

# CUSTOMS AND CULTURES OF THE WORLD



## MY TEENAGE LIFE IN JAPAN







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My Teenage Life in AUSTRALIA

My Teenage Life in BRAZIL

My Teenage Life in CHINA

My Teenage Life in EGYPT

My Teenage Life in GREECE

My Teenage Life in INDIA

My Teenage Life in JAPAN

My Teenage Life in MEXICO

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My Teenage Life in RUSSIA

My Teenage Life in SOUTH AFRICA

Our Teenage Life in the NAVAJO NATION

# CUSTOMS AND CULTURES OF THE WORLD



# MY TEENAGE LIFE IN JAPAN

**By Mari Rich**  
with Sara Saito

**Series Foreword by**  
**Kum-Kum Bhavnani**



MASON CREST



## **Mason Crest**

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# CONTENTS

Series Foreword by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, UCSB .....	6
<b>MEET SARA!</b> .....	8
<b>Japan: An Introduction</b> .....	10
<b>SARA'S SCHOOL LIFE</b> .....	18
<b>TIME TO EAT!</b> .....	20
<b>Japanese Customs</b> .....	22
<b>SARA'S CITY</b> .....	28
<b>Japanese Culture</b> .....	30
<b>SARA'S FREE TIME</b> .....	38
<b>Japan's Economy and Politics</b> .....	40
<b>SARA'S COUNTRY</b> .....	46
<b>SARA ON FAITH IN JAPAN</b> .....	50
<b>The Future of Japan</b> .....	52
Text-Dependent Questions .....	60
Research Projects .....	61
Find Out More .....	62
Series Glossary of Key Terms.....	63
Index/Author .....	64

## Key Icons to Look For



**Words to Understand:** These words with their easy-to-understand definitions will increase the reader's understanding of the text, while building vocabulary skills.



**Sidebars:** This boxed material within the main text allows readers to build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspectives by weaving together additional information to provide realistic and holistic perspectives.



**Educational Videos:** Readers can view videos by scanning our QR codes, providing them with additional educational content to supplement the text. Examples include news coverage, moments in history, speeches, iconic sports moments, and much more!



**Text-Dependent Questions:** These questions send the reader back to the text for more careful attention to the evidence presented here.



**Research Projects:** Readers are pointed toward areas of further inquiry connected to each chapter. Suggestions are provided for projects that encourage deeper research and analysis.



**Series Glossary of Key Terms:** This back-of-the-book glossary contains terminology used throughout this series. Words found here increase the reader's ability to read and comprehend higher-level books and articles in this field.



## SERIES FOREWORD

# Culture: Parts = Whole

**C**ulture makes us human.

Many of us think of culture as something that belongs to a person, a group, or even a country. We talk about the food of a region as being part of its culture (tacos, pupusas, tamales, and burritos all are part of our understanding of food from Mexico, and South and Central America).

We might also talk about the clothes as being important to culture (saris in India, kimonos in Japan, hijabs or *gallibayas* in Egypt, or beaded shirts in the Navajo Nation). Imagine trying to sum up “American” culture using just examples like these! Yet culture does not just belong to a person or even a country. It is not only about food and clothes or music and art, because those things by themselves cannot tell the whole story.

Culture is also about how we live our lives. It is about our lived experiences of our societies and of all the worlds we inhabit. And in this series—Customs and Cultures of the World—you will meet young people who will share their experiences of the cultures and worlds they inhabit.

How does a teenager growing up in South Africa make sense of the history of apartheid, the 1994 democratic elections, and of what is happening now? That is as integral to our world’s culture as the ancient ruins in Greece, the pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, the Himalayas above Nepal, and the Amazon rain forests in Brazil.

But these examples are not enough. Greece is also known for its financial uncertainties, Egypt is



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known for the uprisings in Tahrir Square, China is known for its rapid development of megacities, Australia is known for its amazing animals, and Brazil is known for the Olympics and its football [soccer] team. And there are many more examples for each nation, region, and person, and some of these examples are featured in these books. The question is: How do you, growing up in a particular country, view your own culture? What do you think of as culture? What is your lived experience of it? How do you come to understand and engage with cultures that are not familiar to you? And, perhaps most importantly, why do you/we want to do this? And how does reading about and experiencing other cultures help you understand your own?

It is perhaps a cliché to say culture forms the central core of our humanity and our dignity. If that's true, how do young adults talk about your own cultures? How do you simultaneously understand how people apparently "different" from you live their lives, and engage

with their cultures? One way is to read the stories in this series. The "authors" are just like you, even though they live in different places and in different cultures. We communicated with these young writers over the Internet, which has become the greatest gathering of cultures ever. The Internet is now central to the culture of almost everyone, with young people leading the way on how to use it to expand the horizons of all of us. From those of us born in earlier generations, thank you for opening that cultural avenue!

Let me finish by saying that culture allows us to open our minds, think about worlds different from the ones we live in, and to imagine how people very different from us live their lives. This series of books is just the start of the process, but a crucial start.

I hope you enjoy them.

—Kum-Kum Bhavnani  
*Professor of sociology and  
feminist and global studies at the  
University of California, Santa  
Barbara, and an award-winning  
international filmmaker.*



JAPAN

# MEET SARA!



As I write this,  
I'm 15 years old. I have  
two sisters; one is 10  
years old and the  
other is 12.

Editor's Note: The photos in this book are not of Sara. She chose not to use her real last name or her photo. We respect her privacy and thank her for her contributions to this book.



To: The Reader

Subject: About Me!

We have always lived in our current house. It is pretty big, and also very convenient because it is located in central Tokyo. We live in a very peaceful area and our neighbors are very kind despite all the racket my sisters and I make every day.

My mom works in our school office (which makes life very convenient for all of us). My dad is a portfolio manager at an investment management firm. My parents are divorced. My mom's side of the family lives in America and I visit them every summer.





# Japan: An Introduction

**Y**ou may already know a little bit about Japan without even realizing it. If you've ever added boiling water to one of those packages of dried **ramen** from the supermarket for an afternoon snack, you've eaten a food that originated in Japan. If you're a fan of video games like Super Mario, have ever played Pokémon, or own a product featuring Hello Kitty, you have some things in common with people in Japan.

Japan is an archipelago (a string of islands) on the eastern edge of the continent of Asia. There are four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu—as well as thousands of smaller islands. Most of

## Words to Understand

**habitable** suitable to live in

**industrialization** the process in which an economy is transformed from mainly agricultural to one based on manufacturing goods

**prefecture** an area of land administered by a local government

**ramen** quick-cooking egg noodles, usually served in a broth with bits of meat and/or vegetables

**regent** a person appointed to administer a country because the monarch is either too young or unable to govern for some other reason

**tectonic** a geologic term relating to the structure of the Earth's surface



the smaller islands are not **habitable**. One exception is Toshima, a volcanic island that measures less than two square miles, east of the Izu Peninsula; about 300 people live on the island, which is known for its flowering camellia plants.

Almost 80 percent of Japan is covered with mountains. The largest island, Honshu, is the site of the country's highest peak, Mount Fuji. Several earthquakes hit Japan every year because three of the **tectonic** plates that form the earth's crust meet nearby. When the plates move against each other, earthquakes occur. Japan also has 60 active volcanoes. Despite those dangers, many people agree that Japan's natural landscape, which includes plentiful waterfalls and forests, is among the loveliest on the planet.

Japan is also home to vibrant, bustling cities. Tokyo, for example, is part of the most populous metropolitan area in the world. There you will find exciting neon-lit streets, thousands of restaurants, and plenty to do both night and day.

## A Long History

People first came to Japan about 30,000 years ago. At that time, the major islands were connected to Korea and Siberia by stretches of dry land that people could cross on foot. About 12,000 years ago, the first organized society, the Jomon culture, arose. Jomon people lived mainly in pit dwellings, which were arrayed around central open spaces. They were skilled

### Fukushima Tsunami



Japan is located on the Pacific Rim, an area that is often hit with earthquakes. In 2011, a 9.1 earthquake, one of the largest ever recorded, occurred off the eastern coast of Japan. It created a massive tsunami that rolled at more than 12 yards (40 m) high onto the coastline. The devastation was immense. More than 15,000 people died and thousands more were left homeless.

More dangerously, a nuclear plant in Fukushima was in the tsunami zone. Explosions and a near-meltdown released radioactivity that caused a massive evacuation. The quake and its aftereffects continue in that part of Japan.





hunters, fishermen, and gatherers, and archaeologists have found many examples of the distinctive pottery they made from coils of clay mixed with crushed shells and fibers.



## Samurai

During the early 10th century, an elite group of warriors called Samurai emerged. Future Samurai began training as children. Their schooling included not only martial arts but also poetry and religious philosophy. Samurai were expected to live according to a strict moral code called *Bushido* (the Way of the Warrior), which involved loyalty, respect, and ethical behavior. Instead of facing death or humiliation at the hands of an enemy, Samurai were expected to commit ritual suicide (*seppuku*). Sometimes girls attended Samurai school, although they did not fight on the battlefield. Samurai were well-respected members of society until the mid-1870s, when the Samurai class was outlawed under Emperor Meiji and they lost their privileges.

The Jomon culture survived for thousands of years. In 300 BCE, the Yayoi people came to Honshu Island, traveling from Korea and China. The Yayoi were weavers and toolmakers. They also brought with them the practice of cultivating rice in flooded areas of land called paddy fields. Once agriculture was introduced, social classes started to emerge, and landowners gained authority and influence. According to Japanese legend, in





*This artwork depicts early Japanese leader Jimmu Tenno. He is believed to have been a real person, but in the centuries since, many myths have arisen to make him seem more than simply a human leader.*

660 BCE, Japan's first emperor, Jimmu Tenno, came to power. He was said to be a descendant of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess.

Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in 538, when a Korean ruler gave the Japanese Emperor Kimmei a gift that included a picture of the Buddha and scrolls with Buddhist teachings. Because Japan already had a traditional religion, Shinto, the emperor was not sure how to react. Some four decades later, however, Prince Shotoku, a **regent** to the Empress Suiko, declared Buddhism the official religion because he believed it would help Japan develop into a united and culturally superior country.



Emperors ruled Japan until the 12th century, when military rulers called shoguns, took control. (The word shogun comes from the Japanese words *sho*, which means “commander,” and *gun*, meaning “troops.”)

In 1543, when a ship from Portugal sailed to the port city of Nagasaki, the first Europeans arrived in Japan. The Japanese welcomed the chance



*The 1543 arrival of the Portuguese “kurofune,” or “black ships,” signalled the opening of the country to the West. Though that relationship changed over time, this event remains a turning point in Japanese history.*





*In 1853, U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry, shown here on the left in a woodblock print from the 19th century, arrived with warships in an effort to extend American influence in Asia and continue the “opening” of Japan.*

to trade and began exporting iron and traditional artworks. In return, the Portuguese traders brought fabric, coral, sugar, and firearms. At about this time, Jesuit missionaries also brought the idea of Christianity to Japan.

## Modernization

The shogun in power closed Japan to foreign travelers in 1635. Japanese people were also forbidden from traveling outside their country. Foreign books were banned. With few exceptions, those prohibitions lasted more than 200 years. Finally, in 1868, the last shogun was overthrown and



emperors reemerged as ruling figures. With the long period of isolation over, Japan began changing and modernizing at a rapid pace.

Under the leadership of Emperor Meiji, Tokyo became the nation's new capital, and important reforms were enacted so that Japan could begin competing with Western nations economically, socially, and militarily. The strict division between the social classes began to erode, and religious freedom and other human rights were granted. Feudal lords (known as *daimyo*) returned their land to the emperor, and the country was divided into **prefectures**.



*A Buddhist statue stands broken but unbowed amid the devastating destruction wrought by the atomic bomb dropped by American forces on Nagasaki near the end of World War II in 1945.*



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Education was made mandatory; so was service in the newly strengthened army and navy. Japanese scholars were sent away to study Western science and languages. They brought their new knowledge back to Japan and helped usher in an era of **industrialization**.

During World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, Japan fought on the side of the U.S. Soon, however, the country fell under the sway of right-wing militarists who pursued imperial expansion. On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed the U.S. naval fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and America declared war on Japan in response. The battle between Japanese and Allied forces became the Pacific theater of World War II. In August 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than 100,000 people. Japan surrendered a few days later.

The end of World War II found Japan's cities, industries, and transportation systems in ruins. A new constitution was enacted in 1947, calling for the emperor to give up all political and military power and guaranteeing broad human rights. Church and state were firmly separated. The country was forbidden to have a traditional army and even now has only a self-defense force. Within a few decades, Japan became the world economic powerhouse that we know today. \*



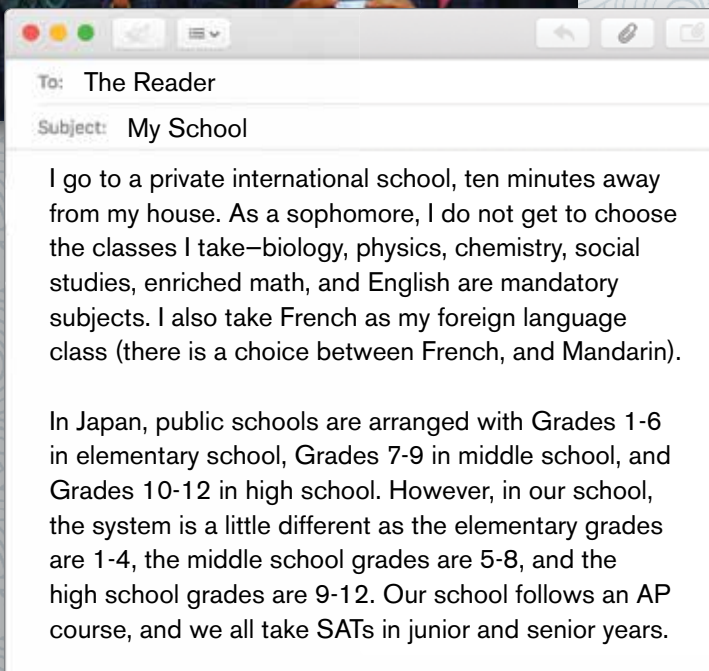
Japan and World War II



# SARA'S SCHOOL LIFE



I love my school because the atmosphere is so friendly and positive. There is hardly any bullying in my school and since we are an international all-girls school, there is no gender or racial discrimination.





## University System in Japan

About half of Japan's high school graduates move on to college or university. Unlike in the US, private schools make up the bulk of the higher education institutions, more than 75 percent. In those schools, a huge focus is on job-hunting and less on studying. Meanwhile, one commentator reported that Japanese corporations actually play a huge role at universities. Students reportedly spend much of their third and fourth years trying to line up a job after graduation, attending meetings and studying business etiquette. In recent years, there has been some pushback to this process. Business groups have said they will wait longer to let students focus more on studies, but so far there has been no real change. There are also junior colleges, as well as a large number of technical colleges, that focus on specific careers.





JAPAN

# TIME TO EAT!

I love all foods  
but my favorite is  
probably sushi.



Udon Noodles



We have a typical breakfast, lunch and dinner, which is sometimes Japanese cuisine and sometimes Western. We do not eat Japanese dishes all the time; probably only about 50 percent of the time.



Tempura





If I go out with my friends, I like to eat sweets in Harajuku.



Eel

Although I am a big fan of Japanese cuisine, my two younger sisters prefer Western cuisine.







# Japanese Customs

**M**ost Japanese customs are a mix of traditional and new. The people have a great respect for the way things have always been done, but younger people have added modern touches amid a year of long-celebrated holidays.

## Happy New Year!

The Japanese New Year, also known as *shogatsu*, is considered one of the most important days on the calendar. Families gather to spend time together (no matter how far away they might live), and many businesses close down from January 1 to January 3.

People generally clean their homes in time for the holiday, and many hang festive decorations made of pine, bamboo, and plum tree branches. They send colorful greeting cards timed to reach their recipients exactly on January 1.

On New Year's Eve, it is traditional to eat long buckwheat noodles (soba) because they represent long lives. In recent years, some families

### Words to Understand

**etiquette** a code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular group

**reciprocate** to do the same in return

**shrine** a place connected with a holy person or event where people go to worship





*At the New Year, many Japanese people visit Shinto shrines to ask for blessing in the year ahead; the event is known as hatsumode.*

have made it an annual tradition to watch the televised show *Kohaku Uta Gassen*, which features a variety of Japan's most famous pop stars—much like American viewers watch the ball drop on Times Square during the countdown to the New Year. The Japanese also have a form of countdown: At midnight on December 31, Buddhist temples all over Japan ring their bells 108 times to symbolize the 108 human sins in Buddhist belief.

One of the most important *shogatsu* customs is to visit a **shrine** or temple. Some of the most popular of these, like the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, attract millions of visitors during the holiday.



*Lanterns are a traditional decoration for the celebration of Obon, honoring ancestors who have died. The lanterns help guide the spirits “home.”*

## The Souls of the Ancestors

Another important holiday is *Obon*, a Buddhist celebration meant to honor the souls of one’s ancestors. Obon is commemorated either in mid-July or mid-August, depending on the region.

It is said that during Obon, the souls of the departed return to earth to visit their family members. Because of this, lanterns are hung in front of houses to guide the spirits. Some people may visit cemeteries or make food offerings, either at local temples or on small altars set up at home.



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## Cherry Blossom Time

Some Japanese traditions have no basis in religion but are rooted instead in the simple enjoyment of nature. *Hanami* (or flower viewing) occurs during the period from roughly the end of March to early May, when *sakura* (cherry blossoms) are at their peak all over Japan.

Many people in Japan eagerly watch the news for reports on when the blossoms are expected to appear so that they can plan large outdoor parties under the trees. These often last well into the night and involve lots of good food and music. The custom of Hanami dates back many centuries.



*The Japanese landmark of Mt. Fuji rises above the plains outside Tokyo. The cherry trees blossom in the wild and in carefully planned gardens.*





## Tea Ceremony

Even serving tea can be an occasion of ritual and celebration in Japan. *Chanoyu*, or the Japanese tea ceremony, has been practiced at least since the 16th century. Back then, it was a way for rulers, elite warriors, and rich merchants to strengthen their social connections. Most historians credit the creation of the tea ceremony to a Buddhist priest named Murata Shuko (1422–1502), who outlined the intricate steps of the ritual, which can take years to learn.

Even today, many Japanese families set aside a small room in their house devoted to the tea ceremony. In the tea room, the host is responsible for the elaborate process of preparing the tea and for presenting it in beautiful serving pieces that they have carefully collected. The guests are expected to follow a strict code of **etiquette** that concerns the gestures they use to drink their tea and how they show their appreciation to their hosts. Each ceremony can take hours to complete.



## Everyone Loves Chocolate

The Japanese have adopted some holiday traditions from the United States but put their own twist on them. February 14, for example, marks Valentine's Day there, but Japanese women do not wait to receive big, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates. Instead, on February 14, they send their husbands, boyfriends, and other men in their lives tokens of their true affection or professional respect.

The custom has been traced back to 1936, when a candy manufacturer based in the city of Kobe thought that marketing the holiday would be a good way to make money. He took out ads in the newspaper, and the custom took off. In the 1950s, a Japanese company called Mary Chocolates began making heart-shaped candies for the first time. Now, Japanese women spend an estimated \$500 million every year on Valentine's Day chocolate.

White Day occurs on March 14. On that day, men who received chocolates and gifts a month before, on Valentine's Day, are expected to **reciprocate**. White Day was launched in 1978 by Japan's National Confectionery Industry Association. Traditional gifts include white chocolate, white clothing, and jewelry. \*



*Japan has a slightly different way of celebrating Valentine's Day; it is women who provide the sweets to their lovers.*



Japanese tea ceremony



## SARA'S CITY

To: The Reader

Subject: My City

We live in Central Tokyo, a very metropolitan area. So I am not used to anything aside from urban life. Many people find Tokyo's busy atmosphere, with its rushing people and crowded streets, uncomfortable. However, I find it greatly calming. I like how everything is so efficient and always moving in the city—although sometimes it can feel a little suffocating.

When I visit the countryside, I feel myself longing to return to city life. I do enjoy nature and freedom; however, being in big open spaces makes me feel very small and unnoticed. My friends disagree and say they feel the complete opposite living in the city.







## Tokyo: An Amazing World City

Including Tokyo's nearby suburbs, more than 36 million people live in this area, making it the most-populated urban area in the world. That also represents more than 25 percent of Japan's entire population. Though crowded, especially in central Tokyo, it is less densely populated than New York City.

Tokyo, known in ancient times as Edo, is the capital city of Japan as well. Still, all those people can create huge crowds. The subway system employs people whose job it is to push passengers into overcrowded subway cars. On the other hand, thanks to the Japanese national personality, Tokyo is relatively crime free and is always regarded as one of the cleanest major cities.

Japan has attracted more than 19 million tourists annually in recent years, most of them from China and most of them making some part of their trip to include Tokyo itself.

In 1964, Tokyo hosted the Summer Olympics; it is set to welcome the Games again in 2020.





# Japanese Culture

**T**he culture of Japan could be said to mostly stand apart from outside influences. The homogenous nature of the people has led to the creation of a culture developed very much from within the nation, with a few exceptions. In business, for example, Western dress is typical, but the methods of interacting with each other are very Japanese. From food to clothing to entertainment, Japanese culture is quite unique.

## Beyond Sushi

Ask many Americans to name a Japanese food, and they might immediately think of sushi. However, Japanese **cuisine** is varied and delicious, and sushi is only one small part.

In the Edo period of Japanese history (1603–1867), sushi referred to fish that had been pickled in vinegar. Today, the term is used to mean any number of dishes that contain rice prepared with sushi vinegar. Different

### Words to Understand

**conjugate** to give the different forms of a word as they vary by tense, number, or other factor

**cuisine** cooking that is characteristic of a particular country, region, or restaurant

**indigenous** originating naturally in a particular place





*Noodles known as ramen are a popular dish in Japan, served with all sorts of meat and vegetables. They can be seen in markets worldwide as well.*

types of sushi include *nigiri* (small balls of rice with fish or other ingredients on top) and *norimaki* (rice, vegetables, and seafood rolled in sheets of seaweed and sliced). Although outsiders sometimes refer to sushi as “raw fish,” that is a mistake; thinly sliced raw fish is, indeed, eaten in Japan, but it is called *sashimi*.

Noodles of all types are an important part of Japanese cuisine, and ramen (a broth-based dish containing noodles made of wheat flour) is particularly popular. *Ramen-ya*—restaurants serving the tasty, relatively affordable dish—can be found in every area of the country.

Although Japanese food is generally light and healthy, that is not true of every dish. Tempura, for example, refers to pieces of food (often shrimp or various vegetables) that have been dipped in batter and deep-fried.



*Japanese is written with characters that represent sounds and words. When those are put into Western lettering, the translation can be called katakana.*

## Language

Japanese is spoken by about 125 million people, making it one of the most common languages in the world. Linguists have not been able to accurately trace when it was first used, but a large part of its vocabulary is derived from Chinese.

Compared to many other languages, Japanese has relatively few sounds, so most learners can pronounce words easily. Additionally, Japanese grammar is comparatively simple. Nouns always appear in the same form, and there is no distinction between plural and singular. Verbs and adjectives are **conjugated** consistently, with none of the confusing exceptions that make some languages hard to master.



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Writing is probably a little harder for people learning Japanese. Modern Japanese is written using a mixture of three main systems. *Kanji*, characters of Chinese origin, are used to represent words borrowed from the Chinese. *Hiragana* and *Katakana*, two sets of written characters representing syllables or sound, are also used, in order to spell out things like foreign words or names.

## The Sporting Life

You might think of baseball as a purely American phenomenon, but there are 12 pro teams in Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball League. Amateur baseball is also a popular pastime, and many children play in local



*Baseball has been played in Japan for more than 100 years. The most popular pro teams pack stadiums throughout the country.*



Little Leagues, just like in the U.S. Baseball has not displaced traditional martial arts, such as judo, kendo, and karate, however, and many people study and practice these activities for years. Martial arts can be exciting to watch and have even become official events in the Olympics. In many of the traditional martial arts, practitioners earn a series of colored belts to indicate their level of skill.

Judo (which means “the gentle way”) was first included in the Olympic Games in 1964 but has been practiced in Japan since 1882, when Kano Jigoro, a scholar and athlete, devised a method of resisting a powerful opponent by leveraging his own strength against him. While Kendo (Japanese



*The martial art of judo is very popular in Japan. Instead of strikes or blows, athletes use grappling, throws, and leverage to take down an opponent.*



*Huge and powerful sumo wrestlers battle until one man touches the ground with anything but his feet or if one is pushed outside the ring.*

fencing) is not yet an Olympic sport, there are international competitions held every year. Kendo is very dramatic to watch, with competitors clad in armor-like gear wielding long bamboo swords. Modern karate evolved from the **indigenous** martial arts practiced on the Ryukyu Islands (which now make up Okinawa Prefecture). Competitors do not wear any protective gear and fight using only their hands and feet.

It is sumo wrestling, however, that has been called Japan's national sport. Its participants are instantly recognizable because most weigh more than 300 pounds and wear their hair in a distinctive ponytail.





*Karaoke is a popular evening activity for city workers.*

Japan is the home of *manga*, a distinctive style of comic book art in which characters generally feature very large, almond-shaped eyes, and *anime*, a style of animation associated with exaggerated actions, poses, and facial expressions. In Japan, anime and manga are enjoyed by adults as well as children, and some of the themes explored in them are dark or mature.

Another form of entertainment in Japan is playing *pachinko*, a cross between a slot machine and pinball. Pachinko parlors typically feature

## That's Entertainment

Karaoke is now popular around the world, but it originated in Japan. Establishments all over the country allow amateur performers to belt out the songs of their choice, with prerecorded musical accompaniment and the lyrics projected on a screen. It typically costs 100 to 200 yen to use a karaoke machine for 30 minutes on weekdays, or 400 to 500 yen on weekends. (As of late 2016, 100 yen equaled about 90 cents. For more on Japanese currency, see page 42.)



*Manga books on many topics have become popular in the US as well.*



*Pachinko machines are sort of like pinball, with bouncing metal balls.*

bright, colorful signs and extremely noisy atmospheres. Players drop a small metal ball into the machine and hope that it triggers a cascade of additional balls. (Like a coin dropped into a slot machine though, most of a player's balls will simply disappear, requiring the purchase of more.) \*

## Harajuku Style



In recent years, the area around Tokyo's Harajuku Station has become a gathering spot for teens dressed in a mindboggling array of fanciful styles. Many are cosplayers—fans who dress up as characters from anime or manga. Others favor exaggerated Victorian-inspired ensembles that can include bell-shaped skirts with petticoats, knee-high stockings, corsets, and ornate headdresses. Many try a punk-rock look, with plenty of leather, chains, and motorcycle boots.





# SARA'S FREE TIME

To: The Reader

Subject: My Free Time

I have a very busy school life, but I make sure to do other things than study. I am student council president of the 10th grade. I do kickboxing and am part of the cross-country running team.

I am also part of the High School Choir, and the Vocal Ensemble.

As for clubs, I am part of the Brainbowl team, the International History Bee and Bowl team, and a member of the Global Student Accommodation club (a service organization).





I do  
kickboxing!





# Japan's Economy and Politics

**E**ver since Japan's Constitution took effect in 1947, the nation has operated under a **parliamentary** system. That means the Japanese don't elect a president directly, as is done in the United States.

Japan's parliament is called the Diet. It is made up of a 480-seat House of Representatives and a 242-seat House of Councilors. Any Japanese citizen who is at least 20 years old can vote for members of the Diet. Diet members then elect a prime minister from among their own ranks. He or she, in turn, chooses and leads a cabinet of ministers of state.

The Japanese Constitution calls for all three branches of the government—the legislative (the Diet), the executive (the cabinet), and the

## Words to Understand

**hereditary** gaining a title or possession through inheritance

**mint** to make coins out of metal

**parliamentary** describes a government in which a body of cabinet ministers is chosen from the legislature and acts as advisers to the chief of state (or prime minister)

**sovereignty** having supreme power and authority





*Akihito has been emperor of Japan since 1989. His oldest son, Crown Prince Naruhito (left), will take over upon his father's death.*

judicial (the court system)—to work independently of each other. The Constitution also calls for the **sovereignty** of the people and respect for fundamental human rights.

## Like Father, Like Son

Japan still has an emperor, but his role is purely ceremonial and he has no real political power. Japan is the oldest continuing **hereditary** monarchy in the world—and the only country whose monarch uses the title of “Emperor.” When a new emperor is named after the death of his father, he is said to be ascending to the Chrysanthemum Throne.





Although there have been empresses at times in Japanese history, the current Imperial House Law does not allow female descendants of an emperor to inherit the throne. There has been discussion in recent years, however, about amending the law if an emperor ever lacks a male successor in the future.

## Money Matters

The yen is the official currency of Japan. Just as \$ indicates dollars in the U.S., the symbol for the yen is ¥. The name comes from the Japanese word for “round.” Japanese coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 50, 100, and



*The Japanese stock market index is known as the Nikkei. It is closely watched by world financial experts.*



*Japan uses paper money and coins with denominations in yen. In early 2017, about 112 yen was equivalent to one US dollar.*

500 yen. (Some sources say the 1 yen coin costs more to **mint** than its face value.) Paper bills come in denominations of 1,000, 5,000, and 10,000 yen. There is also a 2,000-yen bill, but it is rarely seen in circulation.

Japan began using the yen in 1871, after Emperor Meiji ascended to the throne and Japan set its sights on competing with Western nations economically, socially, and militarily. For centuries before then, silver or iron coins called mon were used; these had holes in the center so they could be strung for the convenience of merchants. (Modern 5 yen and 50 yen coins still have holes in them, reportedly so that people with poor vision can more easily tell them apart from other coins.)



*Japan exports more cars than any nation except Germany. Japan's Toyota and Germany's Volkswagen are the top car manufacturers in the world.*

## The State of the Economy

In recent decades, Japan has become a major economic power. According to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which represents the total monetary value of all goods and services produced over a specific time period, it has the third largest economy in the whole world, right behind the U.S. and China.

The country is a member of the Group of 7 (G7), a loose coalition of democratic industrialized nations that meets each year to talk about global economic issues, international security, and energy policy. (Currently, the



other members are the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom.) If you added up the GDP of all of the G7 members, the total would make up almost 50 percent of the entire world economy.

One reason Japan is a relatively wealthy and stable country is its manufacturing industry. Japanese companies manufacture billions of dollars' worth of cars each year—a fact that is easy to see if you scan any large American parking lot for popular brands like Toyota, Nissan, Subaru, and Honda.

Japan imports raw materials to produce its goods and oil to fuel the machinery required. The country also imports foods like wheat and meat, because agricultural land can be in short supply. The land that is available for farming is typically devoted to rice, which is a high-yield crop and which the government subsidizes. \*



Car factory tour

## Kaizen



Many businesses in Japan adhere to a philosophy called *Kaizen*, which is generally translated as “continual improvement.” The philosophy first emerged after World War II, when companies were inspired by their Western counterparts to become more competitive. It reached widespread popularity when the business consultant Masaaki Imai wrote his best-selling 1986 book, *Kaizen: The Key to Japan’s Competitive Success*.

Every employee at an organization that embraces Kaizen—from the CEO down to the janitors—is expected to work to improve productivity, quality, and company environment. One of the most famous companies to implement Kaizen is automobile manufacturer Toyota, and some sources in the West refer to the philosophy as “the Toyota Way.” At the firm, if a worker on the assembly line notices a defect or problem, the entire line is shut down while everyone collaborates on a solution that might lead to permanent improvement.



# SARA'S COUNTRY

To: The Reader

Subject: My Country

I am very aware of the privileges that come with living in a country as highly developed as Japan. People living in this country are ensured the highest quality of life by an efficient government, a stable economy, and a well-established medical care system. Yet, despite the security that the Japanese government and society provides for its people, I believe Japan is not doing its best in making a world for me and for other teenagers. Having attended an international school my entire life, I have been exposed to a multitude of cultures that have widened my view of the world and of society. Comparing Japan's culture with the various others I have encountered and studied about in my international community, I recognize that Japan is too conservative/closed off and that it struggles with many issues of gender inequality, homophobia/sexual discrimination, and racial prejudices. Japan must work to overcome these stereotypes, and to empower women in order to keep up with the global standards of freedom and equality of the 21st century.

In an all-girls school, such as the one I attend, students are encouraged to become strong women who speak their minds and assert their respective places in the world. However, I see very little of this ideal reflected in the Japanese society for which gender stereotypes seem to be an integrated part of life. I do not see it reflected through the media which portrays and commercializes women to be beautiful yet submissive in nature. I do not see it reflected through the government and through the parliament which houses one of the world's lowest ranking percentage of female members. Nor do I see it reflected through the education system that encourages males to study and females to tend to housework, or through the workplaces maintaining low female employment rates.



**Women make up about 40 percent of workers in Japan, yet they hold less than 10 percent of important manager positions.**



The traditional Japanese woman, sometimes portrayed as the geisha character of long ago, often have been perceived as submissive. Sara feels that needs to change.







## SARA'S COUNTRY

To: The Reader

Subject: My Country

Japan is a great nation but it must advocate gender equality, in order to ingrain the right morals within its citizens and within the children/teenagers who will become its future.

I also believe Japan will benefit by welcoming more refugees and foreigners into the country. By closing its borders to desperate refugees/immigrants, Japan isolates itself from the rest of the world and, unconsciously, generates a fear and prejudice of foreigners/other races in its society.

My friends and I don't often discuss Japanese politics but we do talk about the things that concern *us*. Such as, how the generally closed off attitude of Japan's society harms the rising generation of citizens.





## Party Politics in Japan

As in many nations, political parties play a huge role in government in Japan. There are more than a dozen active parties, but two major ones control most of the action in the Japanese legislature, which is known as the Diet.

For most years since the 1950s, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has controlled the Diet. Its name is misleading, however, as its politics might best be called conservative, as that term is understood in the US. The Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) is actually the more liberal. In 2010, it merged with another, smaller party and dropped the “of Japan” part of its name. Though the DJP briefly ran the government around 2010, the LDP reasserted its control.

As in other parliamentary countries, the prime minister is the leader of the majority party. Thus in 2012, when the LDP took over, its leader Shinzo Abe [AH-bay] became prime minister. Elected in 2012 (he was also briefly PM in 2005–06), Abe is one of the longest-serving prime ministers since World War II.





# SARA ON FAITH IN JAPAN

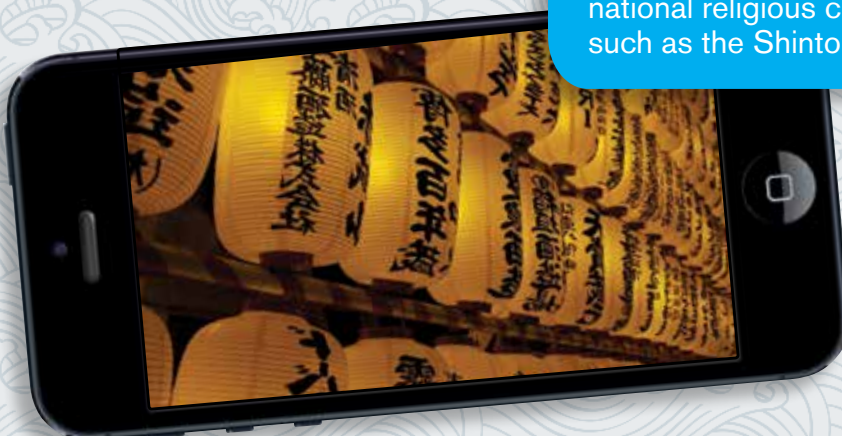
To: The Reader

Subject: Faith in Japan

Religion is very hard to identify in Japanese life. At first glance, it may seem as if the Japanese population is deeply religious because there are national religious ceremonies such as the Shinto New Year and the Buddhist Obon. However, most people participate in these religious activities out of respect for Japan's history and its traditional cultures and less out of specific beliefs. It is very common to be nonreligious in Japan and yet partake in all the national holidays. My entire family, myself included, has no religious background. Most of my friends at school also identify as agnostics [Ed.: "neither believing or not believing in God"] despite attending an essentially Catholic school.

I identify as an agnostic/atheist because I do not believe in God and also because some of my values, such as my belief in LGBTQ rights go against traditional religious beliefs. Although I am an agnostic/atheist, I hold a deep respect for all religions and cultures. I believe we should all be respectful and accepting of one another's religion. When people reject certain religious ideologies, it generates unnecessary hatred and prejudice. I have studied all the world's major religions in school and I know that the ultimate mantra of all religions is to "lead a good life." Perhaps another reason I remain non-religious is because it pains me so much to see how religion (or violence in the name of religion) can be used to do the exact opposite.

Japan celebrates many national religious ceremonies such as the Shinto New Year.







## Faith in Japan

As Sara notes, religion does not play a large role in the everyday life of Japan. The country's two main religions are Shinto, which is as old as Japanese culture itself, and Buddhism, which was introduced to the country in the sixth century. Most people in Japan consider themselves Shintoist, Buddhist, or a combination of both, and differences in religious belief typically do not cause strife or violence as they do in some other countries. The average Japanese person might engage in religious ritual only during events like weddings and funerals, or when participating in one of Japan's many holidays or festival days.



# The Future of Japan

**J**apan relies on other countries for resources such as food, on foreign markets for its exports, and on collective defenses and allies for its national security. Thus, the future of Japan is largely dependent on the future of the world. And just like all nations, it faces challenges as it looks to that future.

## Older and Wiser

There is good news and bad news when it comes to Japan's population. The good news is that thanks to medical advancements and healthy habits, people are living longer than ever. The bad news is that with couples choosing to have fewer children (or no children at all), 25 percent of Japan's population is made up of people over 65 years old. By 2060, that number could reach 40 percent, according to experts. That puts a great strain on the nation's healthcare system, because older people are subject to conditions like arthritis and dementia. The work force also suffers because there are fewer young people to do hard jobs that take physical strength and stamina.

### Words to Understand

**entrepreneur** someone who launches, manages, and assumes the risks of a business

**hub** a center of activity





*In terms of the average age of its population, Japan could be one of the “oldest” countries in the world in the coming decades.*

The Japanese government is taking steps to avoid the problems that come with an aging population. For example, it is offering long-term care insurance so that the elderly can live in comfortable surroundings that meet their needs. Some experts think that Japan will also have to do more to attract workers from other countries to replace Japanese workers who retire. This is especially important for vital professions like nursing.





*A big part of Japan's economic strength in the future will continue to be in consumer electronics, such as televisions, monitors, and computer equipment.*

## Tech Time

Japanese firms once dominated the consumer electronic industry, exporting enormous numbers of televisions, computers, and other such goods. China, Korea, and other countries are now taking over the lead. The government is trying to help Japan regain its standing as a technological giant by encouraging innovation and invention. It is funding start-up companies and lending support to young **entrepreneurs**, and some large universities are building business “incubators” so that professors and students can use their scientific research to create new products or services.

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Some experts think that because Japan is still a major **hub** of automotive design, the country will be a primary source of the next generation of cars. Japanese engineers are working to develop hydrogen-powered fuel cells that will allow cars to run cleanly and affordably. In fact, there is a national policy in place to encourage what has been called a total “hydrogen society,” in which clean, zero-emission fuel could power not only vehicles but everything in an average home. That’s important because some parts of Japan have high rates of pollution.



*Japan was an early leader in fuel-efficient cars. These automobiles made in Japan await export from a dock in Tokyo.*



## Robots to the Rescue

Japan is the acknowledged world leader in the field of robotics, and engineers there are making strides that could have come from the pages of a science fiction novel.

In 1986 Honda engineers began to think about designing a walking robot. Within a few years they had created a humanoid robot that could clumsily walk and climb stairs. After 20 years, their robot could not only walk smoothly but could reach for and grasp objects, recognize simple



*One solution to the issue of a smaller number of workers is to use more and more robots in factories. Japan is also a leader in making the robots.*





*The Honda company's ASIMO robot was one of the first to successfully mimic human motions and to interact independently with people.*

voice commands as well as faces, and navigate around obstacles in the environment. The company uses the robot in presentations to motivate young people to study science and technology. One day, engineers hope that it will be used to care for the elderly (by pushing a wheelchair or feeding a bedridden person) or even for such dangerous tasks as cleaning up toxic waste or fighting fires.



*Japan's work in creating more human-like robots continues. This model was called HPR-4C by the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology.*

Some engineers are focused on making robots that look as close to human as possible. They are making models with realistic-looking skin with embedded sensors. The sensors will allow the robot to react naturally, so if you touch it on the back, for example, it will turn to greet you.

Robots are also being developed with expressive eyes and mouths that can mimic various human facial expressions.

When a robot gets *too* realistic, some people refer to it as being in the “uncanny valley.” That term was coined by the robotics scientist Masahiro Mori in 1970 to describe our feelings of distrust and revulsion toward things that appear *almost* human, but not quite.

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People tend to be more comfortable with realistic robots that resemble pets. A robotic baby seal named Paro, for example, was developed in 2003 at Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST) and is now being used to provide comfort and companionship for residents of nursing homes.

As it faces the challenges of the future, Japan builds on a solid base in business and industry and a tradition of hard work and creativity. \*



Japan robot demo





JAPAN



## TEXT-DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. What happened after the introduction of agriculture to Japan?
2. Why do temple bells ring 108 times in Japan to usher in the New Year?
3. By what name in Japanese is this nation called by its people?
4. Describe the sport of sumo wrestling as reported in the text.
5. What is sashimi?
6. On what principles is the Japanese Constitution based?
7. What is a hydrogen society?



## RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Go online to see what Jomon pottery looked like. Sketch a few pieces and make a poster. Are there any museums near you that exhibit Jomon pottery?
2. Pretend you live in an area with many cherry blossoms. Plan a Hanami party. What would you serve to eat? What kind of music would you play?
3. The Harajuku district was not always a social hub for teens. Research the history of the area and draw a timeline listing major developments and events.
4. Currency exchange rates change frequently. How much is the Japanese yen currently worth in euros? In Indian rupees? Find an online currency converter and make a chart listing what the yen is worth in five other currencies.
5. Experts predict that by 2060, 40 percent of Japan's population will be older than 65. Try to find out what experts say about the American population. Is it aging? Is its ethnic composition changing? Write a few paragraphs about what you think the U.S. will look like when you are an adult.



## FIND OUT MORE

### Books

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Inzer, Christine Mari. *Diary of a Tokyo Teen: A Japanese-American Girl Travels to the Land of Trendy Fashion, High-Tech Toilets and Maid Cafes*. Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2016.

Norbury, Paul. *Japan—Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture*. London: Kuperard, 2011.

### Websites

[www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp)

This is the official site of Japan's National Tourism Organization.

[web-jpn.org/kidsweb/index.html](http://web-jpn.org/kidsweb/index.html)

Kids Web Japan includes information on Japanese food, technology, folk legends, games, and more.

[www.Japan-Talk.com](http://www.Japan-Talk.com)

This site features a calendar of events and fun lists of facts about the country.





# SERIES GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**arable land** land suitable for cultivation and the growing of crops

**commodity** a raw material that has value and is regularly bought and sold

**cuisine** cooking that is characteristic of a particular country, region, or restaurant

**destabilize** damage, disrupt, undermine

**dynasties** long periods of time during which one extended family rules a place

**industrialization** the process in which an economy is transformed from mainly agricultural to one based on manufacturing goods

**infrastructure** buildings, roads, services, and other things that are necessary for a society to function

**lunar calendar** a calendar based on the period from one moon to the next. Each cycle is 28 1/2 to 29 days, so the lunar year is about 354 days

**parliamentary** describes a government in which a body of cabinet ministers is chosen from the legislature and act as advisers to the chief of state (or prime minister)

**resonate** echo and reverberate; stay current through time

**sovereignty** having supreme power and authority

**venerate** treat with great respect



## INDEX

- archipelagos, 10
- automotive design, 55
- baseball, 33-34
- Buddhism, 13
- Buddhist celebrations, 24
- chocolates, 27
- Chrysanthemum Throne, 41
- clothing, 37
- comic books, 36
- constitution, 40-41
- crops, 45
- culture, 30
- currency, 36, 42-43
- economy, 44-45
- education, 17-19
- electronic industry, 54
- emperors, 13-16, 41
- empresses, 42
- entertainment, 36-37
- entrepreneurs, 54
- European arrival, 14-15
- flower viewing, 25
- food, 10, 20-21, 30-31
- foreign travelers, 15
- geography, 10-11
- government, 40-41
- Harajuku Style, 37
- healthcare, 52-53
- hereditary monarchy, 41
- history, 11-17
- holidays, 22-24
- Honda engineers, 56-57
- hydrogen society, 55
- Imperial House Law, 42
- imports, 45
- industrialization era, 17
- islands, 10-11
- Japanese New year, 22-23
- Jomon culture, 11-12
- Judo, 34
- Karaoke, 36
- language, 32-33
- martial arts, 34-35
- military, 17
- Obon, 24
- Olympic Games, 34
- parliamentary system, 40
- population, 11, 52-53
- religion, 50-51
- robotics, 56-59
- Samurai, 12
- shogun, 14-15
- shrines, 23
- sports, 33-35
- sushi, 30-31
- tea ceremonies, 26
- technology, 54, 56-59
- tectonic plates, 11
- Toshima, 11
- traditions, 25-27
- tsunamis, 11
- video games, 10
- volcanoes, 11
- work philosophy, 45
- Yayoi, 12
- yen, 42-43

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**Mari Rich** was educated at Lehman College, part of the public City University of New York. As a writer and editor, she has had many years of experience in the fields of university communications and reference publishing, most notably with the highly regarded periodical *Current Biography*, aimed at high school and college readers. She also edited and wrote for *World Authors*, *Leaders of the Information Age*, and *Nobel Laureates*. Currently, she spends much of her time writing about engineers and engineering. (Thanks to Geraldine Lau for her help in connecting us with Sara and her family.)