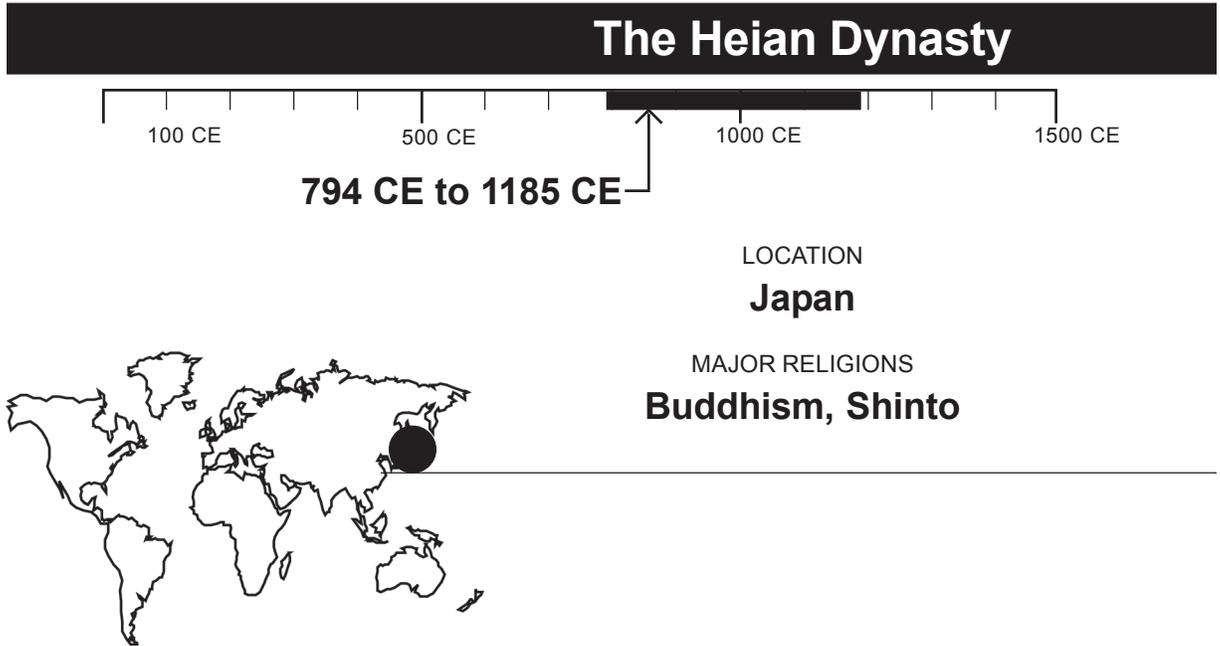


# THE HEIAN DYNASTY



**Honishu was almost ready.** She had been getting dressed for over two hours. She had on four robes, had covered her face in white powder and outlined her eyes perfectly. No detail had been overlooked. Finally she was ready to go for a walk with her two best friends. Honishu had a poem to show her friends that she had written. It was about how friendships change, like leaves in the fall. Honishu loved to write in her diary. She recorded the details of her day and wrote poems in it each night. She couldn't read or write in Chinese, but that didn't matter, only men learned Chinese and they only used it for official government business, something as a girl, she would never have to know about. Honishu had learned to write kana, a form of writing that was for the Japanese language, not imported from China like so much else in Japan. Honishu thought of her writing as like a secret code. It was understood only by the Japanese and with it she could write down her most secret thoughts and ideas. Maybe Japan didn't have to be just like China, maybe Japan could be . . . Japanese.



## OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How do cultural ideas, beliefs and traditions of a society influence their political, economic, and social systems?
- In what ways is the older traditional culture still seen in modern society today?

## Background

PREHISTORIC PEOPLE HAD LIVED IN THE ISLAND OF JAPAN for tens of thousands of years. They had traveled to the islands across land bridges formed by glacial ice sheets. After the disappearance of these land bridges, the people were cut off from the mainland for centuries, living as hunters and gatherers. The beginnings of a religion, later known as Shinto, began to emerge during this time. Shinto emphasized worship of divine spirits found in nature, honoring of ancestors, and devotion to the sun goddess Amaterasu. Into this primitive culture there arrived the first of many contacts with the more advanced outside world. Around 300 BCE immigrants from Korea introduced agriculture and iron tools to Japan. Soon small villages arose as people formed settled communities and began growing rice on the plains of the largest Japanese island, Honshu. Over time, the Yamato clan emerged as the most powerful family group on Honshu and became Japan's first dynasty.

THE STAGE WAS NOW SET for another contact with the outside world that would forever change Japanese culture. Buddhist monks from Korea traveled across the Sea of Japan to share their knowledge and beliefs with the Yamato aristoc-



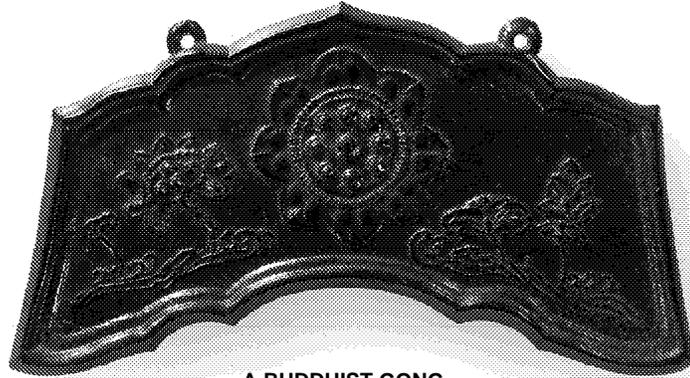
**A HEIAN WARRIOR**

Japanese warlords fought frequently as they tried to create large kingdoms to challenge the power of the Yamato clan in Heian-kyo.

racy, or upper class. Buddhist beliefs blended well with Shinto beliefs and many Japanese, especially the aristocracy, began practicing Buddhism. Buddhist monasteries were built throughout Japan. These were religious centers where Buddhists could devote their lives to understanding their religion. They were often educational centers as well, teaching reading and writing. The monks, men who lived in the monasteries, became powerful and influential advisors in the imperial court, or government, of the emperor.

BUDDHISM WAS NOT THE ONLY NEW IDEA BROUGHT TO JAPAN. The monks also brought the wonders of the Tang Dynasty of China: writing, porcelain, silk, art, science, government. Highly impressed with the advanced Chinese culture, the emperor sent

many young men to China on "embassies" to learn all they could and then bring that learning back to Japan. As a result of these trips, the culture of Japan began to imitate the culture of Tang China. Japan would not always want to simply imitate another civilization. Japan had its own cultural traditions and beliefs. During the Heian period, Japan began developing a culture that was not imitation alone, but one which is still to this day, uniquely Japanese.



**A BUDDHIST GONG**

The detailed artistry of this gong shows the wealth and power of the Buddhist priests during the Heian Era.

### *Political System*

#### **Mixing Cultural Traditions**

In 794 CE the Heian (HAY ahn) era of Japanese history began with a building project. A new capital was built at Heian-kyo, today the city of Kyoto. Heian-kyo means City of Peace and Tranquility. It was a well chosen name as the era would last nearly 400 years and be remembered as a time of peace and prosperity.

The structure of the Heian government reflected how Japan kept some Chinese practices, but also maintained some of its own traditions. Japan established a political system almost exactly like Tang China. The various responsibilities of governing were divided among several departments or offices. Despite this imitation, Japan also kept an important cultural belief of their own. They kept the Shinto belief that the emperor was a descendent of the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu. The Emperor was given great respect because of his divine ancestry. Even today the Japanese flag shows a rising sun.

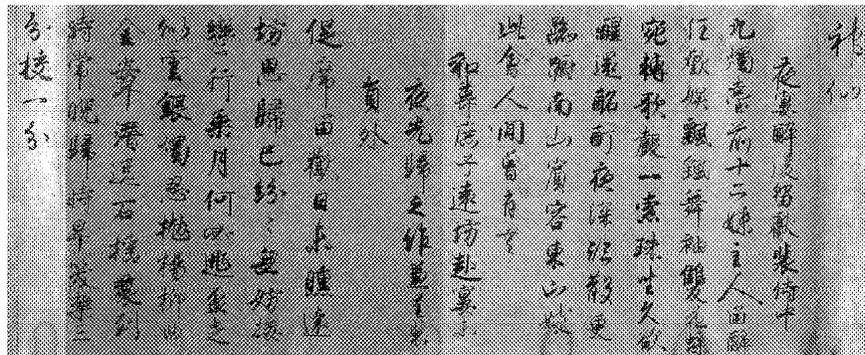
Because of the Emperor's divine status, he was considered the ruler of Japan. However, although he was considered the head of the government, it did not mean that he always had the power to control the government. During the Heian Era, members of the wealthy Fujiwara (fuh jee WAHR ah) family began to

gain more and more power in the government through marriages and being appointed to key government positions. Eventually, it was the Fujiwara family that was making the decisions and running the government, even removing one emperor from the throne and replacing him with another!

### *Economic System*

#### **Ignoring the Poor**

Most Japanese at this time were poor rural peasants who worked as either small farmers on their own land, or worked as laborers on the large estates of the aristocracy. Trade with outside cultures was minimal. Trade within Japan was much the same, with contact between regions being extremely limited. Because Japanese culture emphasized the superiority of the educated upper classes, they did not seek out contact with other cultures. In fact, they rarely went outside the capital city or had any contact with the peasants, the majority of the population. To the emperor and the imperial court families, the farmers of Japan existed primarily for the purpose of taxation in order to support their wealthy, extravagant lifestyles. Understandably, this disregard for the hardship of the peasants played a part in the eventual defeat of the first rulers of Japan.



A POETRY MANUSCRIPT

Kana style of writing became popular among women and the common people of Japan.

## Social System

### The Code of Miyabi

Although the life of the common person remained virtually unchanged during the Heian Dynasty, great changes occurred among the aristocracy. The social life of the aristocracy of Heian Japan was ruled by a concept known as *miyabi*. This uniquely Japanese concept is one of the most enduring cultural contributions from Heian Japan. Having *miyabi* means having good manners and good taste, a certain sophistication that was valued among the aristocracy.

As a result of *miyabi*, men and women took great efforts to behave in the proper manner at all times, in all circumstances. For men, this meant being highly educated, reading and writing in Chinese, appreciating poetry, art, music and nature. For women, *miyabi* also meant appreciating the fine arts, but did not include a formal education. In addition, women were expected to remain secluded from men, always hidden behind silk screens, rarely venturing outside. This situation however, became the very thing that allowed the women to become the leaders in a literary revolution in Heian Japan.

### Contributions/Impact on the World Literature

Creative writing, especially poetry and diaries, was highly prized as evidence of *miyabi* in a person. Unable to write in Chinese, Heian women adopted a new, simpler form of

writing based on the sounds of the spoken Japanese language. In this new form, called *kana*, Heian women began writing ...and writing and writing and writing. Many women became well known for their poetry and stories since it could be read by many people, not just the aristocratic, educated men. This new style of writing eventually became the foundation for modern Japanese today.

- *The Tale of Genji*. World's first novel written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu. It is considered one of the best examples of Japanese literature.
- *The Pillow Book*. Written by Sei Shonagon and was very popular in the Heian Era. It is still read by Japanese students today.

### Japan Today

*Miyabi* remains an enduring concept in Japanese culture. It continues to emphasize proper behavior, respectfulness, and the importance of education. Today Japan has its own unique culture, but the influence of Chinese culture on its history is still plainly seen, especially in religious practices. Most Japanese today practice a combination of Buddhism and Shinto. Wedding ceremonies are done by Shinto priests, while rites of death follow Buddhist traditions. Reflecting their ancient roots of Shinto, the Japanese still look to nature for images of purity, beauty and strength. Mt. Fuji, a snow capped volcanic mountain, is a powerful symbol of Japan, with thousands of people hiking its steep trails each year to catch a glimpse of the sunrise. Both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines can be found along its slopes, powerful symbols of Japan's cultural mosaic.