



JAPAN

Japan is a country of mountainous islands (about three thousand) linked together in a long chain winding down the Pacific coast of northern Asia. To the west lie the Korean peninsula and northern China, further south the Ryukyu Islands lead to Taiwan and the south of China. Japan's closeness to the Asian continent has brought a variety of influences, mainly from China and Korea, which were adapted into Japan's own culture. Some of the most striking cultural imports include the use of the Chinese language and the practice of Buddhism. Tea ceramics, lacquer wares, paintings, and prints, all art forms imported from the continent, acquired distinctive Japanese flavors and became known throughout the world as some of Japan's greatest artistic achievements.

During its long imperial history, Japan experienced many dramatic shifts in power among emperors, **shoguns** (military dictators), aristocrats, and warriors. In 1868 the emperor again became the ruling member of government over the shoguns of the past. Edo, the capital, was renamed Tokyo, which remains the center of Japanese society today. After World War II, a parliamentary government was put into place, and the emperor fulfils a largely ceremonial role in the governance of the nation.