Yodo River. The site was both lovelier than Nagaoka and easier to protect from attacks. Kammu began building a new city he called Heian-kyo, "The Capital of Peace and Tranquility."

Heian-kyo became the first truly Japanese city. Today it is called Kyoto. Like Nara, Heian-kyo was laid out in a checkerboard pattern like the Chinese city of Chang'an. Built on a grand scale, the walled city was lovely and elegant. It was set in forested hills, amid streams, waterfalls, and lakes. It had wide, tree-lined streets. Shrines and temples blended with the area's natural beauty.

Heian-kyo's crisscrossing streets were modeled after those of Chang'an, but the city's architecture was Japanese. In the center of the city were palaces and government offices. Wealthy Heian families lived in mansions surrounded by beautiful gardens with artificial lakes. The grounds of each home covered three to four acres and were enclosed by a white stone wall.

Inside the mansions, large rooms were divided by screens or curtains and connected with open-air covered hallways. Simplicity was considered beautiful, so there were few objects on the wood floors other than straw mats and cushions. The Japanese did not use chairs.

Daily life was very formal, and correct manners were extremely important. For example, a Heian lady sat behind a portable screen. The screen hid her from view while she talked and took part in life around the house. An unmarried lady would permit her suitor to see past the screen only after a romance had become serious.

**corruption** dishonest or illegal practices, especially involving money

## 21.3 The Rise of the Fujiwara Family

During much of the Heian period, aristocrats were the political and cultural leaders of Japan. By the mid-9th century, the real power in the imperial court shifted from the emperor to aristocratic families. The most important of these noble families were the Fujiwara, who controlled Japan for nearly 300 years.

The Fujiwara were never actually rulers. The Japanese believed that the emperor's family was descended from Japan's sun goddess. This gave the royal family a special right to govern. But the Fujiwara had other ways of exercising power.

First, beginning in 858, the Fujiwara married many of their young daughters into the royal family. They also made sure that sons of Fujiwara royal wives were chosen to be emperors. Second, the Fujiwara acted as advisors to the emperor. In reality they had more power than the rulers they guided. They often coaxed older emperors to retire so that a child or youth could take the throne. Then the Fujiwara ruled as regents in the young emperor's name.

The most successful Fujiwara leader was Fujiwara Michinaga, who led Japan from 995 to 1028. He never had an official role in the government. However, this smart, ambitious man had the respect of all around him. He was the father-in-law of four emperors and the grandfather of three more. He lived in great wealth and luxury. Michinaga rightly said, "This world, I think, is indeed my world."

Michinaga is one of the best-known people in Japan's history. During his time in power, the Fujiwara family became even richer. They built palaces, mansions, and temples. After Michinaga's death, his son built a famous temple that came to be called Phoenix Hall. It likely earned this name because it was shaped like a bird in flight. Part of the temple still stands today as a beautiful reminder of Japan's Golden Age.

The Fujiwara family used their power to better their own lives. However, they also kept peace in Japan for nearly three centuries. This peace helped Japanese culture blossom during the Heian period.

Fujiwara Michinaga, one of the most powerful leaders during Japan's Golden Age, was very wealthy. In this page from the diary of Lady Murasaki, Michinaga is entertained by boats on a large pond at his home.



## 21.4 Social Position in the Heian Court

Rank was highly important during the Heian period. A person's rank was determined almost completely by what family he or she came from. Being born into a high-ranking family mattered more than personal qualities or skills.

There were nine main ranks in the Heian court hierarchy. High court nobles filled the top three ranks. These nobles were appointed by the emperor, and they dealt directly with him. Less important officials filled the fourth and fifth ranks. Nobles in all these ranks received profits from rice farms throughout the countryside. They also received money from taxes paid by peasant farmers. The sixth through the ninth ranks were filled by minor officials, clerks, and experts in such fields as law and medicine.

The nine main ranks were divided into classes such as senior and junior, upper and lower. In all, there were some 30 subranks. Each rank brought with it specific privileges and detailed rules about conduct. Members of different ranks had different types of houses and carriages. Rank determined the number of servants people had and even the number of folds in the fans they carried. Men of the first, second, and third ranks carried fans with 25 folds. Men of the fourth and fifth ranks used fans with 23 folds. The fans of those in lower ranks had 12 folds.

This precise ranking system also determined such matters as what color clothing a noble could wear and the height of the gatepost in front of his family's home. In addition, if a person was found guilty of a crime, rank determined how harsh the sentence would be.

Noble women in higher ranks had servants to help them with their personal needs from morning to night.



## 21.5 Beauty and Fashion During the Heian Period

Heian society prized beauty, elegance, and fashion. To be described as *yoki* (good), people had to come from an important family. They also had to look nice and be sensitive to beauty in nature, poetry, and art. Individuals were judged by how good their taste was. The ability to recognize beauty was valued over qualities like generosity and honesty.

Both men and women groomed themselves with great care. Small, pointed beards were considered attractive on male **courtiers**. For women, long hair was an important beauty feature. Ideally, a woman's hair would grow longer than she was tall.

The Japanese of this time considered white teeth unattractive, so both men and women carefully blackened their teeth. They used a dye made from iron and other ingredients soaked in tea or vinegar. How one smelled was also very significant, so both men and women wore scents. Perfume competitions were frequent and popular. People guarded their scent recipes carefully.

For women, makeup was also important. Women used white face powder to make themselves look very pale. Over the chalky powder, a Heian woman put touches of red on her cheeks. Then she painted on a small red mouth. She also plucked out her eyebrows and painted on a set in just the right spot on her forehead.

A woman's clothing needed to be beautiful. An aristocratic woman might wear as many as 12 silk under-ropes at a time. When she rode in a carriage, she might dangle a wrist so that people could see the lovely layers of colored silk.

The love of beauty also showed in Heian architecture, calligraph, poetry, and artwork. Concern with form and beauty was so great that courtiers sometimes performed stylized dances as part of their official duties.



Long hair, eyebrows painted high on the forehead, and bright red lips were signs of beauty during the Heian period.

**courtier** a member of a ruler's court



Noblemen, dressed in silk robes and court hats, enjoy a game of *kemari*. The object of the game was to keep the ball in the air as long as possible.

## 21.6 Entertainment at the Heian Court

Heian-kyo's aristocrats had plenty of leisure time for sporting events, games, and contests. Men enjoyed watching horse races, archery contests, and sumo wrestling. In sumo wrestling, young men of great weight try to throw each other to the ground or out of the ring. When the weather was warm, men and women alike enjoyed watching boat races along the river that ran through the city.

Groups of courtiers played a game called *kemari*, in which they kicked a leather ball back and forth, keeping it in the air for as long as possible. They played in the same elegant robes they wore at court. Women used the stone pieces of the popular board game *go* to play a game called *rango*. The object was to balance as many stones as possible on one finger.

Each of the many festivals and celebrations on the Heian calendar had its own customs. Many involved contests that tested athletic, poetic, or artistic skill. For example, in the Festival of the Snake, cups of wine were floated in a stream. Guests took a cup and drank from it. Then they had to think up and recite a poem. Other special days featured contests that judged the best-decorated fans, the most fragrant perfumes, the loveliest artwork, or the most graceful dancing.

Dancing was an important skill for Heian-kyo's nobles, since dance was part of nearly every festival. *Bugaku* performances were a popular form of entertainment. *Bugaku* combined dance with music and drama. *Bugaku* dancers wore masks and acted out a simple story using memorized movements.

## 21.7 Sculpture and Painting During the Heian Period

During the Heian period, artists continued to be influenced by Chinese art. Gradually, however, sculptors and painters created their own Japanese styles.

Early Heian sculptors commonly made an entire work from one piece of wood. Later in this period, sculptors made statues by carving separate pieces from carefully selected wood and then joining them. With the help of assistants, sculptors could make the separate parts in large quantities. As a result, they could create a group of similar statues quickly and precisely. Jocho, an artist who worked for Fujiwara Michinaga, probably developed this technique.

Jocho made perhaps the greatest masterpiece of Heian sculpture, the Amida Buddha. This Buddha, “The Lord of Boundless Light,” was the subject of much popular worship in Japan. Jocho’s beautifully carved statue expresses a sense of deep peace and strength.

In painting, Heian artists consciously developed a Japanese style. To distinguish it from Chinese-style art, they called it *yamato-e*, or “Japanese painting.” Painters drew their scenes with thin lines and then filled them in with bright colors. Lines were made quickly to suggest movement. In a restful scene, lines were drawn more deliberately.

At first artists used the new style to paint Buddhist subjects. But over time they focused on nonreligious scenes. There were four main types of *yamato-e*: landscapes showing the four seasons, places of natural beauty, people doing seasonal tasks, and scenes from literature (called “story paintings”).

The new style of painting was used to decorate walls, screens, and the sliding doors of houses and temples. Some of the most famous examples of *yamato-e*, however, are scroll paintings. A scroll painting shows a series of scenes from right to left, so that viewers see events in time order as they unroll the scroll. Scroll painting had been invented in China, but Heian painters added their own distinctive touches. For example, they often showed scenes inside buildings from above, as if the viewer were peering through an invisible roof.

This statue is made of joined pieces of wood. The peg at the shoulder would have fit into the arm piece.





## 21.8 Writing and Literature During the Heian Period

Writing was the most valued form of expression in Heian Japan. Everyone was expected to show skill in using words well. Early Heian writers composed artful poems in Chinese. As time went on, distinctly Japanese ways of writing developed, both in daily life and in the creation of works of literature.

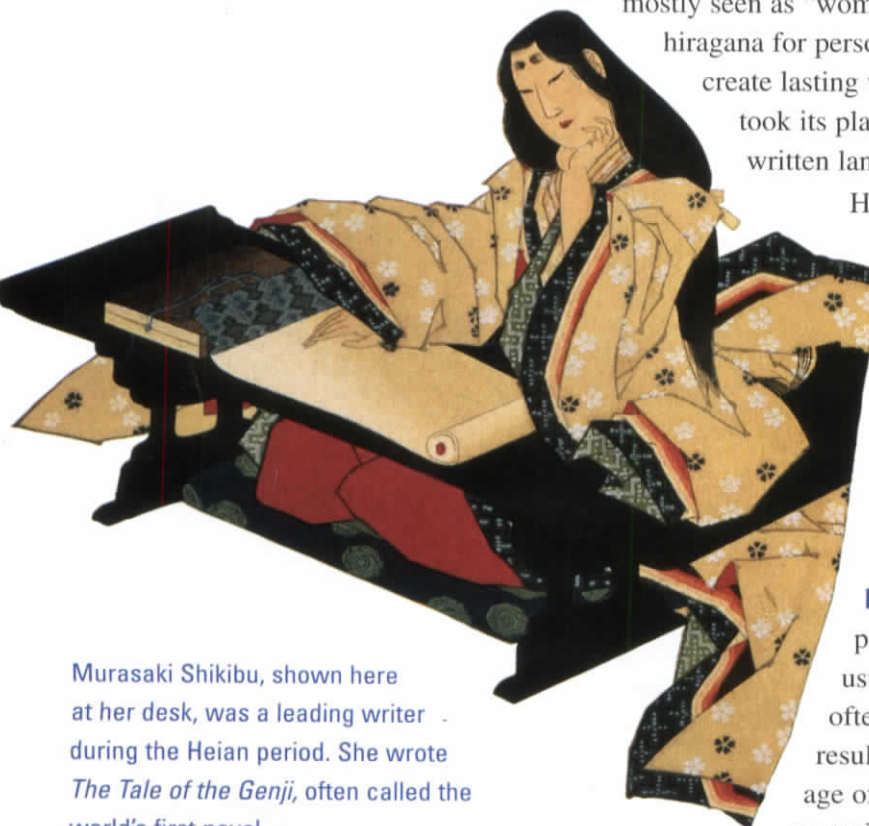
**Writing in Daily Life** Poetry was part of daily life in Heian-kyo. People were expected to make up poetry in public. If they could not think up a few clever lines to fit an occasion, others noticed the failure. Men and women carefully created poems to charm each other. When someone received a poem from a friend, family member, or acquaintance, he or she was expected to write a response. The reply poem was supposed to have the same style, mood, and **imagery** as the original.

**imagery** descriptive or imaginative language, especially when used to inspire mental “pictures”

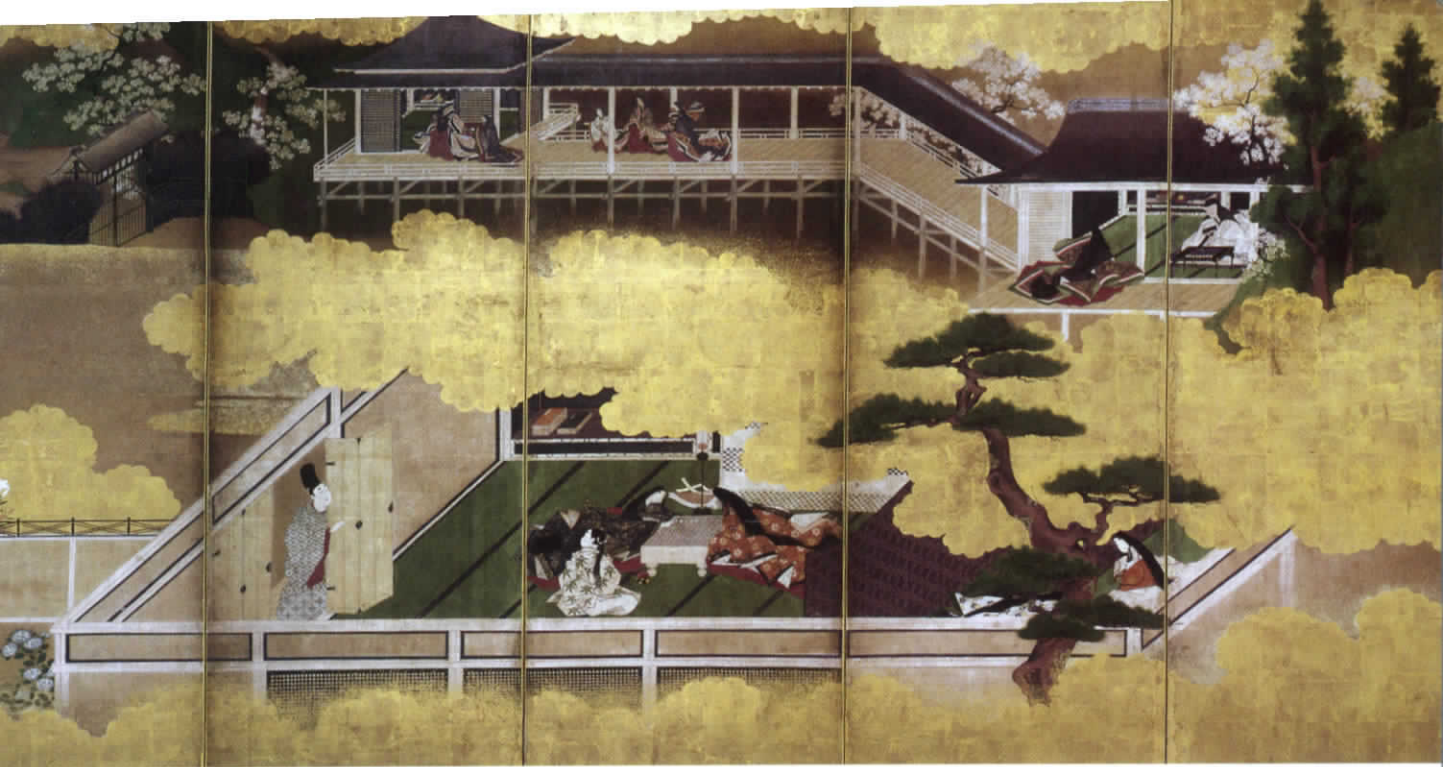
In the last chapter, you learned how the Japanese used kana to write the syllables of their language with simplified Chinese characters. In Heian times, there were two ways of writing syllables, much like two separate alphabets. One, *katakana*, was more formal. Men used *katakana* when they wrote anything important. The second way of writing syllables was *hiragana*. Characters in *hiragana* are formed with simple strokes that make writing and reading easier and faster. *Hiragana* was mostly seen as “women’s writing.” Court women favored *hiragana* for personal writing, and some of them used it to create lasting works of literature. Over time, *hiragana* took its place alongside *katakana* as part of Japan’s written language.

Heian writers took care to present their work in a beautiful manner. Calligraphy skills were as important as the ability to create poetry. People believed that handwriting revealed their character and goodness better than the words they used. Calligraphy was often displayed on colorful, handmade paper. Sometimes the paper was even perfumed.

**Women Become Japan’s Leading Writers** The female companions to the courtiers of Heian-kyo were usually selected for their intelligence. They often took a great interest in literature. As a result, women led the flowering of a golden age of Japanese literature in the 10th and 11th centuries.



Murasaki Shikibu, shown here at her desk, was a leading writer during the Heian period. She wrote *The Tale of the Genji*, often called the world’s first novel.



The best-known Heian writer was Murasaki Shikibu. Born into the Fujiwara family, she served as a lady-in-waiting to one of the daughters of Michinaga Fujiwara. Her novel, *The Tale of Genji*, is a Heian masterpiece. Today it is regarded as one of the great works in world literature.

*The Tale of Genji* is often called the world's first novel. The book follows the love life of Genji, a fictional prince. It paints a vivid picture of life in the Heian court. Much of the book focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the characters, particularly the women. As a result, *The Tale of Genji* has served as a model for the modern romance novel.

Shikibu also kept a diary about her life in the court. Like her novel, her diary offers historians a close look at court life in the 10th and 11th centuries.

The other leading writer of the time was Sei Shonagon. Like *The Tale of Genji*, Shonagon's *Pillow Book* presents a detailed picture of life in Heian-kyo. *Pillow Book* is a collection of clever stories, character sketches, conversations, descriptions of art and nature, and various lists. Here is Shonagon's list of "Things That Should Be Short":

*A piece of thread when one wants to sew something in a hurry.*

*A lamp stand.*

*The hair of a woman of the lower classes should be neat and short.*

*The speech of a young girl.*

Like Sei Shonagon, many Heian women wrote their thoughts and experiences in diaries. A book called *The Gossamer Years* is the earliest existing example. This diary by an unknown noblewoman describes her unhappy life as companion to a Fujiwara leader. Writers often included artwork, poems, and letters in their diary entries.

*The Tale of Genji* describes the life of Japanese nobles during the Heian period. The painting on this detail of a six-panel screen is an illustration of a scene from the novel.

## 21.9 The End of the Heian Period

The Heian period is known as Japan's Golden Age of peace. But despite the glittering imperial court, problems were brewing that would bring an end to the Heian period.

Aristocrats in Heian-kyo lived very well, but in Japan's rural areas most people were quite poor. The peasants' farming and other work supported Heian-kyo's rich. Even so, the wealthy looked down on the poor and ignored their problems.

While the rich focused on culture in Heian-kyo, events in the countryside began to weaken the Heian court. The practice of giving large estates to top nobles slowly reduced the emperors' power. Those who owned these estates paid no taxes. After a time, tax-free land was quite common. The government could no longer collect enough taxes to support the emperor.

Japan's rulers began to lose control. Bandits roamed the countryside. People of different religions began to band together to attack and rob each other. The government was now too weak to supply law enforcement. Estate owners created their own police and armies to protect their lands. The profits from landowners' estates went to paying the warriors instead of supporting the emperor.

By the 12th century, the power of some local lords rivaled that of the weakened imperial government. Fighting broke out over control of the land. Meanwhile, various clans struggled for power in the capital. By 1180, there was civil war in Japan.

In 1185, Minamoto Yoritomo, the head of a military family, seized power. A new era began in which military leaders controlled Japan. You will read more about this era in the next chapter.

The wealthy nobles during the Heian period ignored the problems of poor people in Japan's rural areas.



## 21.10 The Effect of the Heian Period on Japan Today

As you have learned, the Heian period saw the birth of a uniquely Japanese culture. The effects of this flowering of culture are still felt today. In fact, much of Japan's culture has remained quite constant since the Heian period. This can be seen most clearly in Japan's literature and drama.

Heian authors influenced many later Japanese writers. *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon are classics. They are as basic to Japan as Shakespeare's works are to English speakers.

The success of these writers had a major effect on Japan's written language. The Japanese people today write with the same characters used in *The Tale of Genji*.

Heian influence can also be seen in modern poetry. The short poems called *tanka* were very popular in Heian times. *Tanka* poetry is still a vibrant part of Japanese literature today.

Modern Japanese drama also shows Heian influences. As you may recall, the *bugaku* performances of Heian times blended dance and drama. *Bugaku* led to Japan's unique **Noh theater**. In *Noh* dramas, a chorus sings a heroic story as performers dance and act it out. *Noh* theater is centuries old, but it is still a popular form of entertainment in Japan.

This painting is another illustrated scene from *The Tale of Genji*.



**Noh theater** a classic form of Japanese drama involving heroic themes, a chorus, and dance

## 21.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the Golden Age of Japanese culture. During the Heian period, aristocrats—especially the Fujiwara family—dominated the imperial court. They created a culture that was uniquely Japanese.

The aristocrats of Heian-kyo lived in great luxury. They prized beauty, elegance, and correct manners. Heian artists created new Japanese forms of sculpture and painting. Court women wrote classic works of Japanese literature.

The Heian period ended in civil war and the rise of new military leaders. In the next chapter, you will learn how these leaders created a warrior culture in Japan.