

#10375 JAPAN: THE 21ST CENTURY

BENCHMARK MEDIA, 2001

Grade Level: 6-12

28 Minutes



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JAPAN: 21ST CENTURY

28 minutes, video

Distributed by BENCHMARK MEDIA
Produced by NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY
Humanities Extension/Publications Program

FOR USE IN: World Geography

LEVEL: Grades 5 to 10

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVE:

To help students understand the following about Japan:

- ❑ the volcanic physical geography, varied climate, intensive farming, and industrialization of this island nation
- ❑ the homogeneous cultural, ethnic identity, and high literacy of its densely populated islands
- ❑ how after 700 years of feudal isolation and WWII devastation, it emerged as a democracy and the 2nd largest economy in the world.
- ❑ The strong and still pervasive effect of historical Japanese culture, now being modified with Western values

BEFORE SHOWING THE VIDEO:

1. Using a wall map, have students locate Japan. How far is it from where they live? Note the volcanic origin of the four main and thousands of smaller islands strung out over the same latitudes as the USA's entire east coast, from Maine to Florida. Locate the volcanic "Ring of Fire" that circles much of the Pacific Ocean and includes Japan. Locate places the video will take note of: the 4 main islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushi; nearby Russia's Siberia, China's Manchuria, and Korea; and the cities of Kobe, Tokyo, Utsunomiya on Honshu 60 miles northeast of Tokyo, Kyoto and Nara— ancient capitals of Japan.
2. How do the physical geographic features and climate of Japan compare with those of the entire east coast of the United States, which lies in the same latitudes?
3. On population density and physical maps, note that most of the population is concentrated on about one-eighth of the land, on the small arable valleys and coastal areas squeezed between steep volcanic mountains.
4. Ask students to make a list of how different cultures have shaped their lives, for example, the foods (including Japanese and Asian) they eat, the sports they practice or enjoy watching (including martial arts), hobbies (including flower arrangement and gardening), the language(s) they speak, the music they listen to, their religion. How would their everyday life be different if it had not been influenced by other cultures?
5. Discuss how physical geography and climate, local commerce and farming, available transportation and communications affect the way people are able to live and work together in your local area.
6. What recent changes have resulted from modern communications (broadcast, cable, and satellite television, the Internet, the mobile phone)? Expand the concept to other regions of the

country. When they view the video, ask students to notice how modern communications with the West are also affecting the values and lives of the island people of Japan.

CONTENT OF THE VIDEO:

To understand how Japan transformed itself from a feudal agrarian society, long isolated, and then devastated by WW II, only to emerge as the second largest economy in the world, second only to the U.S, one must first understand their land and their history.

Japan has four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushi. They and thousands of smaller islands are strung out over the same latitudes as the USA's entire east coast, from Maine to Florida. Japan's climates range widely from humid continental in the north with snowy winters, to humid subtropical in the south. The active volcanic "Ring of Fire" that circles much of the Pacific Ocean, includes Japan. In 1995 an earthquake registering 7.2 on the Richter scale struck Honshu's city of Kobe, killing 6,000 people and inflicting severe damage.

Only one-eighth of the land, which lies in valleys and along the coast, is arable. The steep volcanic mountains are not. Intensive cultivation of rice provides the staple grain, and the surrounding sea, supplies fish, the staple protein. World trade is vital to this island economy.

Early contact with neighboring China and Korea brought information about farming techniques and the ideas of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, a pictographic form of writing, and the religion of Buddhism from China and Korea. Buddhism blended with Japan's pre-existing religion, Shinto. Less than 1% of the population is Christian.

Because it was largely isolated for 700 years until mid-19th century, a strong and still pervasive Japanese culture took deep root. Such traditions include the powerful military leaders (called Samurai) warrior code of Bushido embodying great respect for tradition and strong loyalty to authorities. Those values still greatly influence the conduct of Japanese business and government today.

Japan's government is a parliamentary democracy with an Emperor as a symbol of the State. The two-house legislature is called the National Diet. Its constitution, rewritten after WWII, prohibits a strong military, and permits U.S. military bases in Japan – which has become increasingly controversial in recent years.

International trade is critical to the nation's survival. About half of what Japan eats is imported. Imports and exports are the nation's life blood.

Living space is so limited by the country's mountainous terrain, that everything reflects that: small cars and trucks, narrow streets, and small living spaces. Extensive networks of high-speed electric trains connect cities, and subways serve the larger cities.

The Saga family live in Utsunomiya, 60 miles northeast of Tokyo, in a typical suburban home of only 1,250 square feet for 5 people. A comparable home for such a family in the U.S. would be more than double that. The Japanese solution to the space problem is to have multiple uses for a room; such as for sitting and eating during the day, and sleeping at night.

Parents and teachers stress the importance of education to students, who are very serious about their studies. But many younger Japanese, while respecting family and religious customs, are seeking more freedom for their individual growth and interests in such things as Western music.

Still the traditional Japanese cultural values, which are pervasive and deep, can be seen in formal gardens, seasonal religious festivals, traditional crafts. Traditional customs such as their highly ritualized tea ceremony have a social and aesthetic function. But here too, the western craze for coffee has penetrated Japan, and one finds Starbuck's coffee shops and fast-food restaurants opening here and there.

Martial arts are taught in schools, yet the American sport of baseball has become a Japanese passion, and English is a mandated language in Middle School.

Japan is entering the 21st century as a major global economic power with its younger generation more open to Western cultural influences than their parents.

AFTER SHOWING THE VIDEO

1. Stimulate class discussion about Japan's physical geography, climate, traditional cultural values, high literacy, and ethnic homogeneity. How are they similar and how different from those in the U.S.?
2. What were the reasons for the nation's dramatic economic growth from WWII until the early 1990's? (a highly skilled work force with a work ethic, respect for authority and consensus, high literacy, and a business culture providing lifetime security)
3. What were the reasons for the recent economic stagnation in Japan? (the bursting of the land speculation bubble, the too close connection between businesses and banks with the government, and the lack of political will to close down or merge shaky banks and businesses -- the same values of loyalty and respect for tradition that had made the country so successful in former more favorable economic conditions).
4. Divide the class into two groups, and assign one to a life of a Japanese middle class business person in Tokyo, and the other to a craftsperson in the suburbs of Tokyo. Ask the students to prepare a class presentation on a typical day in the life of their subject. Compare those typical daily events with similar daily events in the students' lives.
5. Ask students to plan a trip to Tokyo, and to Kyoto, using maps, tourist information, information from World Wide Web, books or articles, and the video. Reports should address how they would travel within Japan, where they would choose to visit, what they would want to see, do, and buy, what food they would expect to be served in a restaurant and what would they sit on, which time of year they would prefer to travel and why, what clothing they would bring, and what the weather and landscape would be like.
6. What would probably be the most pervasive and surprising Japanese custom they encounter? (everyone bows: from the elevator operators to their passengers in a department store; to those who store luggage on a bus to the bus passengers as the bus departs)
7. If any Japanese political or economic issues are currently in the headlines, have students bring in clippings and discuss them. This can lead to an investigation into the nation's current, larger economic and political structure and problems.

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