1 • INTRODUCTION

Japan is a land of incredible contrasts. Speeding bullet trains whisk locals and visitors past neon-lit skylines to ancient castles and tranquil shrines. The land of the rising sun never fails to fascinate. Come and experience Japan in style, enjoying opportunities for insider access rarely available to the ordinary traveler.

Humans have lived on the islands of Japan since Paleolithic times. Indeed, archaeologists have uncovered some of the oldest pottery ever found in Japan.

Migration has not played a significant part in the history of Japan. The Japanese are a mixture of northeast Asians with others from the coast of China, Southeast Asia, and Polynesia. By the Heian Period (AD 794–1185), the dominant Japanese population extended its control over the northern region of the island of Honshu, displacing the native Ainu people. In the nineteenth century, the Ainu were again displaced within the northernmost island of Hokkaido when Japanese settlers arrived there as well.

Throughout Japan's history, the government has been dominated by emperors. The authority of the emperor is much decreased today. Various historical periods also saw political power shift to warriors *(samurai)* who established military governments *(bakufu)*.

Japan suffered an economic crisis following World War I (1914–18). In 1923, Tokyo and Yokohama were devastated by an earthquake. Japan entered World War II (1941–45) in 1941 when it attacked the United States and Great Britain. Defeat in World War II stripped Japan of its overseas empire and military. Its economy and most of its large cities were devastated. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been reduced to rubble by atomic bombs. Allied military forces, mostly American, occupied Japan from 1945 to 1952 and imposed sweeping reforms to promote democracy. After the end of the occupation, the Japanese rebuilt their country.

As an economic force, Japan grew dramatically beginning in the 1960s. The country has enjoyed a high standard of living since then.

Politically, Japan is a parliamentary democracy modeled on the British system. Representatives are elected to the *Diet,* a parliament with two legislative chambers. The majority party in the lower house, the House of Representatives, elects a prime minister from its ranks. This prime minister forms a cabinet. While the conservative Liberal Democratic Party is the largest party, its decades-long streak of control of the lower house was broken in 1993. Political parties are now going through a period of reorientation.

2 • GEOGRAPHY

Japan is home to about 125 million people. Nearly all Japanese speakers live in Japan proper. Small communities of Japanese moved to Hawaii and North and South America throughout the country’s history, but most of their descendants no longer speak Japanese.

Japan is a chain of approximately 3,000 islands off the eastern coast of Asia. Throughout history, the main islands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku have been the homeland of the Japanese. During the seventeenth century, the Japanese extended their political influence southward over the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa, which are home to a closely related population that speaks a variant of Japanese. The Ryukyus became part of Japan in the nineteenth century. Hokkaido was fully annexed in the nineteenth century.

Approximately two-thirds of Japan’s land area is too mountainous for development. This compresses the population into coastal strips, mountain basins, and especially a few large plains: the Kanto Plain around Tokyo, the Kansai Plain around Osaka, and the Nobi Plain around Nagoya. The population is overwhelmingly urbanized, and the lure of jobs and urban life still draws people to the cities.

Japan experiences considerable seismic activity. It has many active volcanoes, and earthquakes are a frequent occurrence. On September 1, 1923, a massive quake destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama and killed approximately 130,000 people. Kobe was devastated on January 17, 1995, by a quake which took over five thousand lives. Japan also endures seasonal typhoons. While often destructive, these storms cause little loss of life.

3 • LANGUAGE

The Japanese language is spoken only in Japan. It is an Altaic language that has Korean as its nearest relative. While Japanese is not related to Chinese, it adopted part of its writing system from China. Chinese characters *(kanji),* each with multiple meanings and pronunciations, are part of the Japanese writing system.

Japanese words are composed of multiple syllables. Suffixes change the tense of verbs, form negatives, or otherwise modify the meaning of words. The standard sentence order is subject, object, and verb.

**STANDARD PHRASES AND WORDS**

| ***Japanese*** | ***English*** |
| --- | --- |
| Ohayoo-gozaimasu | Good morning |
| Kon-nichi wa | Good day |
| Kon-ban wa | Good evening |
| O genki desu-ka | How are you? |
| O-kagesama de | I'm well, thank you |
| Sayoonara | Goodbye (formal) |
| Arigatoo-gozaimasu | Thank you |
| Doo itashimashite | You’re welcome |

Family names come first and given names second. Hence, “Tanaka Junko” is Junko (a female given name) of the Tanaka family. In conversation, titles of respect follow a name. *San* is a universal title of respect equal to Mr., Miss, or Mrs. That means “Tanaka-san” could mean Mr. Tanaka, Ms. Tanaka, Miss Tanaka, or Mrs. Tanaka.

4 • FOLKLORE

Japanese folklore is a fascinating mixture of Shinto myths, stories of nature spirits, Buddhist tales, and historical figures who supposedly carried out all manner of mythical deeds. Perhaps the most renowned of these is [Minamoto Yoshitsune](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Minamoto_no_Yoshitsune.html), who helped his half-brother Minamoto Yoritomo win the Gempei War (1180–85). Celebrated for both his military genius and his beauty, Yoshitsune supposedly learned warrior skills as a boy from *tengu—*half-man, half-bird creatures who dwell in the mountain forests of Japan. Yoshitsune used his prowess to defeat the giant Buddhist warrior-monk Benkei in a duel on the Go-jo Bridge in Kyoto. Overwhelmed by Yoshitsune's brilliance, Benkei surrendered and became not only Yoshitsune’s loyal follower but the veritable personification of loyalty. Yoshitsune and Benkei died together in battle after Yoritomo became jealous of his brother and turned against him.

Japanese folklore says that hundreds of strange beings thrive in nature. In addition to *tengu* who taught Yoshitsune, there are *kappa*, bird-beakedwater demons about three feet tall with turtle shells on their backs. Full of mischief, *kappa* often lure people into the water to drown. They love cucumbers, and one can protect oneself from *kappa* by carving one's name on a cucumber and tossing it into a local stream. When out of the water, *kappa* carry water in a depression on their heads. When you encounter a *kappa*, stay very calm and simply bow in greeting. The *kappa* will return the bow, spilling its water and becoming too weak to cause you harm.

The oldest surviving Japanese book is the *Kojiki*, a collection of Shinto myths. The Kojiki describes how Izanagi and Izanami, a pair of male and female gods, created the world and the islands of Japan. The primary Shinto deity is the sun goddess Amaterasu. On sending her descendant to rule Japan, she gave him three sacred treasures: a bronze mirror, a sword, and a string of comma-shaped jewels called *magatama*. These items are still associated with the imperial family. Amaterasu is honored at the Ise Grand Shrine, said to house the original mirror.

5 • RELIGION

Japan boasts three religious traditions: Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Shinto, literally "the way of the gods," is the name of the religious practices that were indigenous to Japan before Buddhism was introduced. Shinto concerns itself with humanity's relationship to nature, agriculture, and society. People offer prayers and offerings to deities *(kami)* for health, a good crop, children, and safety. Harvest festivals are Shinto events. Shinto also governs community relationships, which is why marriages are usually Shinto ceremonies.

Buddhism’s richness and ties to Chinese culture helped it gain support at the Japanese court. Buddhism also offered answers to spiritual questions that Shinto neglected, for example, about morals and life after death. By the Nara Period (AD 710–794), Shinto and Buddhism existed side by side in Japan. Japanese scholars explained that their Shinto gods were local versions of the universal beings represented by the many Buddhas. Shinto deals with issues of this world (crops, social relations, clan ancestors), while Buddhism focuses on ethical (moral) and metaphysical (supernatural) issues. This division still works for many Japanese. Weddings may be Shinto ceremonies, but when it is time to hold a funeral, people turn to Buddhism and the answers it provides about the continuation of the human soul.

Confucianism was imported into Japan from China. It emphasizes the need to find one's place within the greater social order and be a responsible member of the social units to which one belongs. Confucianism is hierarchical: in social relations, one party is superior, the other inferior. It is the duty of the superior to teach, protect, and nurture the inferior. The inferior should respect and learn from the superior. Ideally, Confucianism leads to a highly ethical, supportive social order. It also stresses study, a value widely respected in Japan.

Christianity was introduced to Japan by St. Francis Xavier in 1549, and Catholic missionaries met with considerable success for nearly a century. However, the military government of Japan expelled them and made the practice of Christianity a crime punishable by death. Christianity was only legalized in the 1870s, at which time Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox missions were established. They are all active throughout the country today, especially in education and charity work. Only one percent of Japanese are Christians. However, Christian teachings have had significant influence on Japanese thinking.

6 • RITES OF PASSAGE

One hundred days after birth, an infant is presented at a local Shinto shrine for a blessing.

The festival "Shichi-Go-San," or "seven, five, three," falls on November 15. On that day, parents take children of these ages to a Shinto shrine to be blessed. Originally, this ceremony was for girls three or seven years old and boys five years old.

Japanese people celebrate educational milestones. At the beginning of formal schooling, a child receives a leather backpack for books and sometimes a private study desk. Parents attend school entrance ceremonies and graduations in formal dress. University entrance examinations are a major turning point in any teenager's life, as admission to a good university is often critical to an individual's future. Much is made of test preparation, the exam, and the announcement of the results.

January 15 is "Coming of Age Day," on which all who have turned twenty during the previous year are recognized as legal adults. Young men and women wear fancy dress—usually a kimono—to ceremonies, which are often followed by parties and the presentation of significant gifts.

Formal company ceremonies mark the hiring of new employees and the retirement of individuals.

Couples usually celebrate their wedding at a commercial wedding hall. Shinto ceremonies are conducted in private with only the couple, a priest, witnesses, and parents present. In place of vows, the bride and groom exchange cups of *sake*. Christian church weddings strike many Japanese as exotically romantic, and many wedding halls have an imitation church in which couples can enjoy a church-style ceremony in front of guests, complete with an actor playing the priest. After the ceremony follows an elaborate dinner with speeches and the formal cutting of a Western-style wedding cake.

Death is usually associated with Buddhist rituals. Visitors honor the deceased at a wake by burning incense in front of a photo. Bodies are cremated and the ashes placed in a family grave, which has space for numerous urns under a single tombstone. Surviving relatives place a plaque with the Buddhist name of the deceased on the family’s Buddhist altar. Over several years, they organize memorial ceremonies to pray for their departed loved one.

7 • RELATIONSHIPS

Japanese people tend to be more formal than Americans. They often use fixed phrases and forms of polite exchange. Manners require that the speaker use language to honor or elevate the other party while denigrating themselves. Japanese society places great importance on who is superior to whom in any relationship. This is reflected in language and gestures.

Japanese bow to greet each other. The person of lower status bows lower and should initiate the greeting. Shaking hands is rare among Japanese, who rarely engage in physical contact. Distinctive gestures include pointing to one's nose to indicate oneself. Women cover their mouths with their hands when laughing. Men, when embarrassed, scratch the backs of their heads. A Japanese person who feels very uncomfortable will often suck air between their teeth.

Because houses are very small, the Japanese usually entertain outside the home. Home visits usually involve no more than a brief meeting over tea. The guest brings a gift, for example, flowers, fruit, or pastries. Gifts are used to reinforce relationships with relatives, friends, teachers, doctors, business contacts, and so on. Two gift-giving seasons, New Year's and midsummer, are marked by a particularly impressive wave of gift-buying and gift-giving.

Dating is usually seen as a pastime for high school students and young adults only. Schools actively discourage it. People often go out in groups for outings, picnics, karaoke parties, or visits to amusement parks. Student couples who are dating usually limit themselves to a visit to a coffee shop or fast-food restaurant. Japanese students rarely work (many schools forbid it) and often have limited extra incomes. Financial restrictions and busy study schedules often leave little dating options. Dating among working adults is common. Arranged marriages were the norm in the past, but today’s Japanese usually marry for love.

8 • LIVING CONDITIONS

Japanese generally enjoy good health and have the longest life expectancy in the world. Medical care is generally good; it includes both modern science-based medicine and traditional Chinese-style herbal medicine.

Housing is a major problem in Japan's crowded cities. While the Japanese prefer single-family houses, the enormous cost of land prevents many from having a real yard. A single acre may contain as many as forty houses. Small apartments are very common. Traditionally, houses were furnished with wall-to-wall straw mats *(tatami)*. Recent trends are toward carpet or wooden floors and Western-style furniture.

The Japanese standard of living is very high. Material possessions are comparable to those in the United States, and the general safety of Japanese city streets add to the overall sense of well-being. The major problems that today’s Japanese people face are restricted living spaces and demanding work and study schedules that leave very little personal time.

9 • FAMILY LIFE

Tradition puts women lower in the social order than men. However, times are changing. Even in the most traditional of families, Japanese women have always enjoyed considerable autonomy and power. Japanese schooling treats boys and girls equally, ensuring that women are well-educated. Traditionally, the wife is in charge of the house and oversees the children. This is her full-time job and includes two important responsibilities: managing money and monitoring children’s education. The wife keeps the family budget, manages savings and large purchases, and even gives her husband his weekly allowance. She also oversees the children's education. Most Japanese children have few household chores; instead, they devote regular time to study under their mother's watchful eye.

Family size has declined to an average of 1.8 children per couple. The average age for marriage has risen to about twenty-six years for women and twenty-eight for men. While most marriages are for love, men and women in Japanese society often live very separate lives. This limits the emotional closeness between married couples. Compared to the United States, couples have somewhat less soaring expectations about how much personal satisfaction they will gain from married life. This, plus stress on the social importance of the family unit, helps keep the annual divorce rate to 1.3 per 1,000 people (1990). It used to be common for the eldest son to keep living with his parents together with his own family in a three-generation household. However, this practice is rapidly declining.

Some Japanese keep dogs and cats, but the small size of houses and apartments prevents many people from having pets. Goldfish and birds are popular. Some keep crickets, which are popular for their song.

10 • CLOTHING

Japan’s most well-known traditional dress is the *kimono,* a robe that is wrapped around the body, left side over right, and tied with a sash *(obi).* Women's kimono vary from the simple everyday designs preferred by older women to elaborate robes of painted silk that are worn on ceremonial occasions. Men rarely wear kimono, except on some formal occasions and when performing traditional arts. The light summer cotton kimono *(yukata)* remains very popular for relaxing at home, resorts, and summer festivals.

Traditional footwear is sandals *(zori)* or wooden clogs *(geta)* with a thong that passes between the big toe and the second toe. Men and women generally pair this footwear with *tabi,* split-toed socks that accommodate the thong.

Most Japanese wear Western-style clothing in daily life. Japanese tend to dress more formally and neatly than Americans. Young people tend to be very fond of jeans. Middle and high school students wear dark blue or black uniforms with badges that indicate their school and grade.

11 • FOOD

Japanese people enjoy a wide range of foods, including dishes and foodstuffs imported from China and the West. The staple of the Japanese diet is rice, usually eaten plain from a bowl without seasoning or butter. Rice is complemented with other dishes, including fish, meat, vegetables, various pickles, and soup. Japan is an island nation, and Japanese people eat a great deal of seafood. Some fresh fish is eaten raw with soy sauce as *sashimi* or combined raw with rice to form *sushi.* However, most fish is cooked, often grilled or deep-fried in batter *(tempura).*

Buddhism discouraged the eating of meat, but this taboo has largely disappeared. Japanese eat chicken, pork, and beef, but servings tend to be small. Soup is made with fermented soybean paste *(miso)* or dried bonito shavings *(katsuobushi).* Noodles in various forms are a common main dish.

Most Western foods can be found in Japan. Hamburgers and pizza are popular, and many U.S. restaurant chains are well represented.

Meals do not include desserts. Sweets are served separately with tea or coffee. Japanese sweets often include sweet bean paste in the middle. Western baked goods, often with a Japanese twist, are widely available.

The national beverage, of course, is Japan’s famous green tea. Black tea, coffee, soda, and beer are all popular as well. Milk and dairy products are a recent but very popular addition to the Japanese diet.

, except at restaurants that serve Western-style food eaten with a knife and fork. It is normal and polite to drink soup straightStickinging is inappropriate, however. T

To really understand how today’s Japanese food culture combines the local and the international, the traditional and the modern, try this recipe for green tea ice cream!

*Recipe*

Green Tea Ice Cream

Ingredients

* 1 pint softened vanilla ice cream
* 1 tablespoon green tea powder

Instructions

Blend together ice cream and green tea powder. Return to freezer until ready to serve.

12 • EDUCATION

Japanese people place great value on education and see it as the straightest path to self-improvement and a successful career. Japan claims a hundred-percent literacy rate (the percentage of the population able to read and write).

The academic year begins in April and ends in March. Japanese children begin kindergarten at age four and elementary school at age six. Compulsory education covers only elementary school (six grades) and middle school (which consists of three grades). However, ninety-four percent of children go on to high school (three grades). Most schools are coeducational. Elementary education stresses basic skills, especially reading and math, and seeks to develop the individual into a socially responsible group member. Elementary school teachers establish strong ties with their students, and children often find early education an enjoyable experience.

However, middle school and high school are much more challenging. This is when emphasis shifts to intensive study with limited optional classes. A university degree is essential for anyone aspiring to a professional career, but university entry is by competitive examination. Preparation for these entrance exams, called "examination hell," drives much of middle and high school education in Japan. Students often supplement regular classes with lessons at *juku* (cram schools) after school hours. Critics at home and abroad rightly charge that Japanese education stresses memorizing information that can be regurgitated during university entrance exams. However, Japanese schools also cultivate problem-solving and group work skills more than is usually recognized.

One-third of high school graduates enter college or university, and most of these graduate. Two-year women’s colleges and vocational schools are common in Japan. Four-year universities are similar to those in the United States. However, many Japanese students arrive burned out by "examination hell" and exert minimal effort at their studies, preferring to socialize and form peer networks at school clubs. Graduate study is not as common as in the United States.

13 • CULTURAL HERITAGE

Japanese classical musical instruments include the *koto* (a thirteen-string horizontal harp), the *shakuhachi* (a vertical bamboo flute), and the *shamisen* (a three-stringed banjo-like instrument). The *shakuhachi* is usually played solo or with the *koto*. The *koto* is frequently played solo or in group ensembles. The *shamisen* is a popular folk instrument that is also played solo.

In today’s Japan, Western instruments such as the piano, violin, and guitar are more popular than traditional instruments. Modern popular music reflects strong Western influences, and many Japanese are well versed in Western classical music.

Dance is also a popular pastime. People continue to study complex classical forms, and a dynamic folk tradition of festival dances thrives across Japan. The annual Bon Festival includes group dancing open to all.

Japan’s literary heritage enjoys worldwide renown, and rightly so. The oldest surviving text, *Kojiki*, was published in 721 and blends Shinto myths and history. The famed *Manyoshu* anthology of poetrydates back to the Nara Period (710–794). The Heian Period (794–1185) saw an explosion of literary achievement, especially by court women. Military tales were in vogue during the Middle Ages (1185–1335). The greatest of these is the *Tale of the Heike*, which recounts the tragic history of Minamoto Yoshitsune and his brother Yoritomo. The Muromachi Period (1336–1568) produced poetic *noh* theater plays that often reflected Buddhist values. Traditionally, most poetry was written in the *tanka* form, five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. The first three lines of the *tanka* gave rise to the famous seventeen-syllable haiku. The most renowned haiku author was Basho. The Tokugawa Period (1603–1868) gave rise to *bunraku* puppet drama and kabuki theater, for which playwright Chikamatsu wrote his classic tragedies. In the nineteenth century, Western influences inspired many [autobiographical](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Autobiography.html) novels. Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* is an early [twentieth-century](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/20th_century.html) favorite. Many Japanese writers have seen their works translated overseas, and [Kawabata Yasunari](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Yasunari_Kawabata.html) and Oe Kenzaburo have won Nobel Prizes for literature.

14 • EMPLOYMENT

For men in particular, the ideal employment path in Japan is still to join a company directly after graduating from high school (for nonprofessional jobs) or college (for professional jobs). The ideal is to remain with the same company until retirement around age sixty. The company is expected to reward employees for their loyalty and long hours of work, making a commitment to preserve jobs. However, only about a third of Japanese workers actually live this "lifetime employment" ideal. Many younger Japanese question the lack of mobility characteristic of lifetime employment and opt for riskier, but potentially more rewarding, career paths.

Women; many work outside the home in retail, service, or clerical jobs. Unmarried working women represent an affluent portion of the Japanese public, and many enjoy their status. However, quite a few workplaces still expect women to quit when they marry or have their first child, although requiring women to do so is illegalAfter raising their children, many women rejoin the workforce, often in less advantageous positions.

Older Japanese companies, in particular, have a very group-oriented work environment. Employers expect employees to put company interests before personal concerns, and office workers typically work long hours.

Wages start very low and rise as employees gain seniority. The average per capita income in Japan is higher than in America, but many necessities of life, especially housing, are more costly than in the United States.

15 • SPORTS

The Japanese are great sports enthusiasts. Physical education classes in high school include an elective in one of Japan's traditional martial arts, for example, judo, karate, or archery. Japanese universities have their own teams that compete in baseball, rugby, martial arts, and other sports.

Baseball is extremely popular. The *Koshien*, or annual national high school baseball tournament, keeps people throughout Japan glued to their screens every August. Japan has also developed some interest in American football and basketball. The new "J-League," a professional soccer league, sparked a soccer craze in the early 1990s.

Sumo wrestling, a popular native sport, plays out across six annual fifteen-day tournaments. Two wrestlers seek to force their opponent to step outside a circle or to touch the ground with some part of their bodies other than the soles of their feet. A striking feature of sumo is the huge size of the athletes; top-ranked wrestlers usually exceed three hundred pounds, with some clocking in at over five hundred pounds.

Other popular sports include golf, tennis, skiing, hiking, swimming, and fishing. Many elderly people enjoy gateball, a game that resembles croquet.

16 • RECREATION

The Japanese people are great television fans; they own more television sets per person than Americans. Japan has a plethora of television stations that broadcast an endless array of song and variety programs, celebrity quiz shows, extensive sports and news broadcasts, and family dramas. Historical dramas often feature stories about samurai, and dramatizations of real historical figures and incidents are especially popular.

While moviegoing is a very popular form of entertainment, Japanese cinemas are heavily dependent on imports, especially from America. Japan's own movie industry achieved international fame for its artistry and sophistication in the 1950s and 1960s, when director [Akira Kurosawa](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Akira_Kurosawa.html) impressed the world with films such as *Rashomon* and *The Seven Samurai*. While the domestic film industry is still productive, it has lost much of its luster since its heyday.

Traditional live theater forms survive, including *noh* dramas, *bunraku* puppet plays, and live kabuki theater. The Japanese also love attending concerts, from classical Western music to homegrown pop groups.

Karaoke is a popular form of participatory entertainment. Singing along to popular songs with recorded orchestral accompaniment began as entertainment in Japanese bars before spreading overseas.

Other enduring Japanese pastimes are appreciating seasonal changes and participating in holiday festivals. Major festivals always attract huge crowds. In spring and fall, young and old flock to sites famed for their beautiful plum and cherry blossoms, irises, azaleas, chrysanthemums, or resplendent fall leaves.

17 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES

The Japanese take pride in having elevated many handicrafts to art. A prime example is pottery, which thrives in regional traditions across the country. Some pottery is delicate and exquisitely detailed, while heavier folk pottery that is simpler and more rustic enjoys enduring popularity. The aesthetic values of the traditional tea ceremony, which include "*wabi cha*" (poverty tea), encourages this more austere style of pottery.

Another resilient art form is papermaking with mulberry bark. Special papers with distinct textures and patterns are prized for letter writing, [calligraphy](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Calligraphy.html), and wrapping. Fabric arts are equally well developed. Artisans use a wide variety of styles and methods to dye, paint, and decorate swaths of silk used for women's kimono. Tie-dying is also employed.

The Japanese government cherishes these arts, recognizing masters as National Living Treasures to celebrate and support their work.

18 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Most major social problems in Japan can be traced back to population issues. While Japanese men and women enjoy the greatest longevity in the world, the country’s low birth rate is below replacement level. As a result, Japan’s population is the most rapidly aging in the world. In recent years, the population has even begun to shrink. This raises serious questions about how, in the twenty-first century, a dwindling workforce will support huge numbers of retirees.

Civil rights are a problem for some minority groups. Resident aliens, primarily Koreans, make up less than 1 percent of the population. While they have been born and raised in Japan, they must still register as foreign residents and are excluded from certain jobs. These restrictions are gradually easing, thanks to campaigns to remove barriers for resident aliens.

Another minority group is the *burakumin* (“hamlet people”), who make up about 2 percent of the population. Physically indistinguishable from the majority Japanese, the *burakumin* are descendants of outcasts who suffered severe discrimination in pre-modern times. They remain subject to widespread discrimination, in spite of attempts to legislate equality.

The tiny population of Ainu on the northern island of Hokkaido are an indigenous people who were overrun by majority-Japanese settlers. Most have now intermarried with the majority Japanese.

An issue of concern in modern Japan is the status of women. While Japan has implemented many laws to encourage gender equality and protect women, social values have not kept up. Gender-based career paths, for example, are still common. While many Japanese women appear content with their status, those who wish to pursue careers previously limited to men find the door only partially open.

Japanese society tolerates and even encourages considerable drinking, and [alcoholism](https://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Alcoholism.html) is a problem. People commonly go for a drink after work to relieve stress and renew personal bonds, a tradition of social drinking that can lead individuals to take in large amounts of alcohol. Japan's island geography has helped to greatly restrict the inflow of hard drugs and firearms, but there are signs that these problems may be getting more serious.