

AN INTRODUCTION TO JAPAN







An Introduction to Japan

The Educational Resource Guide was created by staff at the Embassy of Japan, all of whom have had experience living, studying, and working in Japan. It aims to both present a comprehensive overview of Japanese society and culture and be a source of inspiration for children and adults alike to learn more!

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GEOGRAPHY OF JAPAN

- 73% of land is mountainous and hilly, 12.5% is used for agriculture
- 145,936 sq. mi. (slightly smaller than California)
- A mostly temperate climate with four distinct seasons
- Comprised of four large islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and other smaller islands
- Has 47 prefectures
- Largest cities by population: Tokyo (Capital), Yokohama, Osaka, Nagoya, and Sapporo

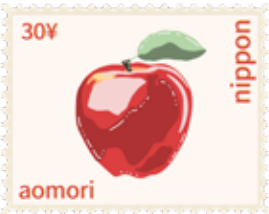


- Consists of more than 6,800 islands
- Lies on the “Pacific Ring of Fire,” and has over 100 active volcanoes and about 1,500 earthquakes on average per year due to its tectonic plate activity



Sapporo City

The largest city in Hokkaido prefecture. Sapporo is known for its famous Snow Festival held every February.
Icon: Snow Sculpture



Aomori Prefecture

Known for its delicious apples and the giant illuminated lantern floats of the Nebuta Festival.
Icon: Apple



Tokyo Metropolis

Formerly called “Edo,” Tokyo got its name when it became Japan’s official capital in 1868.
Icon: Tokyo Skytree



Fukushima Prefecture

The third largest prefecture in Japan, famous for *akabeko*, which is a traditional toy.
Icon: Akabeko



Nagoya City

An industrial hub that’s also home to the ancient traditions of the famous Atsuta Shrine.
Icon: *Shachihoko*



Kyoto City

Once the capital and now one of the most historical cities in Japan.
Icon: Kinkakuji



Osaka City

A vibrant city famous for its street foods like *okonomiyaki*, a Japanese savory pancake.
Icon: Osaka Castle



Fukuoka Prefecture

Food markets and cutting-edge architecture blend harmoniously with Japan’s southern natural landscape.
Icon: *Tonkotsu* Ramen



Hiroshima Prefecture

Some of the most spectacular fall foliage in the world can be seen on Miyajima.
Icon: Water *Torii*



Mt. Fuji

The tallest mountain in Japan and an active volcano at 12,388 ft. tall.



Okinawa Prefecture

Has an interesting mix of indigenous Ryukyu culture and Japanese culture, which is noticeable in the cuisine, architecture, performing arts, and unique dialect.
Icon: *Shisa*



Nagasaki Prefecture

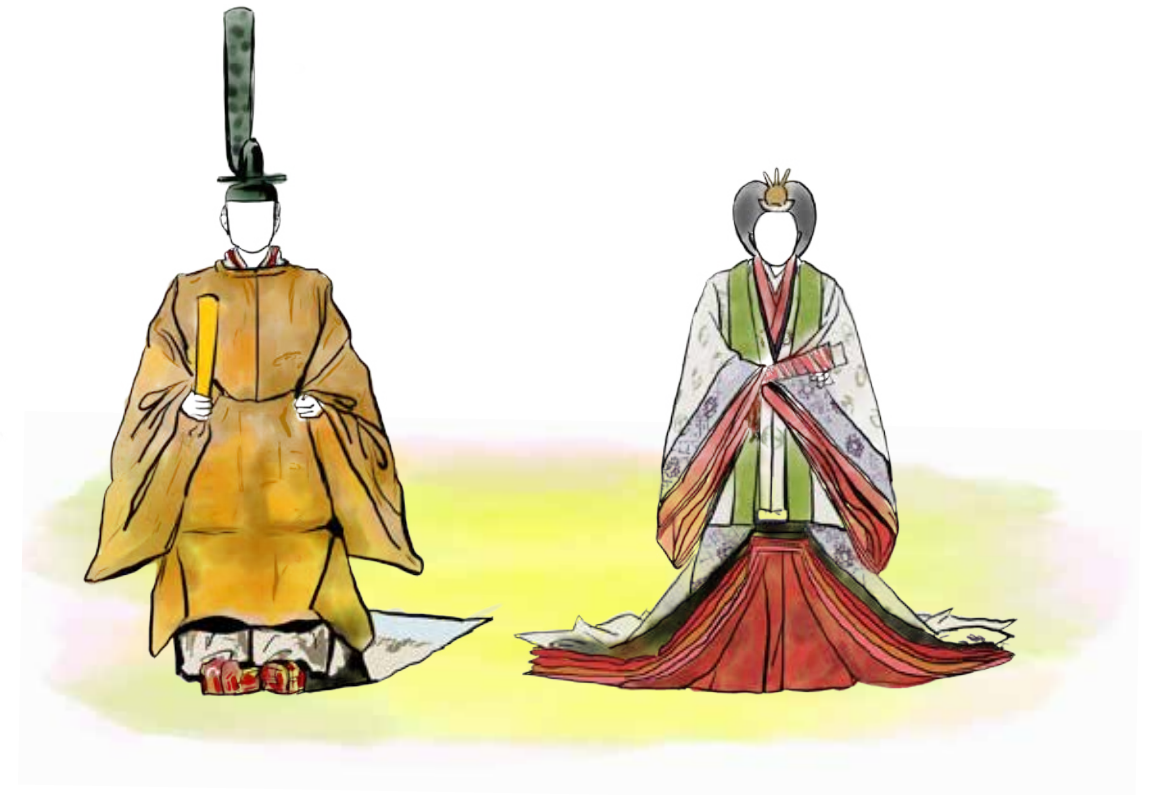
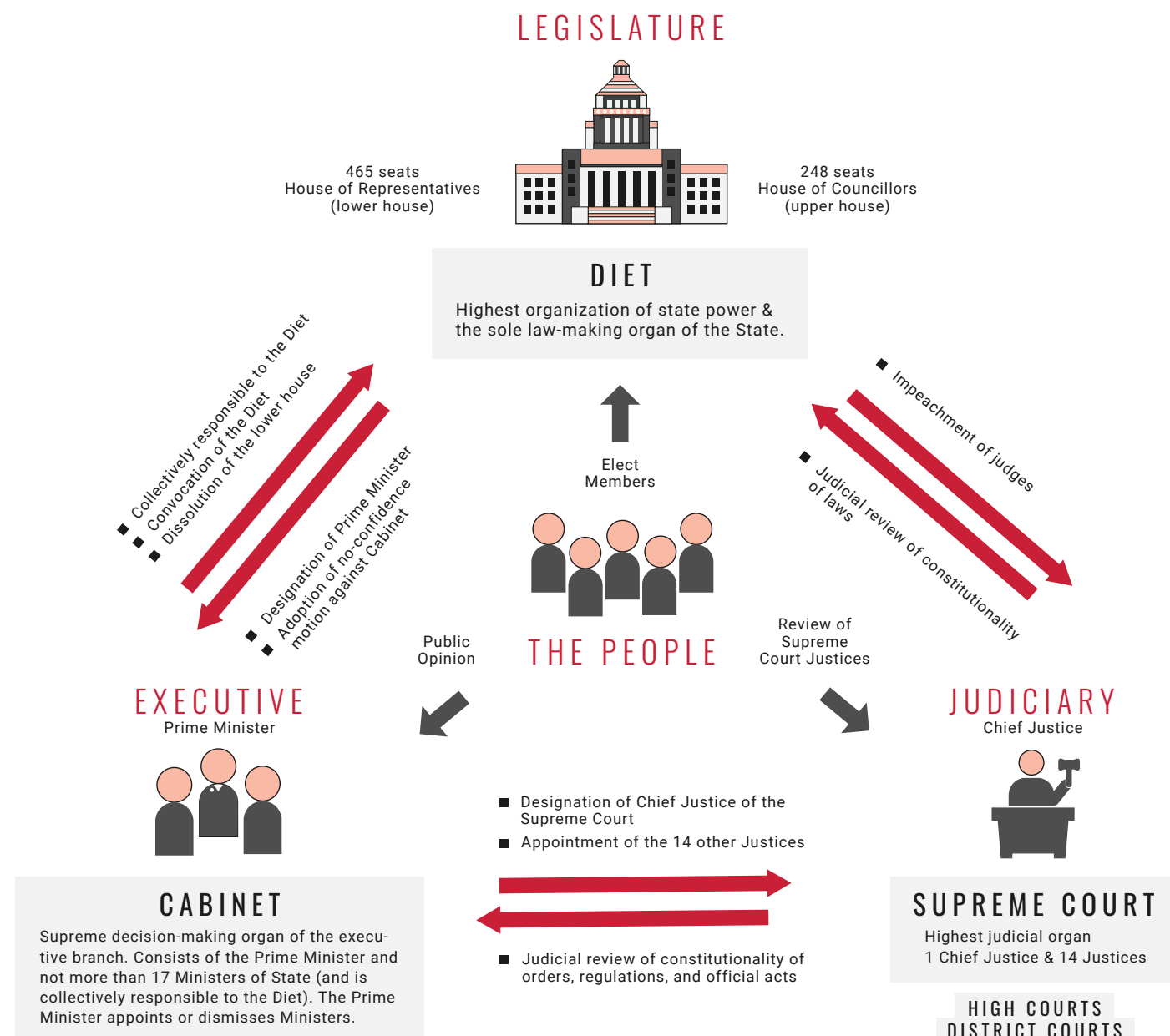
In the Edo period (1603-1867) Nagasaki was the only port allowed to trade with other nations due to the national isolation policy.
Icon: Dutch Trade Boat

GOVERNMENT

Japan has a parliamentary system of government. While the Emperor remains an important symbol of unity, all governmental decisions are handled by the three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The Constitution of Japan came into effect in 1947, emphasizing principles of sovereignty, respect for fundamental human rights, and advocacy of peace.

Separation of Powers

The Constitution of Japan provides for the principle of the separation of powers. Three independent organs — the Diet, the Cabinet, and the Judiciary — are established, and each limits the power of the others through a system of checks and balances. This prevents the abuse of power and guarantees the rights and freedom of the people.



Emperor and Nengo

While Japan uses the Gregorian calendar that is used in the U.S., Japan also has its own calendar that counts years from the start of each emperor's reign. The years within a single emperor's reign are part of an era classified with a *nengo*, or Japanese era name. This "one reign, one era name" was adopted in the Meiji era beginning in 1868.

Nengo eras: Meiji (1868–1912), Taisho (1912–1926), Showa (1926–1989), Heisei (1989–2019), and Reiwa (2019–present).

In 2019, Emperor Akihito abdicated the throne, leaving his son, Prince Naruhito, to ascend the Chrysanthemum Throne and become Emperor of Japan. This resulted in the end of the Heisei era and the beginning of a new era, Reiwa, or "beautiful harmony." May 1, 2019 was the official first day of Reiwa 1, with January 1st to April 30th still considered Heisei 31. On that day, many Japanese people marked the momentous occasion with gatherings and celebration.

The Emperor is the symbol of Japan and of the unity of the people. He performs acts in matters of state with the advice and approval of the Cabinet, such as the promulgation of amendments of the Constitution, laws, cabinet orders and treaties, the convocation of the Diet, etc. While he has no powers related to government, he appoints the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court as designated by the Diet and the Cabinet respectively.

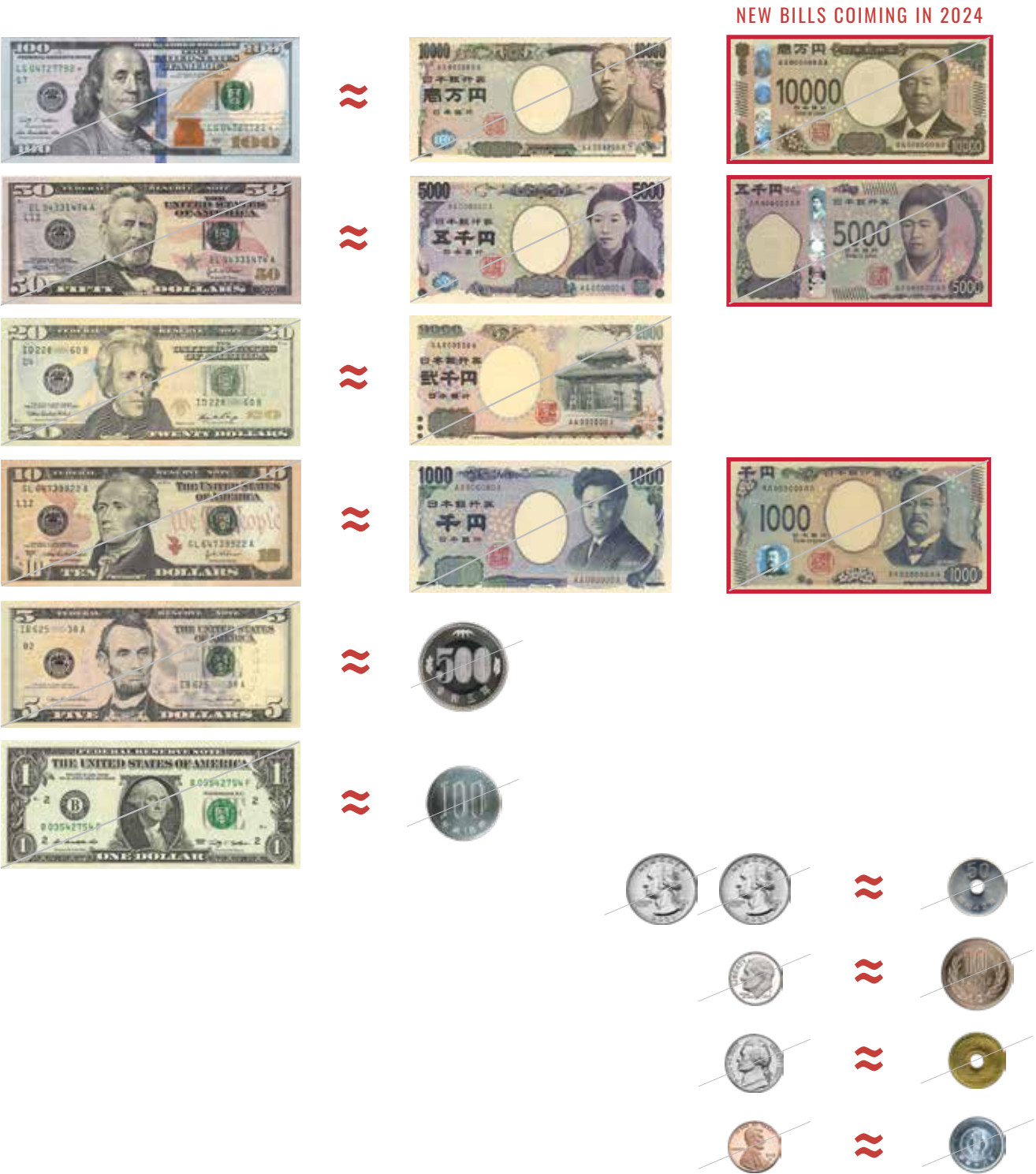
In this respect, the position of the Emperor in postwar Japan differs from that in prewar days when the Emperor was the source of sovereign power.

The Imperial Throne is dynastic and succeeded from father to son.

CURRENCY

Yen

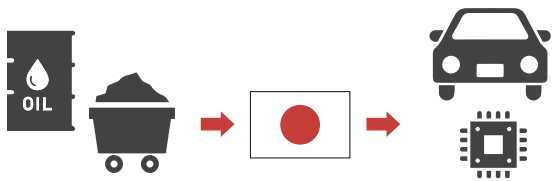
The official currency of Japan, the Japanese Yen (JPY), is the third most traded currency in the foreign exchange market. The word yen means “circle” or “round object.” Yen was officially adopted by the Meiji government in 1871 as part of the modernization policy of Japan’s economy. In March 2023, the exchange rate of 1 USD averaged around 140 JPY.



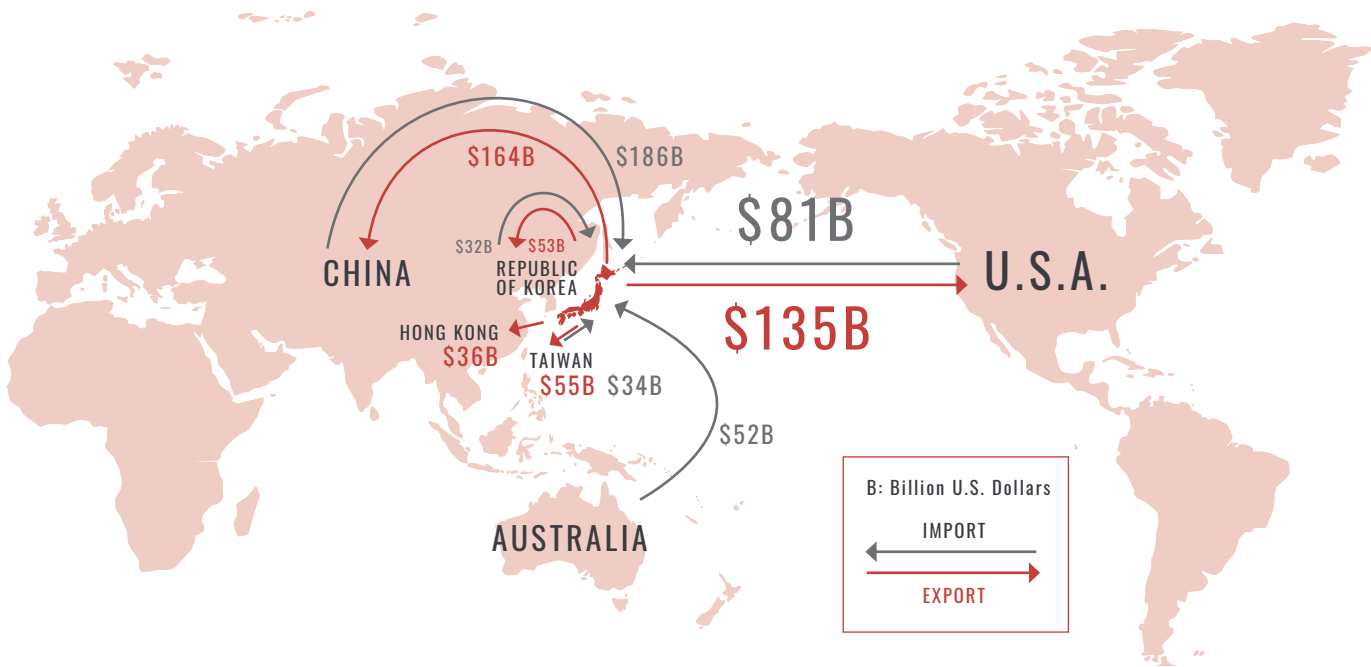
ECONOMY

3rd Largest Economy in the World (Nominal GDP, 2022)

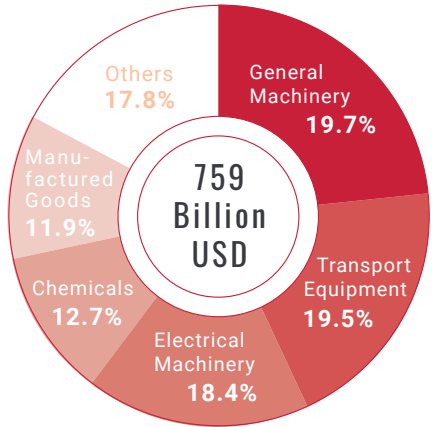
As Japan is a small island nation with few natural resources, items such as petroleum, food, and minerals must be imported from other countries. That said, Japan is a major player in international trade. Japan’s impressive export performance can be explained by the wide variety of its industrial output, the shift to products with a high value, its competitiveness, and the leading position of its industry in a number of fields.



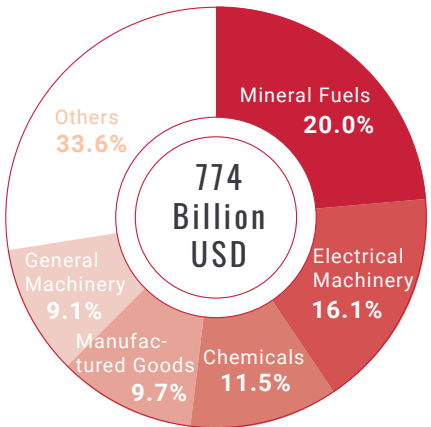
Top 5 Export & Import Partners (2021)



Top 5 Products Exports (2021)



Top 5 Products Imports (2021)



Source: JETRO, Statistics Bureau of Japan

JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Although Japan is becoming more and more diverse, Japanese remains the primary language of Japan. A standardized version spoken in Tokyo is now common across all prefectures; however, unique dialects and accents still exist regionally. The first Japanese writing system was adapted from that of China sometime in the 5th or 6th century. This writing system, called *kanji*, consists of pictures (or logograms) that represent words or ideas. Since these characters were originally from the Chinese language, they could not accommodate the different sounds and words found in Japanese. Thus, two other writing systems called *hiragana* and *katakana* were developed.



Traditionally, the Japanese language is written top to bottom and read right to left; however, while that style is still used in contemporary Japan, Japanese can also be written horizontally and read left to right like the English language. You can find examples of both writing styles in Japan today: in Japanese novels, magazines, and manga (Japanese comics) written top to bottom and right to left, or in emails or websites written horizontally and left to right. Above are a couple examples of what it would look like in both forms.

Kanji

Kanji use a number of strokes to represent words, which can combine to express further ideas or concepts. They often have several pronunciations, and the correct one is determined by the surrounding characters. Today, Japanese people must learn about 2,000 kanji for literacy, though traditional texts, proper names, and technical writing show as many as 50,000 kanji in existence. By 6th grade, students are expected to read and write approximately 1,000 kanji.

Picture of the sun becomes the kanji for day or "hi" Practice!

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Hiragana

Hiragana is a phonetic script made up of 46 characters created by simplifying cursive-style kanji characters. It was first popularized as a literary script mainly used by women of the imperial court in 11th century Japan, some of the most notable being Murasaki Shikibu who wrote the literary classic, *The Tale of Genji*, and Sei Shounagon who wrote the original *zuihitsu* poem, *The Pillow Book*. In modern Japan it is mainly used for Japanese words, particles, and verb endings.

An (secure, ease) becomes the hiragana あ or "a" Practice!

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Katakana

Katakana is also a phonetic script made up of 46 characters and similar to hiragana. It was created through the simplification of select components of certain kanji characters. However, you may notice it is much boxier and less soft-looking than its counterpart hiragana. Katakana is mainly used for loanwords – for example, many Western names would be written in katakana – but it is also used for emphasis, onomatopoeias, and scientific names of flora and fauna.

A (curves of river or mountain) becomes the katakana ア or "a" Practice!

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Hiragana Chart

あ <small>A</small>	い <small>I</small>	う <small>U</small>	え <small>E</small>	お <small>O</small>
か <small>KA</small>	き <small>KI</small>	く <small>KU</small>	け <small>KE</small>	こ <small>KO</small>
が <small>GA</small>	ぎ <small>GI</small>	ぐ <small>GU</small>	げ <small>GE</small>	ご <small>GO</small>
さ <small>SA</small>	し <small>SHI</small>	す <small>SU</small>	せ <small>SE</small>	そ <small>SO</small>
ざ <small>ZA</small>	じ <small>JI</small>	ず <small>ZU</small>	ぜ <small>ZE</small>	ぞ <small>ZO</small>
た <small>TA</small>	ち <small>CHI</small>	つ <small>TSU</small>	て <small>TE</small>	と <small>TO</small>
だ <small>DA</small>	ぢ <small>JI</small>	づ <small>ZU</small>	で <small>DE</small>	ど <small>DO</small>
な <small>NA</small>	に <small>NI</small>	ぬ <small>NU</small>	ね <small>NE</small>	の <small>NO</small>
は <small>HA</small>	ひ <small>HI</small>	ふ <small>FU</small>	へ <small>HE</small>	ほ <small>HO</small>
ば <small>BA</small>	び <small>BI</small>	ぶ <small>BU</small>	べ <small>BE</small>	ぼ <small>BO</small>
ぱ <small>PA</small>	ぴ <small>PI</small>	ぷ <small>PU</small>	ぺ <small>PE</small>	ぽ <small>PO</small>
ま <small>MA</small>	み <small>MI</small>	む <small>MU</small>	め <small>ME</small>	も <small>MO</small>
ら <small>RA</small>	り <small>RI</small>	る <small>RU</small>	れ <small>RE</small>	ろ <small>RO</small>
や <small>YA</small>		ゆ <small>YU</small>		よ <small>YO</small>
わ <small>WA</small>				を <small>WO</small>
		ん <small>N</small>		







ひらがな

Katakana Chart

ア <small>A</small>	イ <small>I</small>	ウ <small>U</small>	エ <small>E</small>	オ <small>O</small>
カ <small>KA</small>	キ <small>KI</small>	ク <small>KU</small>	ケ <small>KE</small>	コ <small>KO</small>
ガ <small>GA</small>	ギ <small>GI</small>	グ <small>GU</small>	ゲ <small>GE</small>	ゴ <small>GO</small>
サ <small>SA</small>	シ <small>SHI</small>	ス <small>SU</small>	セ <small>SE</small>	ソ <small>SO</small>
ザ <small>ZA</small>	ジ <small>JI</small>	ズ <small>ZU</small>	ゼ <small>ZE</small>	ゾ <small>ZO</small>
タ <small>TA</small>	チ <small>CHI</small>	ツ <small>TSU</small>	テ <small>TE</small>	ト <small>TO</small>
ダ <small>DA</small>	ヂ <small>JI</small>	ヅ <small>ZU</small>	デ <small>DE</small>	ド <small>DO</small>
ナ <small>NA</small>	ニ <small>NI</small>	ヌ <small>NU</small>	ネ <small>NE</small>	ノ <small>NO</small>
ハ <small>HA</small>	ヒ <small>HI</small>	フ <small>FU</small>	ヘ <small>HE</small>	ホ <small>HO</small>
バ <small>BA</small>	ビ <small>BI</small>	ブ <small>BU</small>	ベ <small>BE</small>	ボ <small>BO</small>
パ <small>PA</small>	ピ <small>PI</small>	プ <small>PU</small>	ペ <small>PE</small>	ポ <small>PO</small>
マ <small>MA</small>	ミ <small>MI</small>	ム <small>MU</small>	メ <small>ME</small>	モ <small>MO</small>
ラ <small>RA</small>	リ <small>RI</small>	ル <small>RU</small>	レ <small>RE</small>	ロ <small>RO</small>
ヤ <small>YA</small>		ユ <small>YU</small>		ヨ <small>YO</small>
ワ <small>WA</small>				ヲ <small>WO</small>
		ン <small>N</small>		

カタカナ

Guess what these kanji mean!

Pictogram	Kanji	Pronunciation	English
	目	me moku boku ma	1 _____
	山	yama san sen zan	2 _____
	火	ka hi ho	3 _____
	木	boku moku ki ko	4 _____
	林	hayashi rin	5 _____
	森	mori shin	6 _____

Answer: 1 eye 2 mountain 3 fire 4 tree 5 woods 6 forest

Let's Practice Hiragana!

good morning || ohayou

おはよう

thank you || arigatou

ありがとう

see you later || mata ne

またね

hello || konnichiwa

good morning || ohayou

please || onegai shimasu

thank you || arigatou

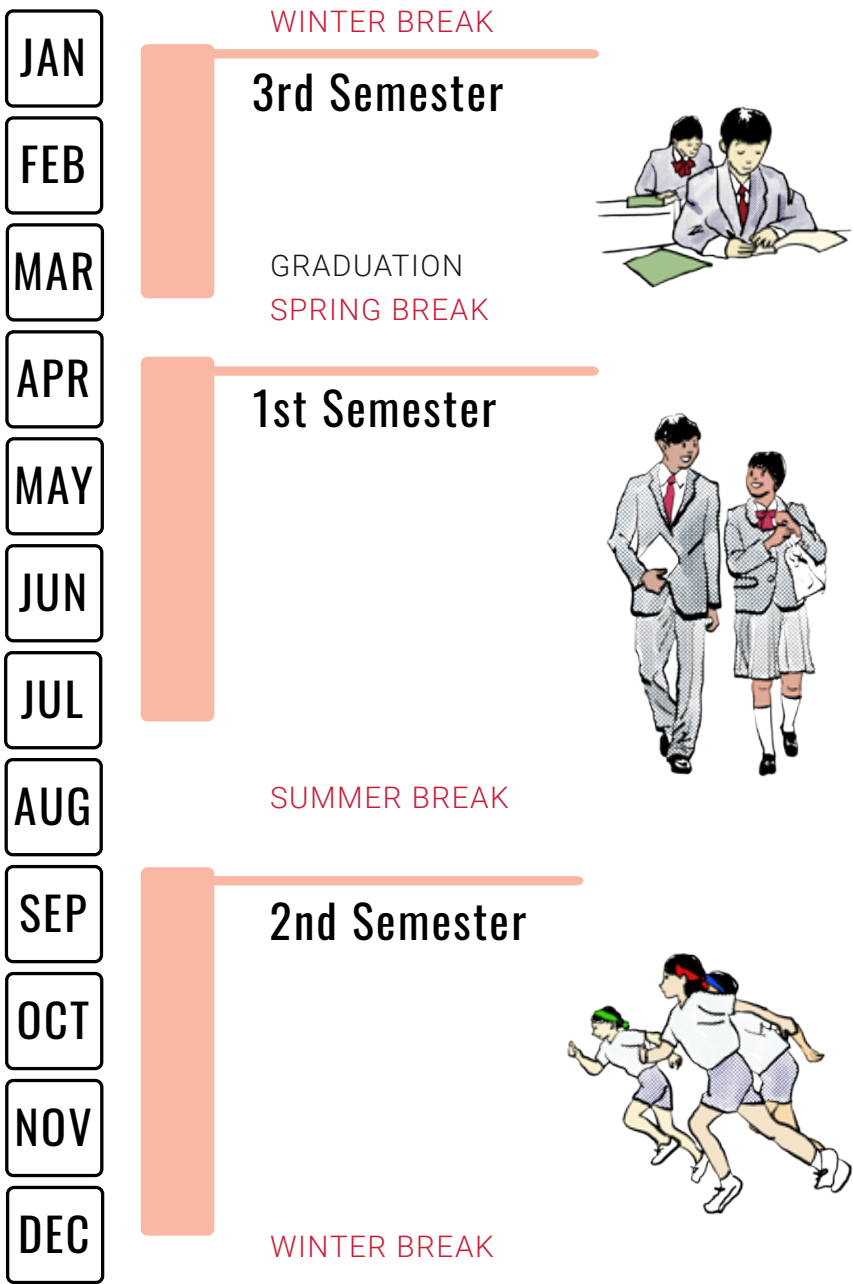
it's ok || daijoubu

see you later || mata ne

EDUCATION

While formal education has existed in Japan since the 6th century, it was not until the Edo period (1603-1867) that it became widespread and accessible to people of all class levels. The current educational system was introduced in the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education and the School Education Law. Under these laws, elementary (ES) to junior high school (JHS) education was made compulsory. Kindergartens and preschools are also popular options for students in modern Japan. Most schools in Japan, both public and private, require school uniforms from junior high to high school (HS).

The Japanese School Year



DID YOU KNOW?

Most JHS and HS students are required to wear uniforms. Each school has its own unique uniform and may have variations for the seasons!

SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS

The Japanese school year begins in April and ends in March with short breaks between each semester.

DID YOU KNOW?

While only ES and JHS are compulsory, 98% of students continue on to HS and 95% graduate!

Elementary School 1st - 6th grade (6 years)



Children enter 1st grade in the April after their sixth birthday and complete ES upon finishing 6th grade. Many students walk to school everyday. This custom teaches responsibility, pedestrian safety, and independence. Younger students commonly wear a special yellow hat when walking, called *tsugaku boshi*. Students learn 1,026 kanji (roughly half of the 2,136 used in daily life) before graduating. As of 2020, English is a compulsory class starting in 3rd grade.

Junior High School 7th - 9th grade (3 years)



Many JHS students go to their neighborhood schools. However, some go to private schools further from home. Most JHS students will join a club after school, ranging from soccer to calligraphy to table tennis. Many third-year students will spend much of their school year preparing for HS entrance exams.

High School 10th - 12th grade (3 years)



98.8% of JHS students go on to HS, and the majority of them graduate (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2019). To attend public high school, students must take an entrance exam. Some students may even live in or attend a school outside of their prefecture if it excels in their preferred area of study.

University



In 2017, there were 86 national universities, 90 public universities, and 604 private universities in Japan. National universities are extremely competitive and consistently rank among the top schools in Japan. The number of international students attending Japanese universities in 2018 was 298,980, a 12% increase from the year before (Japan Student Services Organization, 2018). Circles, or student organizations/groups, are a popular form of socialization among university students in Japan. The majority of university students commute to school from their homes rather than living on campus in dorms.

SCHOOL LIFE

Students in Japan study many subjects commonly found in the U.S. school system, including math, science, language arts, foreign languages, physical education, and home economics. Japanese school curriculums may also incorporate civics, ethics, fine arts, as well as traditional arts such as Japanese calligraphy, known as *shodo*, and haiku.

Students in Japan are assigned a homeroom with a teacher who, with student leaders, conducts homeroom at the start and the end of the day. Unlike most American schools, the students do not move from classroom to classroom, but instead teachers go to the students' homeroom classrooms to teach.

A Typical Schedule in the Week of a Junior High School Student

Hour 時間	Monday 月	Tuesday 火	Wednesday 水	Thursday 木	Friday 金
8:30~8:50	Homeroom - 朝の会				
1 8:55~9:45	Japanese 国語	Math 数学	Japanese 国語	Math 数学	Japanese 国語
2 9:55~10:45	English 英語	PE 体育	English 英語	English 英語	Science 理科
3 10:55~11:45	Science 理科	Japanese 国語	Music 音楽	Home Economics 家庭	English 英語
4 11:55~12:45	Math 数学	Science 理科	Social Studies 社会	Home Economics 家庭	Math 数学
12:45~1:10	Lunch - 昼食				
1:10~1:25	Recess - 昼休み				
5 1:35~2:25	Social Studies 社会	Art 美術	Tech Ed 技術	Science 理科	Social Studies 社会
6 2:35~3:35	PE 体育	Art 美術	Study Hall 総合学習	PE 体育	Homeroom
3:35~3:45	Cleaning - 掃除				
3:45~4:00	Homeroom - 帰りの会				
4:00~	Club Activities - 部活動				

Student Activities

SCHOOL LUNCH

In ES and JHS, students typically eat school lunch in their classrooms. In many schools, students take turns serving lunch to their classmates. The lunch is prepared by the school or local school lunch centers featuring local and seasonal specialties, with extra care given to the nutritional balance of the meal.



CLEANING TIME

Generally, Japanese schools do not have a custodian! From ES to HS, students clean the classrooms, halls, and yards of their school every day. This activity teaches cleanliness and respect for the space they work in and share with others.



CLUB ACTIVITIES

Many students from ES to HS will participate in afterschool club activities. In ES, sports such as soccer or basketball are offered while options increase in JHS and HS. In addition to sports, this usually includes martial arts, band, and traditional Japanese arts like *shodo*. Clubs will meet after school for one or two hours and sometimes on weekends.



SPORTS DAYS & CULTURE FESTIVAL

Students at all levels participate in a Sports Day every year: the entire school competes in a full day of sporting events like relays, sprints, obstacle courses, etc. JHS and HS students participate in a yearly Culture Festival as well. Culture Festivals can look different at every school. Some popular Culture Festival events include school plays, choir competitions, themed classrooms with activities like a haunted house, and food stalls. In addition, student clubs will often use the Culture Festival to showcase their talents and passions with special performances and exhibitions.



JUKU

Many students, especially those in their third year of JHS and HS, will attend *juku*, or cram schools. These schools help students better prepare for entrance exams to get into highly competitive high schools and universities.



FLAVORS OF JAPAN

Japan is home to delicious foods and flavors. Whether you love savory ramen or fresh sushi, Japan has a wide range of appetizing cuisine to enjoy. Japanese cuisine, or *washoku*, touches on all the flavor profiles: sweet, bitter, salty, sour, spicy, and *umami*.

Umami was identified as a unique flavor by Japan in 1908 and translates as a “delicious taste.” It refers to a savory, rich flavor that can be found in many Japanese dishes containing mushrooms, meats, bone broths, and fish. Let’s explore some uniquely Japanese foods and recipes together!

Core Japanese Food Staples

Kombu

Kombu is a type of seaweed used to create strong, umami broths and soups. It can be used in salads and other dishes as well to bring a full flavor to the dish.

Miso

Miso is a paste made from fermented soybeans and is a Japanese staple in the kitchen. It is known for its umami flavor and can be added to many dishes to increase flavor.

Mirin

Mirin is a sweet rice liquor made exclusively for cooking purposes. Mirin can be used to boil, cook, and stir fry many common Japanese dishes and adds a uniquely Japanese flavor.

Dashi

Dashi is soup stock that can be made from *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes), kombu, *niboshi* (a type of small dried fish), or shiitake mushrooms and creates a very rich, savory soup stock used in various dishes like ramen.

Yuzu

Yuzu is a unique citrus fruit resembling a cross between a lemon and mandarin orange. It’s commonly used in Japanese cuisine as a zest and is a key ingredient in *ponzu* (citrus-based sauce).

Shoyu

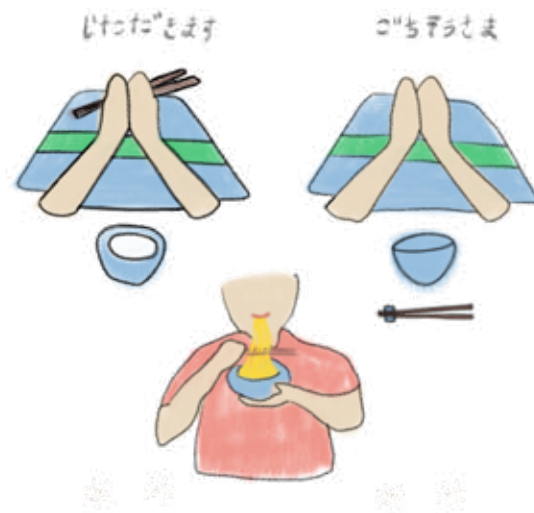
Shoyu is a Japanese-style soy sauce made from fermented soy beans, wheat, salt, and water. From sushi to ramen, shoyu is an integral pillar of Japanese cooking.



JAPANESE FOOD ETIQUETTE

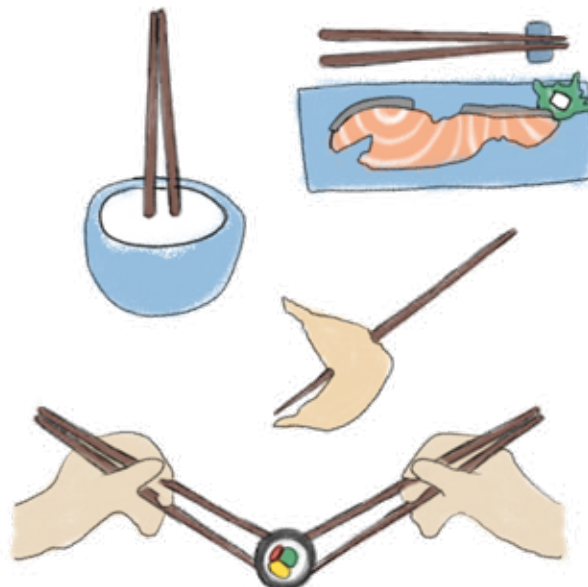
The Do's ○

- Say "*itadakimasu*," or "let's eat," before enjoying your meal
- Pick up your bowl or small plate and bring it closer to your mouth (you can also drink soup or broth directly from the bowl without a spoon)
- It's ok to slurp your ramen and soup
- Say "*gochisosama*," or "thank you for the meal," to the chef when you are finished



The Don'ts ✕

- Stick your chopsticks up vertically in the food or rice – instead, place them flat on a surface or plate
- Use a single chopstick to stab food
- Pass food from chopstick to chopstick, or use chopsticks to move bones, as these actions are used for funeral ceremonies
- Point with your chopsticks
- Leave too much food unfinished – try to eat everything as a sign of appreciation



A TYPICAL JAPANESE MEAL

While Western foods are very popular and have been adapted to Japanese tastes, traditional family meals throughout Japan usually follow the *ichijyu-sansai* approach, which means one soup, three sides. Rice is combined with two or three dishes called *okazu*. Typically, a main fish or meat dish is complemented by either simmered, seasoned, or pickled vegetable side dishes. Let's look at a few examples below!





RECIPE: ONIGIRI

Onigiri (rice balls) are a beloved and timeless snack in Japan. Different forms of onigiri date back as far as the 11th century and were often eaten as quick snacks by samurai on the go in the 17th century. They are made by simply using your hands and cooked Japanese short grain rice. Adding different fillings like pickled plums, kombu, tuna and mayo, chicken, etc., can add new, interesting flavors to your snack! Onigiri are perfect for lunch, picnics, and any time a quick, delicious meal on the go is necessary.

Ingredients: Serving size = 2-3 onigiri

- 1 cup cooked Japanese short grain rice
- 1 sheet of *nori* (dried seaweed) cut into smaller strips
- salt as needed
- optional fillings: salted, flaked salmon; canned tuna mixed with mayonnaise; Japanese pickled plums

Directions:

- Run your hands under water to help prevent the rice from sticking to them. Then, spread a pinch of salt evenly over your palms.
- Using sticky rice, place a palm-sized amount of rice on one hand and gently shape it into a ball.
- (Optional) Using two fingers, poke a hole in the center of the rice and then insert your favorite filling. Once satisfied, fill the hole with additional rice.
- Make a triangular shape by placing the ball on the palm of one hand, while the other hand bends to form the desired shape.
- Place the center of the nori strip at the base of the triangle. Then wrap the ends upward towards the peak of the triangle.
- Now your onigiri is complete! Enjoy!

RECIPE: OKONOMIYAKI

Okonomiyaki is a kind of Japanese savory pancake filled with flour, eggs, cabbage, toppings, and whatever else you like! Okonomiyaki translates to “grilled how you like it,” which makes it perfect for any craving you might have. From restaurants to street vendors, it is highly adaptable and incredibly delicious! In fact, depending on your location, you may find yourself with an entirely new version of okonomiyaki to enjoy. For example, in Hiroshima, many prefer adding noodles to the base. You can customize it further with variations including bacon, kimchi, cheese, mochi, seafood, and so much more!

Ingredients: Serving size = 1-2 people

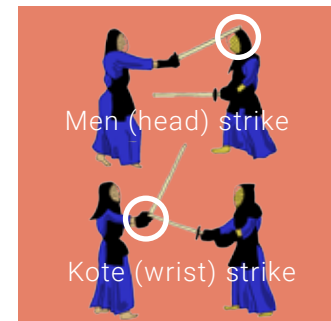
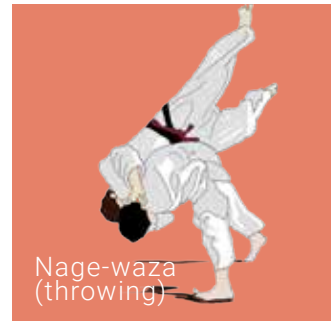
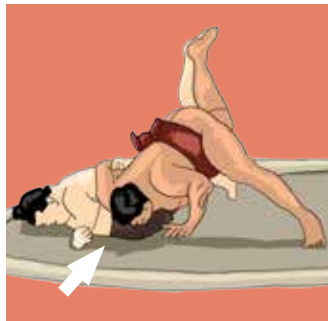
- 2/3 cup water
- 1 cup flour
- 1 egg
- 3-4 strips of sliced pork or bacon
- 3 cups shredded cabbage
- 3 tsp. instant fish soup stock
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder (optional)
- optional toppings: okonomiyaki sauce, bonito flakes, *aonori* seaweed

Directions:

- Mix the flour and baking powder together (if you decide to include baking powder). Then gently mix those dry ingredients together with water.
- Add all the remaining ingredients to the flour water mixture except for the pork/bacon slices. Mix thoroughly.
- Heat a hot plate or frying pan and add a little of your oil of choice. Fry the pork slices on both sides and then spoon the okonomiyaki mixture on top of the slices. Spread it into a round shape about 1 inch thick.
- When air bubbles start to form, flip the okonomiyaki over with a spatula. Continue cooking while pressing down on it slightly with the spatula until the other side is done.
- Spread the okonomiyaki sauce over the okonomiyaki and sprinkle the bonito flakes and *aonori* seaweed on top for added flavor.



JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTS



Sumo

Sumo is Japan's national sport with a long history dating back to religious rituals in ancient times. It was not until the Edo period (1603-1867) that sumo was regarded as a spectator sport. Sumo involves two wrestlers clad in *mawashi* loincloths pushing, throwing, and tossing down one another to cause the opponent to step outside the ring or touch the ground with any part of the body other than the soles of the feet.

Judo

Developed from the older art known as *jujutsu* (unarmed combat), judo is a unique sport with an emphasis on training the mind and spirit rather than solely on winning. Judo involves opponents grappling and throwing one another to win the competition. Judo has gained a large following internationally and in 1964 was recognized as an Olympic sport.

Kendo

Kendo is a martial art that was heavily influenced by the samurai era, which is evident in both the ritualized behavior and highly regimented practice sessions at the dojo. Kendo involves a competitor using a sword to both protect oneself and defeat the opponent. Basic techniques, including a face strike, hand strike, torso strike, and a frontal thrust to the neck, are used in a variety of combinations and applications. In the past, wooden swords were used, but now a bamboo sword is the norm, and competitors wear *bogu*, or protective gear, to protect themselves during competitions.

Karate

Karate is perhaps one of the most widely known Japanese martial arts. Also known as *karatedo* ("the way of the empty hand"), it was developed in the Ryukyu kingdom (present-day Okinawa) in the 14th century as a weaponless form of self-defense. It involves three basic movements: thrusts, kicks, and arm strikes. Today, it is both a competitive sport and also a form of self-defense, with many instructors focusing on both *kata* and *kumite*. Approximately 130 million people around the world today practice karate.

Sumo and Karate photo: AFLO

JAPANESE PERFORMING ARTS

Japan's Four Traditional Theaters

Kabuki

Japan's traditional *kabuki* performances are known for their highly elaborate stage props, costumes, and heavy makeup that differentiates heroic characters from villains, as well as the *onnagata*, or the female characters. Characters utilize the *hanamichi*, or flower walk runway, as well as a rotating stage while dancing and performing to music.

Noh

Noh are masked dramas with elaborately dressed performers who dance and chant to an accompanying chorus and *hayashi*, or traditional ensemble of Japanese instruments. It is the oldest existing professional theater in the world, dating back to the 14th century.

Bunraku

Bunraku is Japan's professional puppet theater often featuring stories of pathos and tragedy. A single puppet is controlled by three puppeteers to give it life-like movements, while offstage a *shamisen* (three-stringed Japanese instrument) player sets the play's speed, and the *tayu*, or chanter, recites the lines of every part, altering their voice for each role.

Kyogen

Kyogen are comedic plays performed in between two *noh* plays. The performer wears little to no makeup and uses exaggerated facial expressions to tell the story as music and stage props are sparse.



Kabuki, Bunraku, Kyogen photo: @Afro, Noh photo: @JTA

Modern-Day Popular Entertainment

Rakugo

Rakugo is a form of comedic monologue that relies heavily on the good delivery of a punchline. In Japanese, a punchline is referred to as *ochi* (fall), therefore, *rakugo* can be directly translated as "stories that fall." Dating back to the Edo period (1603-1867), this comedic narrative is performed by a single storyteller dressed in a kimono while sitting in the formal *seiza* kneeling position. The storyteller uses their voice and upper body to play different characters and sometimes also uses a fan or a *tenui* towel as a prop. While classic *rakugo* stories passed on from master to disciple are still told today, modern stories may also include satirical takes on society.



Takarazuka

Takarazuka is Japan's all-female musical theater revue established in the early 20th century known for its dramatic stories, elaborate makeup and costumes, and big show numbers. Actors specialize in playing either male or female roles; however, it is the *otokoyaku*, or male roles, that receive top billing and the most fame. Consequently, the training for all actors, but especially the *otokoyaku*, is rigorous and competitive. Five troupes exist within the revue: Hana (Flower), Tsuki (Moon), Yuki

(Snow), Hoshi (Star), and Sora (Cosmos). Each troupe alternates between the Takarazuka Grand Theater in Hyogo prefecture and the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo, as well as performing in local cities and internationally.

2.5-Dimensional Musicals

In recent years, theater productions based on pop culture like manga, anime, and games have become a popular form of entertainment, in particular among Japanese youth. These live stage performances were named 2.5D by fans because, while the performers are 3D, their performances are faithful reproductions of the original 2D characters and thus are seen to be "in-between" 2D and 3D. One of the original 2.5D musicals that brought about the popularity of these stage performances is *The Musical of the Prince of Tennis*, but many internationally adored anime like *Naruto* and *Sailor Moon* have been adapted into 2.5D musicals.



TRADITIONAL CULTURAL CORNERSTONES



Kimono

In recent years, the kimono has seen a small revival. The modern kimono originated in the Heian period (794-1185) when there was a shift in sewing technique that allowed for it to be a garment that could be worn by any body shape.

The most elaborate kimono are worn at Japanese weddings and at *seijin-shiki*, or coming-of-age ceremonies, while light cotton summer kimono called *yukata* are commonly worn to Japanese summer festivals.

Kado

Also known as *ikebana*, *kado* is the Japanese art of arranging flowers, and can be translated as “the way of flowers.” It began as early as the 16th century with Buddhist flower offerings but spread to decorating households and other locations. The most common styles of ikebana are *rikka* (“standing flowers”), *seika* (“living flowers”), and *nageire* (“flung flowers”). All of these styles attempt to find harmony between flower and container, and take into consideration the display’s surroundings.

Since the 20th century, avant-garde ikebana has also become popular, allowing for the incorporation of non-living materials like metal or glass. It remains a popular art form, and there are estimated to be more than 3,000 ikebana schools across Japan.



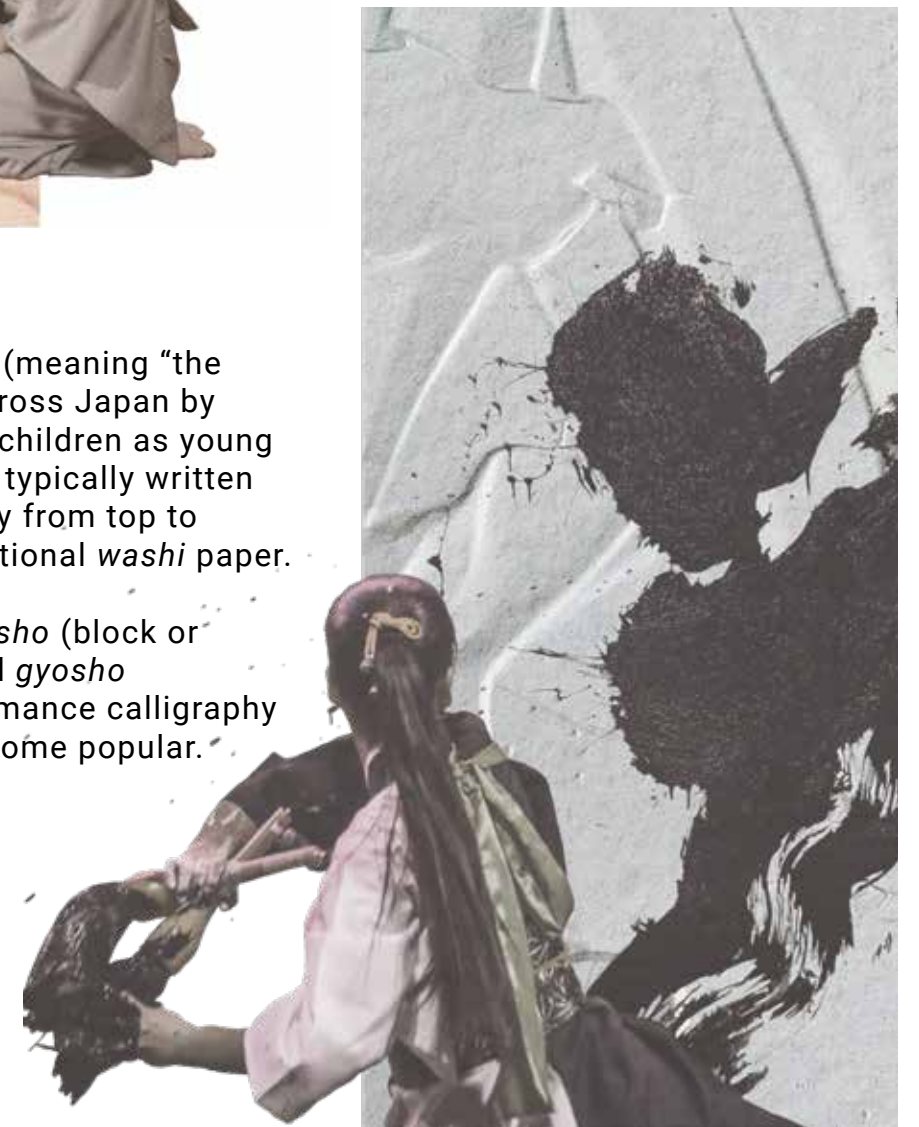
Sado

Sado, meaning “the way of tea,” is often translated as “tea ceremony.” It involves a host and guests sharing a moment of togetherness through drinking tea in a methodical and reverent way. The tea comes in the form of matcha, or powdered green tea, and the *temae* (the serving and preparing of the tea), is determined down to the movement of the fingertips. There is meaning in every step of the preparation. The tradition continues to be practiced by different tea schools to this day.

Shodo

Shodo, or Japanese calligraphy (meaning “the way of writing”), is practiced across Japan by not only professionals but also children as young as elementary school. Kanji are typically written with *sumi*, or black ink, vertically from top to bottom and right to left on traditional *washi* paper.

There are three main styles: *kaisho* (block or print style), *sosho* (cursive), and *gyosho* (semi-cursive). Recently, performance calligraphy set to music and dance has become popular.



ANNUAL EVENTS

January	February	March
<p>Oshogatsu: January 1st</p> <p>Oshogatsu is New Year's Day in Japanese. People participate in <i>hatsumode</i> (the first shrine or temple visit of the year), send and receive <i>nengajo</i> (New Year's greeting cards), and eat <i>osechi</i> (traditional food). Children receive <i>otoshidama</i> (New Year's Money) from family and relatives. Together, families reflect on the past and look forward to the upcoming year.</p> <p>Seijin no Hi: Second Monday of January</p> <p>Seijin no Hi (Coming of Age Day) honors those who have turned 18 years old over the past year. Children are welcomed into adulthood through organized ceremonies called <i>seijin-shiki</i> and many people often wear traditional clothing such as kimono and a <i>hakama</i> (a pant-like garment worn over a kimono) to celebrate.</p>	<p>Setsubun: Early February</p> <p>Setsubun is the day before spring in the old lunar calendar. "<i>Fuku wa uchi, oni wa soto</i>" (fortune in and bad spirits out) is the chant said while throwing beans around one's home. Originally, members of the Imperial Court would observe this holiday to dispel bad spirits and winter gloom while welcoming the coming spring. It is believed that for good health one must eat the number of beans equivalent to their age.</p>	<p>Hina Matsuri: March 3rd</p> <p>Hina Matsuri, or Doll Festival, is a holiday dedicated to the happiness and healthy growth of girls. It originated from a purification ritual that used paper dolls.</p>
<p>Tanabata: July 7th</p> <p>Tanabata, or Star Festival, is centered on a forbidden love story between a princess and a commoner who are forced to meet only once a year by crossing the Milky Way. Their annual reunion is represented by the "cowherd star," Altair, and the "weaving princess star," Vega, which appear connected by the Milky Way during this time of year. On this day, people write wishes on strips of paper and attach them to leaf-bearing bamboo stalks.</p>	<p>Obon: Mid-August</p> <p>Obon is an annual observance to welcome and console the souls of ancestors who are thought to visit one's home during this period.</p>	<p>Otsukimi: Date Varies</p> <p>Otsukimi, meaning moon-viewing, is a time to appreciate the mid-autumn moon. This tradition dates back to the Heian period (794-1185). Moon-viewing parties are often accompanied by sticky rice cakes offered to the moon.</p>

Japan celebrates many unique national holidays and festivals throughout the year. In addition, there are countless local festivals. Let's take a look at some of the largest annual events in Japan!

April	May	June
<p>School Graduation and Entrance Ceremonies: March to April</p> <p>For students in Japan, the blooming cherry blossoms are accompanied by big life changes. In March, schools hold <i>sotsugyo-shiki</i> (graduations) and in April, <i>nyugaku-shiki</i> (entrance ceremonies) usher in the new school year.</p>	<p>Kodomo no Hi: May 5th</p> <p>Kodomo no Hi, or Children's Day, celebrates the healthy growth and future success of all children. On this day, families with children fly carp streamers called <i>koinobori</i> outside their homes.</p>	<p>Tsuyu: Begins in Early June</p> <p>In most parts of Japan, the rainy season, or <i>tsuyu</i>, typically lasts for several weeks and runs from the beginning of June to the middle of July. During this time, it is common to make <i>teru teru bozu</i> (tissue paper charms) that are hung near windows in the hopes that they will stop the rain and bring sunshine the next day.</p>
<p>Sports Day: Second Monday of October</p> <p>Considered a national holiday in Japan, Sports Day commemorates the opening of the 1964 Summer Olympics held in Tokyo. Many schools hold their own sports day to help promote physical and mental health.</p>	<p>Shichi-go-san: November 15th</p> <p>Seven (<i>shichi</i>), five (<i>go</i>), three (<i>san</i>) are considered lucky numbers in Japan. For this reason, families with boys aged three and five and girls aged three and seven visit Shinto shrines to pray for good health and safety.</p>	<p>Omisoka: December 31st</p> <p>On Omisoka, or New Year's Eve, Buddhist temples strike bells 108 times to symbolize the purification of the 108 earthly desires. This ringing of the bells is known as <i>joya no kane</i>. <i>Toshikoshi soba</i>, or New Year's Eve buckwheat noodles, are eaten on this day because the long noodles represent a long life.</p>

THE SEASONS OF JAPAN

Fuji 藤/Wisteria

Ichigo 苺/Strawberries

Sakura 桜/Cherry Blossom

Sanshoku Dango 三色団子/
Three-colored Dango

Spring

Japanese springtime is blessed with beautiful *sakura*, or cherry blossoms, blooming throughout the country. As the weather warms, many people will enjoy the blossoms through *hanami*, or sakura viewing, by setting up a picnic under sakura trees with friends, family, or even co-workers.

Koinobori
鯉のぼり/
Carp Streamer

Spring is also a time of “new beginnings” in Japan and often signifies the start of a new school year for students or a new career for working professionals.

Takenoko 筍/
Bamboo
Shoots

Sakura Mochi 桜餅/
Cherry Blossom Mochi

Hinaningyo
雛人形/Hina Doll

Zaru Soba ざる蕎麦/Cold Soba

Kakigori
かき氷/
Shaved Ice

Taiko 太鼓/Drum

Kingyo 金魚/
Goldfish

Summer

Japanese summers begin in June with *tsuyu*, or the rainy season, signifying the beginning of hot and humid summer days that keep the vegetation lush and provide perfect conditions for rice production.

For students, summer means a month-long break from their studies. During summer break, many celebrate *Umi no Hi* (Ocean Day) by spending the day at the beach to escape the heat. Another important summer holiday, *Obon*, a Buddhist custom to honor one's ancestors, is marked with trips to visit family and with many *matsuri*, or festivals, filled with dancing and music.

Uchiwa
うちわ/Fan

Unagi うなぎ/Eel

Suika
スイカ/
Watermelon

Yukata 浴衣/
Summer Kimono

Furin 風鈴/
Windchime

Hanabi 花火/
Fireworks

Ayu 鮎/Sweetfish

Kinmokusei キンモクセイ/
Osmanthus Flower

Kosumosu 秋桜/Cosmos Flower

Tsuki Usagi 月うさぎ/
Moon Rabbit

Kabocha
カボチャ/
Pumpkin

Momiji
紅葉/
Maple
Leaves

Fall

Fall is marked by countless harvest festivals throughout the country while the *momiji*, or maple leaves, change to a deep, beautiful red.

The full fall moon is enjoyed during Otsukimi, the Moon-Viewing Festival, with small moon-shaped *tsukimi dango*, or rice cakes, and moon-viewing parties. Like hanami in the spring, many people travel out of their own towns or cities to see *koyo*, or fall foliage.

Kinoko
きのこ/
Mushroom

Yaki-imo 焼き芋/
Baked Sweet Potato

Kaki 柿/
Persimmon

Susuki ススキ/
Pampas Grass

Sanma 秋刀魚/
Pacific Saury Fish

Tsukimi Dango 月見団子/
Mochi for Tsukimi Celebration

Fukubukuro 福袋/
Lucky Bag

Nengajo 年賀状/
New Year's Card

Otoshidama お年玉/
New Year's Money

Kurisumasu keki
クリスマスケーキ/
Christmas Cake

Winter

Japanese winters can be very cold in the north, or very mild in the south. Either way, everyone celebrates together during the *nenmatsu-nenshi*, or New Year's holidays.

During Christmas, which is widely seen as a commercial holiday, couples will go on romantic dates to view the many light displays around the country. Both couples and families may enjoy a fried chicken dinner and Christmas cake together. As the new year begins, many participate in *osoji*, or end-of-year cleaning, to begin the year with a fresh slate.

Kagami
Mochi 鏡餅/
New Year's
Mochi
Decoration



Ozoni お雑煮/
New Year's Mochi Soup

Yuzu Buro
柚子風呂/
Yuzu Bath

Oden おでん/
Fish Cake Soup

Osechi Ryori お節料理/
New Year's Spread

Sunobodo, Suki
スノーボード,
スキー/
Snowboarding,
Skiing

Hatsu Hinode
初日の出/
The First Sunrise
(of the New Year)

Toshikoshi Soba
年越し蕎麦/
New Year's Eve
Buckwheat
Noodles

LEARNING RESOURCES & INFO

KORE MO GAKUSHU MANGA DA!

Manga, or Japanese comics, is a fun resource for learning the Japanese language and expanding your knowledge of Japanese culture and society. With so many titles to choose from, the Nippon Foundation's "Kore mo Gakushu Manga da!" compilation of recommended works is a great starting point. This project was started by the Nippon Foundation to introduce a variety of manga titles to people around the world. <https://www.jflalc.org/jle-manga>



MINATO

If you're looking for more structure in your Japanese language learning, "Minato" is a free e-learning portal with self-study courses that focus on reading, writing, and listening. Courses range from three to six months long. Users can also connect with other learners through the online community. <https://minato-jf.jp/Home/Index>



STUDY IN JAPAN

If you're interested in studying abroad in Japan, start planning your journey here. This site is operated by the Japan Student Services Organization in cooperation with the Government of Japan. It has everything you need to know about various study abroad programs geared towards both Japanese and international students, as well as resources about life and employment in Japan.

<https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/>



MEXT SCHOLARSHIP

Every year, the Government of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) sponsors several scholarships to Japanese universities for research and study. To learn more about each scholarship, eligibility, and the application process, visit the Embassy of Japan's website:

https://www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/mext-scholarship-info.html



JAPAN EXCHANGE AND TEACHING (JET) PROGRAM USA

Interested in living and working in Japan as a teacher? The JET Program is a government-sponsored program that places accepted applicants in schools across Japan to help teach English for one to five years. Applications open up every September. For application requirements and eligibility, visit: <https://jetprogramusa.org/>





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