

Japan

Japan (Nihon or Nippon, officially, Nippon-koku, or Nihon-koku) is an island country in East Asia. It is located in the Pacific Ocean. Japan's name means "sun-origin country", which is why Japan is sometimes identified as the "Land of the Rising Sun". Japan comprises over 3,000 islands making it an archipelago. Japan has the world's tenth largest population, with about 128 million people. For the most part, Japanese society is linguistically and culturally homogeneous with small populations of foreign workers, Zainichi Koreans, Zainichi Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese Brazilians and others. The most dominant native ethnic group is the Yamato people. Buddhism was first introduced to Japan from Baekje of the Korean Peninsula, but the subsequent development of Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist sculptures were primarily influenced by China. Taoism and Confucianism from China have also influenced Japanese beliefs and customs. Religion in Japan tends to be syncretic in nature, and this results in a variety of practices, such as parents and children celebrating Shinto rituals, students praying before exams, couples holding a wedding at a Christian church and funerals being held at Buddhist temples. A minority profess to Christianity. In addition, since the mid-19th century, numerous religious sects (*Shinshūkyō*) have emerged in Japan, such as Tenrikyo and Aum Shinrikyo (or Aleph). About 99% of the population speaks Japanese as their first language. Most public and private schools require students to take courses in both Japanese and English. Japanese culture has evolved greatly over the years, from the country's original Jōmon culture to its contemporary culture, which combines influences from Asia, Europe and North America. Traditional Japanese arts include crafts (ikebana, origami, ukiyo-e, dolls, lacquerware, pottery), performances (bunraku, dance, kabuki, noh, rakugo), traditions (games, tea ceremony, Budō, architecture, gardens, swords) and cuisine.

Shichi-go-san, which literally means "seven, five and three" is a festival celebrated by parents on the fifteenth of November in Japan, to mark the growth of their children as they turn three, five and seven years of age. These ages are considered critical in a child's life. Today, parents celebrate shichi-go-san as their boys turn three and five years of age and as their girls turn three and seven. The boys don on haori jackets and hakama trousers, while the girls would wear a special ceremonial kimono when making their shichi-go-san visit.

Japanese music is eclectic, having borrowed instruments, scales and styles from neighboring cultures. Western music, introduced in the late nineteenth century, now forms an integral part of the culture. Karaoke is the most widely practiced cultural activity. Traditionally, sumo is considered Japan's national sport and it is one of the most popular spectator sports in Japan. Martial arts such as judo, karate and kendō are also widely practiced and enjoyed by spectators in the country.

Rice has long been the main staple of the traditional Japanese diet. It is not only consumed daily as a staple food but also used to brew sake, a traditional alcoholic drink. A unique feature of Japanese dietary history has been the country's various taboos on meat eating. In daily meals, vegetables have generally constituted the main ingredients of side dishes and soups accompanying rice. Among these vegetables are a variety of sea plants that have been utilized since ancient times and remain a unique feature of Japanese cooking even today. Sea plants are usually dried and soaked in water before cooking. Sea tangle has been the most important of all. It is commonly used to prepare broth, and owing to its rich content of glutamic acid, it enhances the original taste of the foodstuffs with which it is boiled.
