Japanese Society and History

By John McKinstry and Harold Kerbo

Included in this preview:
- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Excerpt of Chapter 1

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JAPANESE SOCIETY AND HISTORY

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Contents

Chapter 1: The Place 1
Chapter 2: The People 21
Chapter 3: The Language 41
Chapter 4: The Classical Period 53
Chapter 5: The Period of Feudal Warfare, 1200–1600 65
Chapter 6: The Edo Period 79
Chapter 7: Meiji Japan 93
Chapter 8: Japan After Meiji 109
Chapter 9: Cultural Themes 127
Chapter 10: Family Life 151
Chapter 11: Education 167
Chapter 12: Religion 183
Chapter 13: Politics and Government 203
Chapter 14: The Japanese Economy  217
Chapter 15: Problems and Prospects  235
Chapter 16: Facing the Future  253
In one sense, human societies are like individual human beings: Individuals are influenced by their environments and by events which happen in their lives. But while it is often possible to perceive and even to predict the effects of these factors, individuals who are subject to identical environmental and historical conditioning—siblings, for example—often end up with completely different personalities. And so it is with societies. Effects of some environmental factors are fairly obvious to see. For example, the Japanese have a healthy curiosity about the non-Japanese world, but at the same time, they tend to harbor attitudes that make it difficult for them to open up to a wider social reality. The United States, in turn, is a place where people become intimate very quickly, using first names almost at once and visiting the interior of homes of people they have just met. Both these traits have been forged to a great extent by geography. In Japan, people’s attitudes were formed by the relative isolation of their homeland before the modern period; in the United States, they were formed by the broad expanses of territory, which dictated that people were often set down among strangers and had to learn to interact quickly in order to survive.

However, no amount of information about geography, or history, or physical characteristics, or anything else, can ever give us a complete explanation of why a particular society is the way it is. The best we can do is to learn about these things and use them as a framework to slowly fill in a more complete picture, the only way we can—by examining the important features of a society, one by one.
The American view of the world is what could be called “Eurocentric.” We study mainly European languages, travel to Europe, and tend to know about the history, geography and cultural traditions of that area of the world more than any other. If we were to ask a reader of this page to name three cities in Italy, it is likely that, with a brief moment for reflection, he or she could do so. How many average U.S. citizens can name three cities in Japan or China?

That kind of Eurocentrism is understandable. North America was populated by Europeans more than by people from any other place. Many of our institutions are modeled on European prototypes. We share a spoken tongue with a European nation. Europe is part of our history.

Knowing something about Europe, or for that matter knowing something about any foreign place, certainly adds to our level of sophistication. However, it turns out that many people in this country, although we refer to them as Eurocentric, really don’t know that much about any other place. Recently, the United Nations surveyed randomly selected people in eight countries, asking a few questions about current events in areas around the world. Americans didn’t do so well, coming in at 6th place, trailing people from Canada, Australia, Germany, England, France and Spain, and barely coming in ahead of respondents from the Philippines and Algeria. More bad news came in the annual report published by the Swiss World Economic Forum, which ranked Americans quite low in their international experience and understanding. Such ignorance harms American competitiveness in the world economy in many ways. But there is further damage. An inward-looking view of the world inhibits us from grasping important truths about our own society. Seymore Martin Lipset put it nicely in one of his recent books: “Those who know only one country know no country.”

This book is, in part, a second edition of an early book, Modern Japan (McGraw-Hill, 1998). It has been updated throughout, and several new chapters on earlier Japanese history have been added. As before, this book focuses on Japan, not because it is necessarily more important to be aware of that place than any other, but because it may help to make comparisons with ourselves and to broaden our understanding of how other people deal with the unavoidable tasks facing us all. As we say above, Europe is
part of our history, but how about the present? The world is constantly changing. It is likely that some who read this have names emanating from some version of the Italian language, but in terms of such things as economic transactions and the exchange of technology, we have far more interaction with Japan and the rest of Asia than we do with Italy or any other place in Europe. It would be a good idea for Americans to begin to catch up with the reality of what places in the world are actually more strategic for our future, and to learn more about those places.

This writing is an attempt to give some basic orientation to Japan in a simple, non-scholarly way. We have avoided using citations whenever possible to make it as smooth a read as we can. You may be a little distracted by so many Japanese terms followed by the words in their native script. Most of you do not read Japanese, so simply ignore the Japanese writing. It is included for those students studying the language, who may wish to know how those specific vocabulary items are written in their native form. We should add here that all Japanese names are written Japanese-style, family name first. You may know him as Hideki Matsui, but in Japan, and in this book, he is Matsui Hideki.

We begin our exposition in the following pages with basic elements: The geography and physical characteristics of the Japanese and their homeland, a brief outline of Japanese history, and an examination of specific cultural features. We continue our foray into Japan with a look at Japan’s economy and governmental structure, finally ending by exploring some social problems and commenting on possible future paths for that nation.
Environment plays a significant role in the evolution of any culture. It provides challenges, creates restrictions, provides various degrees of access or isolation in regard to other peoples, and prior to modern technology, it determined when and how work could be done. Culture has to adjust to these realities, and in doing so, formulates, to a degree, the character of a given social tradition.

Consider the American prairie: Pioneers went to live there in comparatively small numbers, in comparison with the huge expanses of territory. American pioneers, as they moved into the wilderness, did not as often form village life as is the norm for other agrarian peoples; they tended more often to live in isolated households, often miles from their nearest neighbors. There were market settlements with stores and churches, but those places could not be traveled to easily or often. Most of the time, those people who settled the Midwest were on their own. The isolation of those people formulated, or at least helped to formulate, many of the characteristics so stereotypical of North American culture. These would include, among others, the famous pioneer self-reliance, an egalitarian view of society, an almost exaggerated sense of hospitality, independence, the unusually strong role of women in family life, and an indifference to, and even distrust of, distant governmental authority.

The Japanese have experienced a different physical and social environment altogether and have dealt with their own surroundings, and so completely different types of social themes evolved. Geography provided Japan with excellent furnishings for wet-rice agriculture, and after it arrived in ancient times from the Asian mainland, a great deal of social tradition has been influenced by that system. Throughout history, Asians
have lived in villages. Maintaining the irrigation ditches for village rice production requires group effort and cooperation. Strong individualism doesn’t work so well in that kind of setting. We will take a look at that environment, and before discussing anything else, consider Japan as a physical entity.

Japan consists of a series of four large islands together with many smaller ones. The largest is the main island of Honshū 本州, which would constitute a fairly large country if that’s all there was to Japan. Over eighty percent of the Japanese population lives on that single island. Kyūshū 九州, in the south, was the route of ancient migrations and remained important historically, while Hokkaidō 北海道, in the north, has only been completely integrated into Japanese society for about 150 years. It is in many ways the most expansive and open part of the country, with some wide prairies and pasture land. The smallest of the four main islands, Shikoku 四国, is located off the southwestern coast of Honshū. The four islands extend between latitudes 30 and 45 degrees north.

While, as you can see from the map, the whole of Japan is made up of rather long narrow stretches of land—no place in the entire nation is more than seventy miles from the sea—the Japanese archipelago runs quite far from northeast to southwest, with a range of about seventeen hundred miles. In climate, the long series of islands that constitute Japan is similar to the east coast of the United States, with Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido comparable to New England. Summers in Hokkaido are shorter and milder than further south, and winters are long and cold; there is even glacial ice in the ocean off the north coast of the island in the winter months.

The large middle island of Honshu and the smallest of all the larger islands, Shikoku, have a climate something like the area from New York to Washington, with four full seasons, including some hot summer days and perhaps a little snow in winter. Further south, Kyushu is somewhat similar to North and South Carolina, and finally, a few hundred miles further to the south, Okinawa 沖縄 is reminiscent of southern Florida, with the same kind of beaches beckoning northern tourists from November through March.
Something which greatly distinguishes Japan from the U.S. east coast, however, is terrain. As a string of mountain ranges pushed up above sea level by volcanic activity, Japan is in a geological sense very young. The rough mountainous terrain of Japan has not had enough time to wear down, and so there is comparatively little flat land anywhere. In fact, the country is so mountainous that wheeled vehicles were never widely used in Japan until the railway system made it there barely a hundred and fifty years ago; there was simply not enough level land to develop a road system suitable for carriages.

The Japanese customarily think of their nation as a small place, and in comparison with the United States, which including Alaska is about twenty-six times larger, it does seem small. But Japan, with 124,000 square miles of territory, is larger than the average nation. It is larger, for example, in land mass than Italy or Germany, and larger than the entire British Isles, including Ireland. However, in spite of its relatively large map size, Japan in anthropological terms is much smaller than it first appears. For the people who live there, Japan certainly suffers from a shortage of arable land.
Even if the nation were not so mountainous, with a population of a little over 127,000,000, only a little less than forty percent of the population of the huge United States and twice the population of Britain, Japan would have less land to go around than most other countries. What makes the situation of crowding so much more critical is that most of the population has to be packed together in small coastal plains; the interior of the country is simply too rugged for large-scale urban development or even for extensive agriculture.

Some parts of northern Honshu are actually under-populated, with quite sparse people-to-land ratios. Other parts of the nation are crammed with people; the two metropolitan regions centered around Tokyo and Osaka are areas of enormous population density in which over thirty percent of the Japanese reside. The metropolitan area around Tokyo, usually called kanto chihō 関東地方 or the Kanto region, smaller than the Los Angeles basin, has a population of around 23,000,000, just under five times the population of the Los Angeles basin.

While short on flat land, and lacking the resources of many other nations, one thing that Japan has plenty of is coastline. With more access to the ocean than many larger nations such as the United States, the sea has been and continues to be extremely important in the lives of the Japanese people. Coastal boats were for a long time a major form of transportation in such a mountainous country, and the Japanese take more food from the sea than any other people.

The four islands of Japan used to be separated by water. Today, all of the four islands are connected by land transportation with a long tunnel connecting Honshu and Hokkaiko, and a vast bridge network which now spans the distance between Honshu and the island of Shikoku. Kyushu and Honshu were tied together in this way early in the twentieth century. The famous bullet train system, the shinkansen 新幹線, which spans the entire rib of Japan from the top of Honshu to northern Kyushu, reaches speeds of 140 mph. The French super express can go faster, but covers less than one seventh the total rail distance of the total shinkansen system.

Japan lies on the western edge of the so-called “ring of fire,” the arc of seismic action ranging from Southeast Asia up through Taiwan and
Japan, and across to the Aleutian Islands and down the west coast of North and South America. More so than for California, the ground under Japan is alive. One cannot stay in most parts of Japan for more than a few weeks without experiencing a minor earthquake. They usually don’t cause serious damage—glasses rattle, light fixtures sway, everyone stiffens up in a kind of nervous reaction. And of course, we hear of far more serious quakes from time to time, which bring heavy damage and loss of life.

Japan suffered one of the most severe natural catastrophes in history in 1923. At slightly after 9AM on September 1, a devastating earthquake struck the Kanto region, the area of Tokyo and its surroundings. It was “The Great Kanto Earthquake Disaster,” 広東大震災 in Japanese. The quake itself damaged over half of the city, but as in the Great San Francisco quake two decades earlier, most of the disaster was caused by the fire storm that followed. Over forty percent of the area’s residences were completely destroyed. More than 130,000 people lost their lives, about six percent of Tokyo’s population at the time of some 2.2 million.

As modern and economically developed as Japan has become since the 1960s, it was forced to delay the construction of very tall buildings in its major cities by several decades. Even today the skyline of Tokyo is much less impressive than that of New York City, built as that city is on solid granite, with no area history of earthquakes. It is a tribute to Japanese engineers that a few buildings of over seventy floors in height now exist in Tokyo, considering the stringent regulations inherent in the building code. All steel and concrete buildings in Japan are required to be anchored at least as deeply into the ground as their planned height above ground. This leads to slower and much more expensive construction than in many other places.

Another element of nature the Japanese have to live with is the yearly cycle of storms which sweep up from the south. They are called 台風 in Japanese, or “typhoons.” They arrive in late summer and early autumn; in some years not much more than just heavy storms with strong winds. But just as our own hurricanes and tornadoes, they can be deadly. In 1959 a typhoon destroyed the entire Nagoya harbor, killing
more than 700 people. In the following chapter, you will read about the great typhoon of 1284, which saved Japan from a Mongol/Chinese invasion.

**FOOD PRODUCTION**

It follows that with so much population density in major urban areas, residential units tend to be smaller than in most nations, and the Japanese have had to learn to use land with great care. Farms in most parts of Japan are only a few acres in size and seem more like large gardens to foreigners. They are intensively worked, and in spite of their small size, they are among the most productive per acre in the world.

Japan does have one resource important for producing food—water. Sufficient water for agriculture was always a problem for the large populations of north China, resulting in diversion of rivers and other huge irrigation projects. This required powerful central authority, a condition which characterized all Chinese Dynasties, at least during their robust periods. Until just a little over a century ago, Japan was subdivided into smaller political units which later became feudal states. Japan, with from 50 to 120 inches in most places, has always had so much rainfall that the kind of central concentration of power characteristic of China throughout history has not always been needed.

As in other Asian societies, the traditional food staple in Japan was, and still is to a considerable extent, rice. It is grown in flooded rice paddies; one cannot travel very far in Japan without noticing the square pieces of land, which, early in the spring, look like small swimming pools, before the rice stalks peek up above the water level. A full forty percent of all cultivated land area is devoted to rice cultivation.

Until the opening of Japan late in the 19th century, a typical Japanese meal consisted of rice plus broiled fish and a small amount of vegetables. With the exception of sushi, which was developed by professional cooks in Tokyo around 1740, the famous Japanese cuisine served in restaurants all over the world today is made up mainly of dishes influenced by foreigners who came to Japan after 1870: Such things as tempura, sukiyaki, shabu-shabu, tonkatsu, etc.
The percentage of full time farmers in the Japanese population is only a little larger than that of the U.S., about four percent. That small percentage has played a much more powerful role in Japanese policy making than farmers have in the U.S. Food prices in Japan are surprisingly high. Rice, for example, costs close to three times what it costs in American supermarkets. Most other food products hover around twice the U.S. price, with Japanese average incomes barely above those of the U.S. What is the reason for this? Part of it is the effective pressure put on the government by the Japanese farm cooperatives. But even if this were not the case, it is likely that Japanese consumers would be willing to pay higher prices for raw food products than would seem to be justified.

Japan urbanized later than did North America. A fairly large portion of the Japanese population has parents, or at least grandparents, who were born and raised on farms. When Japanese think of farmers, they often think about their own relatives, who still live on farms and work at least part of the year as food producers. The o-bon お盆 festival, held each autumn, a kind of all-souls festival, is a time when many Japanese return to their ancestral roots, that is to say, to the farms where their parents or grandparents grew up. Japanese people are perhaps more sympathetic than Americans to the argument that food prices must stay high enough to support the agriculture segment of the population. The farmers who would suffer disadvantage if prices would fall drastically are often people they share some personal identity with. This sentiment seems to be weakening somewhat as some chain stores in Japan now offer food at more bargain prices.

Japan now imports far more of its food supplies than do the U.S. and most other industrial nations. Soy, for example, is fundamental to a great deal of Japanese food preparation. Over ninety percent of the soy beans used in making Japanese tofu is now imported. This makes the Japanese uneasy because if those supplies were ever cut off, Japan would be in a difficult situation. This is one reason Japan has been so stubborn about keeping out foreign rice and has dragged its fee in opening up Japanese agricultural markets.
JAPANESE CITIES

The Japanese have for a very long time been especially attracted to urban life. Although it could be said that Japan got a rather late start in having cities—Nara, the first urban center, did not begin to take shape until the middle of the eighth century—during most of recorded history, the Japanese have strongly preferred urban over rural life; as mentioned in the next chapter, for a long time, for the elite Kyoto-based population, banishment from the capital was among the severest of punishments.

Even today, the term *inaka* 田舎, “country” or “countryside,” draws up images in the Japanese mind of crudeness, backwardness, and simplicity in a distinctly negative sense. *Inakappei* 田舎っぺい, “bumpkin,” is a person of the country, someone ignorant of the finer nuances of cultivated living. Of course, bumpkin is an English word, and it is occasionally still used in much that same way wherever English is spoken. However, in the English-speaking world, an image of the countryside as outside the boundaries of true civilization has been countered somewhat by other images—the image of the gentleman farmer, for example, and the country residence of the British aristocracy. In the new world, men like Washington and Jefferson considered their true residence to be the country, not the city.

As you will learn, in the 12th century, Japan fell into widespread civil war. The areas around castles were the only places secure enough for sustained market activity, and for that reason all castles developed towns around them, the largest and most important ones eventually growing into true cities. European castles sometimes forged the same pattern, but in most cases, castles in Europe and elsewhere did not form the nucleus of urban life.

SOME FEATURES OF MODERN JAPANESE CITIES

A visitor to Japan could not be blamed for puzzling over such a strong preference for city living. Except for just a few places such as parts of downtown Yokohama and some new towns like Tsukuba (a kind of upscale industrial park northeast of Tokyo), Japanese cities and towns don’t usually strike non-Japanese as being very attractive. While some of the
recent architecture in the central parts of Japanese cities is exciting, there is rarely a sense of continuity in the Japanese urban landscape. Zoning has usually been avoided in Japan in order to support and encourage small businesses, resulting in what may be good for business, but not very good for creating a pleasant visual environment. Because Japan is so land poor, plots of land are sometimes unbelievably tiny; the buildings that end up on them are packed together with neighboring buildings of divergent sizes, styles and ages in a visually dizzying mess.

For a nation with 127 million people, as we have seen, the geographic area of Japan is not very big to begin with. To make matters worse, the country is very mountainous, as pointed out above, so that the actual area available for urban development is less than one seventh the total landmass. On top of this, Japanese tax laws encourage people with a little extra space to keep plots of land as food-producing gardens. Even though they may live only minutes from the centers of large cities, and are in every sense city dwellers, they are officially classified as farmers and pay almost no real estate taxes on their entire adjoining property. This of course adds to the shortage of land the rest of the people have left over for adequate housing.

It is hardly surprising then to learn that urban Japan is a very crowded place with space a highly valued luxury. Living accommodations are compact, and roads and highways are narrow even by the standards of the smaller European countries. Public park space in Japan is less available than in most other nations; in fact, almost everything that requires a place for it to exist is in short supply, or at least downsized compared to its counterpart elsewhere. Garbage trucks are a perfect example of downsizing. From a distance, garbage trucks in Tokyo and other cities of Japan look exactly like the ones developed for use in American cities. They have the same hydraulic arms that extend the garbage bucket to the back of the truck and all the way in front over the cab and the same stuffer which compacts the load into the truck. On closer approach, a visitor from abroad suddenly realizes that they are in a sense scale models, about one-half the size of trucks in the U.S. They have to be this size in order to squeeze through some of the tiny residential lanes in Japanese urban space.
HOUSING

One piece of evidence suggesting that the current racial makeup of Japan includes some ancient immigration from the southwest Pacific region is the nature of traditional housing. Up to the modern period, Japanese houses were made of wood, almost never of brick or stone as in China and Korea. Part of the reason for this was undoubtedly because that material can be made to withstand earthquakes better, but when we examine Japanese traditional domestic architecture, we see things reminiscent of coastal south Asia and the Pacific Basin that have little to do with earthquakes. Japanese straw mat flooring, for example, is not seen in other north Asian societies, being more like mat flooring in more southern climes.

The mat flooring is called tatami 畳 in Japanese, and traditional houses, still the abode of most wealthy Japanese, have floors of these mats throughout. They are like very hard hospital mattresses, covered with a polished straw material, and the covering needs to be replaced every few years. Even small modern apartments usually have one tatami room, and local tatami shops, places where the mats are made and repaired, continue to do brisk business.

Japanese share one cultural characteristic with Americans: The desire to live in a privately owned detached house is widespread and quite strong. For reasons pointed out above, this is less possible than in the U.S. People in Japan often have to make a choice between two alternatives: To live in a house located far away from the business district of an urban area and endure a long, exhausting commute to work, or to live in one of the hundreds, or in some cases thousands, of little apartment-like cells in a danchi 団地, the condominium complexes which dot the urban landscape usually a little closer in than the single home residential areas. The reason for the dilemma is that land prices are almost perfectly correlated with distance from the central parts of cities; the closer to the center, the more expensive, and the further out, the more affordable.

Danchi life often (but not always) offers escape from the grueling trip back and forth to work (ninety minutes or more each way is not unusual), but it is not a very attractive compromise. A family of three or four people supported by an adequate income, but with no more than
five or six hundred square feet between them—roughly the area of a small one-bedroom apartment in the U.S.—is not the kind of life one would expect in a country with one of the highest per capita GNPs in the world. On the other hand, a ninety-minute train ride to work is not exactly luxury living either.

Not all Japanese have to make a choice between these two less than ideal alternatives. Some lucky people inherit a house close in to the urban core. Such property will probably stay in the family for the foreseeable future, because to sell it would be to turn over a very high percentage of the sale price in taxes, typically around forty percent, but to keep it requires only a comparatively modest annual property tax. But even these fortunate few must make some sacrifices. If people who manage to live in crowded neighborhoods close to the business district want to own and operate an automobile, municipal regulations require that they park it off the street overnight. In Tokyo, in fact, proof of a parking space is required by the city government before one can even register ownership of a car. Only rarely is there room on the property for a private garage; typically, car owners have to rent space in a parking facility, which can cost several hundred dollars per month.

Another way some people who live in crowded urban Japan avoid at least the stress of commuting to work is by living at their work. Merchants in Europe and the U.S. normally close down a small business enterprise after a day’s operation and travel back to a separate residence. In Japan, with property values comparatively higher on average than in Europe and the United States, small business owners find it is simply too expensive to maintain two properties, one for business and one for residence. The most common practice is to operate the business out of the ground floor of a small building, and for the owner and his family to use the second and other floors as residential area. Until a hundred and fifty years ago, cottage industry was the only type of business in Japan, and today merchants are still referred to as family units: honya-san 本屋さん, “the book house family,” nikuya-san 肉屋さん, “the butcher house family,” denkiya-san 電気屋さん, “the electric utensils house family,” etc.
URBAN LIFE

When they talk about city life, most Japanese do the same thing we have been doing up to this point—they focus on the bothersome nature of urban environment. Japanese people often refer to their homes as “rabbit hutches.” People tend to be more conscious of what is wrong with any social arrangement than with what works well. Crowded, yes. Beautiful, not usually. But neither is urban Japan a place of teeming masses miserably unhappy and poorly served. A more balanced view reveals that Japanese towns and cities are in some ways models of civility, with excellent facilities and a successful strategy in the face of difficult circumstances.

Public transportation is one of those impressive aspects of modern urban Japan. Hundreds of miles of inter-urban train tracks crisscross the urban landscape of the largest cities; trains leaving heavily populated suburbs to carry passengers to their work in downtown areas arrive at stations every few minutes during commute hours.

These trains are very crowded during rush hours, but the service is dependable, with train personnel as courteous and helpful as situations allow. Eight Japanese cities have subway systems; the network under the streets of Tokyo recently passed New York City as having the most subway miles of any city in the world.

The lack of urban zoning, although contributing to visual messiness as mentioned above, does have a positive side. For people who live in the built-up parts of towns and cities, shopping is much more convenient than the typical situation in the United States. Very few places in Japan are zoned for residential use only, with merchants prohibited from running businesses from their property. As neighborhoods develop, consumer businesses sprout up and develop along with them, so that most people can shop for food or other things needed for daily life with only a short few-minute walk, instead of having to drive, park and go through all the fuss required of most Americans.

Urban anonymity and indifference to shared communal interests has always been a drawback to city life everywhere. It is common for next door neighbors not to really know each other in modern urban residence areas all over the world, especially in large apartment complexes. The Japanese have some of this problem too, and in fact, in some ways the
Japanese are more indifferent to strangers in public than are Europeans and Americans. Japanese urban communities, on the other hand, try to work against that kind of disunity with all sorts of communal organizations, some of which work very well and have the effect of bringing a bit of village communalism to life in the faceless city. Many urban communities have neighborhood cleanup days for which a member of each residence unit contributes a few hours to tidying up the area.

It is not uncommon for older neighbors in Japanese cities and towns to form tour groups, traveling to hot springs resorts, and even taking trips to foreign countries together. Where one would expect the most facelessness of all, the large *danchi* complexes, there are usually various kinds of organized activities, including shared child care and different kinds of hobby groups.

So while it is not usually possible for the Japanese urban population to avoid conditions of crowdedness, people there bring considerable resourcefulness to the problems they have to face.

**THE KANTO REGION**

It is helpful in trying to understand urban Japan to take a closer look into the character of some of the largest and most important Japanese metropolitan areas. At the center of the Kanto region, a large plain along the pacific coast in the center of Honshu, lies *Tokyo* 東京, the nation’s capital city, and just a few miles south of Tokyo lies the great port city of *Yokohama* 横浜. The meaning of the two Chinese characters used in writing *Kanto* 関東 is “east of the gate,” originally referring to the area to the east of an important check point used to monitor movement of people back and forth between Edo and Kyoto by the Tokugawa regime in the Edo Period (1600–1868). Today it is used to mean the huge metropolitan area around the capital including Tokyo and several hundred square miles of satellite cities and suburbs. It is the place where decisions are made which affect the economies of nations all across the globe.

With around twenty-two million inhabitants, the Kanto region is the largest metropolitan area by far in Japan, and second in Asia only to Shanghai. French, Russians, and Mexicans can easily understand
the central place of Tokyo in Japanese life. In their countries as well as in Japan, so much is both drawn to, and emanates from, a dominating capital city. Americans might have a harder time with this concept because American culture derives out of many regional urban areas, some which have traditionally played a dominant role in a particular industry: Detroit in the automotive industry, Pittsburgh in the steel industry, Southern California in the movie industry, etc. No one city in the U.S. is at the heart of all facets of national life. In Japan, Tokyo does indeed dominate virtually every aspect of that society; it is the political center, the nucleus of business and financial life, the entertainment center, the hub of national rail and air travel, the center of national and international communications, and the place where five of the top ten universities are located.

Except for a very few corporations such as the Toyota Motor Company centered near Nagoya, large Japanese enterprises have their main offices in the Tokyo area even if they manufacture most of their products elsewhere. Many Japanese complain that the nation is far too centered around the capital and its surrounding area, causing everything—government, businesses, services of all kinds, and above all, people—to try squeeze into that one place of a few hundred square miles, smaller, as mentioned above, than the urban area around Los Angeles. In a nation without much land for urban space, the area around Tokyo is the most crowded of all.

The Kanto region is the place where more opportunities exist for high-paying jobs than in any other part of Japan. It is also the center of higher education and certainly the center of political influence for the nation as a whole. This creates an artificially high value of real estate and also contributes to more crowding than would be the case if these things were more spread out over the nation. Although a lot of people who live in the Tokyo-Yokohama area would actually prefer to live in a smaller city and find life in the Kanto region a bit overwhelming, most Japanese are proud of their capital city. School children take group tours during their tenures as both junior high school and senior high school students, and at least one of those trips for schools in the provinces will be to Tokyo.
They visit the Imperial Palace, the National Diet building which houses both houses of the Japanese legislature; Meiji Shrine, the large park dedicated to the first emperor of the modern period; and the Tokyo tower, modeled after, but slightly taller than the Eiffel tower in Paris. We have lived most of our lives in California, in places like Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo. When people mention specific places in New York City in conversation, on occasion we will not be able to come up with any mental images of what they are talking about. Probably most of you have that same problem. But wherever we go in Japan, from the most remote areas of Hokkaido or Kyushu, if some place in Tokyo is mentioned, almost everyone knows about it because they have been there and seen it. A large percentage of adult Americans, certainly more than half, have never visited New York City or Washington D.C. To meet a Japanese adult, even an older and not so educated one, who has never been to Tokyo is quite a rare experience.

THE KANSAI REGION

Some three hundred miles to the southwest of the Kanto region is the second largest metropolitan area in Japan, the Kansai 関西 region, “west of the gate.” In current usage, Kansai refers to the area around the city of Osaka 大坂 and includes the cities of Kobe 神戸 (where a calamitous earthquake did billions of dollars of damage and caused the deaths of more than 6,000 people in 1995), and Kyoto, the official capital city of Japan for over a thousand years until the middle of the last century.

With somewhere between eight and ten million people, the area has less than half the population of the area around Tokyo, and today it is not the center of very much of national life. But the history of the Kansai region goes back much further than that of Tokyo, and many people who live there are convinced that their area, Kansai, and not Kanto, is the real heart of Japanese culture.

The Tokugawa Shoguns, the regime which reigned over Japan from 1600 to 1868, in a real sense stole the center of Japanese life from Kansai and moved it to Kanto. True sons and daughters of Kansai have never quite forgiven this theft, and though most important institutions were
eventually drawn to the new *de facto* capital, in their hearts they consider Tokyo an upstart region full of displaced farmers. An interesting symbol of this pride is the way media personalities in Kansai, for example people who read the news on local television, continue to speak Japanese with a distinctive local rhythm and accent, while television news in the rest of the nation has succumbed to imitating the speech patterns of Tokyo.

Osaka itself had its origins as a commercial center and even now still has the reputation of a place where business interests take center stage. This is one of the reasons that among large cities of the developed world, it has a notoriously small amount of public park space. Osaka merchant families were the first to develop modern capitalism in Japan; some of the most famous names in Japanese business history—Mitsui, Sumitomo, Nomura, Matsushita—originate from Osaka; a few of them were famous even before the modern period in Japan began in 1868.

American military commanders were ordered not to bomb the city of Kyoto during the war with Japan, and so it escaped the destruction rained down on most of the other urban centers. It exists today, as it has for centuries, as an architectural record of Japanese civilization. There are over 500 temples of historical significance in Kyoto, some dating back to the ninth century. Those, together with some of the most famous gardens in the world, as well as the old imperial palace, draw more tourists than any other place in the country, both foreign and native. If one were limited to just a single place to see as a tourist in Japan, Kyoto would probably be the best choice.

**SAPPORO**

The northernmost and second largest island of the Japanese archipelago, Hokkaido, was the last area to be brought into the sociological and economic orbit of Japanese life. As late as 1910, less than two percent of the Japanese population lived there, and its capital, Sapporo 札幌, was little more than a military post near the middle of the island surrounded by a town of hardy pioneers. A Japanese Rip Van Winkle from that time would not have believed what he would see a scant 100 years later. For decades it has been the fastest growing urban area in Japan, recently
passing Nagoya as the nation’s third largest city, with a population of close to four million.

Together with Kyoto, which lies next to a large lake, Sapporo is the only other large Japanese city which is not a seaport, and it is located about fifty miles inland from the nearest port of Otaru. Most of Sapporo’s growth has taken place since the 1950s, and being so young, it has had a distinct advantage over older Japanese cities in that as it grew, it was able to better accommodate modern street planning and the motorcar.

We mentioned above that Japanese cities usually do not appear very attractive to outsiders. Sapporo comes closer than most to avoiding that characterization, and in fact, some parts of the urban area are rather handsome. Most streets in residential areas are laid out in straight lines and cross each other at right angles, a rarity in the rest of Japan. Street numbering in Sapporo is consecutive, as in most of the rest of the world, and does not follow the maddening chronological numbering system of the rest of Japan. The downtown area, while perhaps not to the extent of San Francisco or a Seattle, has a certain functional attractiveness to it. One notable feature is the underground city, a shopping area one story under the surface of the central part of downtown that stretches for many blocks—a convenience for shoppers on cold Hokkaido winter days.

The development of the area around Sapporo during the second half of the twentieth century was quite extraordinary. The city itself had a population of around 250,000 immediately after the war. By 1980, it had grown to almost two million! Wheat and dairy products began to catch on in Japan in the 1950s, and because Sapporo is too far north for successful rice production, the several thousand square miles of rich soil surrounding Sapporo was available and quickly became the source of two new massive industries—wheat products, especially wheat noodles, and a wide range of dairy products. A second source of growth is a tourist

* It may be hard to believe, but the normal way of numbering properties in Japan is according to the date of their development within a relatively small demographic area, so that property number 5 may be next to number 18, etc.
industry which has put the area second only to Kyoto as a destination for tourists.

As Japan joined the ranks of affluent populations of the world, skiing became a popular recreation. With long winters and situated as it is close to mountains perfect as ski slopes, Sapporo rapidly grew into the winter sports and recreation capital of Japan, and not just as a winter destination for Japanese travelers. Hokkaido has a climate unlike that of any other part of the nation. It is outside the range of rain clouds which cover Japan for most of the spring and early summer, which make a sunny day during those months a rare treat. It is also far enough north to escape the scorching heat and humidity of Japanese summers, making Sapporo an attractive year-round tourist destination.

So then we can see that just as in the United States, geography, weather, population density, agricultural practices—all these things—have worked to help create definitive themes in Japanese life. Japanese are more community oriented than are Americans; this is true even for those Japanese who live in very large cities. This is no doubt due to the long historical period when close-knit village life and close cooperation in the agricultural cycle was the norm for all but a very small minority of aristocrats and townspeople. The group, especially the work group, has long been noticed as far more central to Japanese life than in most other places. Historically the Japanese have had an unusual curiosity and respect for cultural elements which come to Japan from the outside. This is easier to understand when we contemplate how recent it has been that these people could escape the bounds of their island isolation.

This then has been a discussion of the physical aspect of the Japanese nation. Next we will take a look at the people who lived and adjusted to those circumstances.

**NAGOYA**

Some geographers rank the third largest metropolitan area in Japan a place called Kita Kyushu 北九州, but all you have to do is go there and you will discover that the place has no actual core city, it’s just a bunch of large towns all bunched together and counted as an urban area. The real
third largest, and certainly historically a far more important urban area is Nagoya 名古屋, center of a region usually labeled Chubu 中部 or middle area, signifying its important location. Nagoya lies on the old tōkaidō 東海道, the road linking the two great historical power centers of Japanese life—Kyoto and Edo (which later became Tokyo). The population of Nagoya proper is only a little over 2 million, but the metropolitan area surrounding it contains over 5 million inhabitants, about the same as its sister city of Los Angeles, California.

Nagoya has a fine deep water port and was significant as a shipping area as far back as Japanese history goes. During the Edo Period, which you will read about later, Nagoya was administered directly as a fief of the ruling Tokugawa clan. They built a castle there, completed in 1612, which was destroyed in the war but rebuilt exactly to its original dimensions in 1959. It has been turned into a very interesting museum. Atsuta Shrine 熱田神宮 is in the Nagoya area, the second most venerated holy place in Japan, next to Ise 伊勢 further to the south.

In modern times, Nagoya has been one of Japan’s chief export centers (nearly 40% of Japan’s exports ship from its port), as well as one of its main manufacturing hubs. Before the end of World War II, Nagoya was home to the Japanese aircraft industry, one reason why the city and surroundings were so heavily bombed by the U.S. Air Force. Although not targeted for nuclear weapons, destruction brought about by standard bombs was in many ways as great as for Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Over time it made a complete recovery and came eventually to be home to the largest vehicle manufacturing center in the world. One of Nagoya’s suburbs changed its name a few years ago to reflect the importance of the largest single employer in the area. The suburb is now officially known as Toyota City.

The Toyota plant covers several square miles, and although as you know they have been having some very serious quality control problems recently, Toyota was established over a decade ago as the world’s largest producer of cars and trucks. The importance of the company to the economy of the Nagoya area can hardly be exaggerated: Over 30,000 workers are employed directly at the plant and another 20,000 work for suppliers located nearby.