CHAPTER 13

The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Japan, Korea, and Vietnam

Chapter Outline Summary

I. Japan: The Imperial Age
   Taika, Nara, and Heian (7th to the 9th centuries)
   borrowing from China at height
   A. Crisis at Nara and the Shift to Heian (Kyoto)
      Taika reformed
      copied Chinese style of rule
      bureaucracy
      opposed by aristocracy, Buddhist monks
      Capital to Heian (Kyoto)
      abandoned Taika reforms
      aristocracy restored to power
   B. Ultracivilized: Court Life in the Heian Era
      Court culture
      codes of behavior
      aesthetic enjoyment
      poetry
      women and men took part
      Lady Murasaki, Tale of Genji
   C. The Decline of Imperial Power
      Fujiwara family
      dominated government
      cooperated with Buddhists
      elite cult
   D. The Rise of the Provincial Warrior Elite
      Regional lords (bushi)
      fortress bases
      semi-independent
      collected taxes
      personal armies
      samurai
      Warrior class emerged
      martial arts esteemed
      special code
      family honor
      death rather than defeat
      seppuku or hari-kiri
      peasants lost status, freedom
      Salvationist Buddhism

II. The Era of Warrior Dominance
   By the 11th and 12th centuries
   family rivalries dominated
   Taira, Minamoto
   A. The Declining Influence of China
838, Japanese embassies to China stopped
Gempei Wars
1185, Minamoto victorious
*bakufu*, military government
Kamakura, capital

B. The Breakdown of Bakufu Dominance and the Age of the Warlords
Yoritomo
Minamoto leader
assassinated relatives
death brought succession struggle
Hojo family
Minamoto, emperor figureheads
Ashikaga Takuaji
Minamoto
14th century, overthrew Kamakura rule
Ashikaga Shogunate established
emperor driven from Kyoto
struggle weakened all authority
1467–1477, civil war among Ashikaga factions
300 states
ruled by warlords (*daimyo*)

C. Toward Barbarism? Military Division and Social Change
Warfare became more brutal
*Daimyo* supported commerce

D. Artistic Solace for a Troubled Age
Zen Buddhism
important among elite
point of contact with China

III. Korea: Between China and Japan
Separate, but greatly influenced each other
Ancestors from Siberia, Manchuria
by 4th century B.C.E., farming, metal working
109 B.C.E., Choson kingdom conquered by Han
Silla, Paekche

A. Tang Alliances and the Conquest of Korea
Koguryo people
resisted Chinese dominance
Sinification increased after fall of the Han
Buddhism an important vehicle

B. Sinification: The Tributary Link
Silla, Koryo dynasties (668–1392)
peak of Chinese influence
but political independence

C. The Sinification of Korean Elite Culture
Silla capital, Kumsong
copied Tang cities
Buddhism favored

D. Civilization for the Few
Aristocracy most influenced by Chinese culture
all others served them

E. Koryo Collapse, Dynastic Renewal
Revolts caused by labor, tax burdens weakened Silla, Koryo governments 1231, Mongol invasion followed by turmoil 1392, Yi dynasty founded lasted until 1910

IV. Between China and Southeast Asia: The Making of Vietnam
Chinese push south to Red River valley Viets retain distinctiveness Qin raid into Vietnam, 220s B.C.E. commerce increased Viets conquer Red River lords Merged with Mon-Khmer, Tai Culture distinct from China women generally had higher status

A. Conquest and Sinification
Han expanded, Vietnam becomes a tributary from 111 B.C.E., direct control Chinese culture systematically introduced

B. Roots of Resistance
Resistance from aristocracy, peasants women participated 39 C.E., Revolt of Trung sisters

C. Winning Independence and Continuing Chinese Influences
Distance from China helps resistance Independence by 939 until 19th century Le Dynasty (980-1009) used Chinese-style bureaucracy

D. The Vietnamese Drive to the South
Indianized Khmer, Chams defeated, Viets expanded into Mekong delta region

E. Expansion and Division
Hanoi far from frontiers cultural divisions developed following intermarriage with Chams, Khmers Nguyen dynasty capital at Hue, by late 1500s challenged Trinh in north rivalry until 18th century

Chapter Summary
Chapter Summary. The peoples on China’s borders naturally emulated their great neighbor. Japan borrowed heavily from China during the 5th and 6th centuries when it began forming its own civilization.
To the north and west of China, nomadic peoples and Tibet also received influence. Vietnam and Korea were part of the Chinese sphere by the last centuries B.C.E. The agrarian societies of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam blended Chinese influences with their indigenous cultures to produce distinctive patterns of civilized development. In all three regions, Buddhism was a key force in transmitting Chinese civilization.

**Emulation and Cultural Independence.** The Vietnamese official Ly Van Phúc wrote his treatise “On Distinguishing Barbarians” during his embassy to Beijing. Having discovered that the residence accorded to his party was labeled “The Vietnamese Barbarians’ Hostel,” he had the sign destroyed and wrote his bitter response. He sought to reprimand the Chinese by reminding them that the Vietnamese had long embraced Chinese culture. The incident illustrates the tensions that typified relationships between China and its neighbors. China was inevitably influential, by its size and achievements, but it could also cause distrust. Peoples such as the Vietnamese, the Koreans and the Japanese emulated China, and sought to retain their distinctive cultures.

**Japan: The Imperial Age.** During the Taika, Nara, and Heian periods, from the 7th to the 9th centuries, Japanese borrowing from China peaked, although Shinto views on the natural and supernatural world remained central. The Taika reforms of 646 aimed at revamping the administration along Chinese lines. Intellectuals and aristocrats absorbed Chinese influences. The common people looked to Buddhist monks for spiritual and secular assistance, and meshed Buddhist beliefs with traditional religion.

**Crisis at Nara and the Shift to Heian (Kyoto).** The Taika effort to remake the Japanese ruler into a Chinese-style absolutist monarch, supported by a professional bureaucracy and a peasant conscript army, was frustrated by resistance from aristocratic families and Buddhist monks. During the next century the Buddhists grew so powerful at court that one monk attempted to marry Empress Koken and claim the throne. The emperor fled and established a new capital at Heian (Kyoto). He abandoned the Taika reforms and restored the power of aristocratic families. The Japanese departed from Chinese practices in determining aristocratic rank by birth, thus blocking social mobility. The aristocrats dominated the central government and restored their position as landholders. The emperor gave up plans for creating a peasant conscript army and ordered local leaders to form rural militias.

**Ultracivilized: Court Life in the Heian Era.** Although the imperial court lost power, court culture flourished at Heian. Aristocratic males and females lived according to strict behavioral codes. They lived in a complex of palaces and gardens; the basis of life was the pursuit of aesthetic enjoyment and the avoidance of common, distasteful elements of life. Poetry was a valued art form, and the Japanese simplified the script taken from the Chinese to facilitate expression. An outpouring of distinctively Japanese poetic and literary works followed. At the court, women were expected to be as cultured as men; they were involved in palace intrigues and power struggles. Lady Murasaki’s *The Tale of Genji*, the first novel in any language, vividly depicts courtly life.

**The Decline of Imperial Power.** The pleasure-loving emperors lost control of policy to aristocratic court families. By the 9th century, the Fujiwara dominated the administration and married into the imperial family. Aristocratic families used their wealth and influence to buy large estates. Together with Buddhist monasteries, also estate owners, they whittled down imperial authority. Large numbers of peasants and artisans fell under their control. Cooperation between aristocrats and Buddhists was helped by secret texts and ceremonies of esoteric Buddhism, techniques to gain salvation through prayer and meditation. Both groups failed to reckon with the rising power of local lords.

**The Rise of the Provincial Warrior Elite.** The provincial elite also had gained estates. Some carved out regional states ruled from small fortresses housing the lord and his retainers. The warrior leaders (*bushi*) governed and taxed for themselves, not the court. The bushi created their own mounted and armed forces (*samurai*). Imperial control kept declining; by the 11th and 12th centuries, violence was so prevalent that monasteries, the court, and high officials all hired samurai for protection. The disorder resulted in the emergence of a warrior class. The bushi and samurai, supported by peasant dependents, devoted their lives to martial activity. Their combats became duels between champions. The warriors developed a code that stressed family honor and death rather than defeat. Disgraced warriors committed ritual suicide
(seppuku, or hari-kiri). The rise of the samurai blocked the development of a free peasantry; instead, peasants became serfs bound to the land and treated as the lord’s property. Rigid class barriers separated them from the warrior elite. To counter their degradation, peasants and artisans turned to salvationist Buddhism.

**The Era of Warrior Dominance.** By the 11th and 12th centuries, provincial families dominated the declining imperial court. The Taira and Minamoto fought for dominance.

**The Declining Influence of China.** Chinese influence waned along with imperial power. Principles of centralized government and a scholar-gentry bureaucracy had little place in a system where local military leaders predominated. Chinese Buddhism also was transformed into a distinctly Japanese religion. The political uncertainty accompanying the decline of the Tang made the Chinese model even less relevant, and the Japanese court discontinued its embassies to the Tang by 838. The Gempei wars caused great suffering among the peasantry. The Minamoto, victorious in 1185, established a military government (bakufu) centered at Kamakura. The emperor and court were preserved, but all power rested with the Minamoto and their samurai. The transition to feudalism was underway in Japan.

**The Breakdown of Bakufu Dominance and the Age of the Warlords.** The leader of the Minamoto, Yoritomo, because of fears of being overthrown by family members, weakened his regime by assassinating or exiling suspected relatives. His death was followed by a struggle among bushi military leaders (shoguns) for regional power. The Hojo family soon dominated the Kamakura regime. The Minamoto and the emperor at Kyoto remained as powerless, formal rulers. In the 14th century, a Minamoto leader, Ashikaga Takuaji, overthrew the Kamakura regime and established the Ashikaga Shogunate. When the emperor refused to recognize the new regime, he was driven from Kyoto; with the support of warlords he and his heirs fought against the Ashikaga and their puppet emperors. The Ashikaga finally won the struggle, but the contest had undermined imperial and shogunate authority. Japan was divided into regional territories governed by competing warlords. From 1467 to 1477 a civil war between Ashikaga factions contributed to the collapse of central authority. Japan became divided into 300 small states ruled by warlords (daimyo).

**Thinking Historically: Comparing Feudalisms.** Fully developed feudal systems developed during the postclassical age in Japan and western Europe. They did so when it was not possible to sustain more centralized political forms. Many other societies had similar problems, but they did not develop feudalism. The Japanese and western European feudal systems were set in political values that joined together most of the system’s participants. They included the concept of mutual ties and obligations and embraced elite militaristic values. There were differences between the two approaches to feudalism. Western Europeans stressed contractual ideas while the Japanese relied on group and individual bonds. In each case, the feudal past may have assisted their successful industrial development and shaped their capacity for running capitalist economies. It may also contribute to their tendencies for imperialist expansion, frequent resort to war, and the rise of right-wing militarist regimes.

**Toward Barbarism? Military Division and Social Change.** The chivalrous qualities of the bushi era deteriorated during the 15th and 16th centuries. Warfare became more scientific, while the presence of large numbers of armed peasants in daimyo armies added to the misery of the common people. Despite the suffering, the warlord period saw economic and cultural growth. Daimyos attempted to administer their domains through regular tax collection and support for public works. Incentives were offered to settle unoccupied areas, and new crops, tools, and techniques contributed to local well-being. Daimyos competed to attract merchants to their castle towns. A new and wealthy commercial class emerged, and guilds were formed by artisans and merchants. A minority of women found opportunities in commerce and handicraft industries, but the women of the warrior class lost status as primogeniture excluded them from inheritance. Women became appendages of warrior fathers and husbands. As part of this general trend, women lost ritual roles in religion and were replaced in theaters by males.

**Artistic Solace for a Troubled Age.** Zen Buddhism had a major role in maintaining the arts among the warrior elite. Zen monasteries were key locations for renewed contacts with China. Notable achievements were made in painting, architecture, gardens, and the tea ceremony.
Korea: Between China and Japan. Korea, because of its proximity to China, was more profoundly influenced over a longer period than any other state. But, despite its powerful neighbor, Korea developed its own separate cultural and political identity. Koreans descended from hunting and gathering peoples of Siberia and Manchuria. By the 4th century B.C.E., they were acquiring sedentary farming and metal-working techniques from China. In 109 B.C.E., the earliest Korean kingdom, Choson, was conquered by the Han and parts of the peninsula were colonized by Chinese. Korean resistance to the Chinese led to the founding in the north of an independent state by the Koguryo people; it soon battled the southern states of Silla and Paekche. After the fall of the Han an extensive adoption of Chinese culture—Sinification—occurred. Buddhism was a key element in the transfer. Chinese writing was adopted, but the Koguryo ruler did not form a Chinese-style state.

Tang Alliances and the Conquest of Korea. Continuing political disunity in Korea allowed the Tang, through alliance with Silla, to defeat Paekche and Koguryo. Silla became a vassal state in 668; the Chinese received tribute and left Silla to govern Korea. The Koreans maintained independence until the early 20th century.

Sinification: The Tributary Link. Under the Silla and Koryo dynasties (668–1392) Chinese influences peaked and Korean culture achieved its first full flowering. The Silla copied Tang ways, and through frequent missions, imported Chinese learning, art, and manufactured items. The Chinese were content with receiving tribute, allowing the Koreans to run their own affairs.

The Sinification of Korean Elite Culture. The Silla constructed their capital, Kumsong, on the model of Tang cities. There were markets, parks, lakes, and a separate district for the imperial family. The aristocracy built residences around the imperial palace. Some of them studied in Chinese schools and sat for Confucian exams introduced by the rulers. Most government positions, however, were determined by birth and family connections. The elite favored Buddhism, in Chinese forms, over Confucianism. Korean cultural creativity went into the decoration of the many Buddhist monasteries and temples. Koreans refined techniques of porcelain manufacture, first learned from the Chinese, to produce masterworks.

Civilization for the Few. Apart from Buddhist sects that appealed to the common people, Chinese influences were intended for a tiny elite, the aristocratic families who dominated Korea’s political, economic, and social life. Trade with China and Japan was intended to serve their desires. Aristocrats controlled manufacturing and commerce, thus hampering the development of artisan and trading classes. All groups beneath the aristocracy in the social scale served them. They included government officials, commoners (mainly peasants), and the “low born,” who worked as virtual slaves in a wide range of occupations.

Koryo Collapse, Dynastic Renewal. The burdens imposed by the aristocracy upon commoners and the “low born” caused periodic revolts. Most were local affairs and easily suppressed, but, along with aristocratic quarrels and foreign invasions, they helped weaken the Silla and Koryo regimes. Over a century of conflict followed the Mongol invasion of 1231, until the Yi dynasty was established in 1392. The Yi restored aristocratic dominance and tributary links to China. The dynasty lasted until 1910.

Between China and Southeast Asia: The Making of Vietnam. The Chinese move southward brought them to the fertile, rice-growing region of the Red River valley. But the indigenous Viets did not suffer the same fate as others known to the Chinese as “southern barbarians.” Their homeland was far from the main Chinese centers and the Viets had already formed their own distinct culture. They were prepared to receive the benefits of Chinese civilization, but not to lose their identity. The Qin raided into Vietnam in the 220s B.C.E. The contact stimulated an already existing commerce. The Viet rulers during this era conquered the Red River feudal lords and incorporated the territory into their kingdom. Viets intermarried with the Mon-Khmer and Tai-speaking inhabitants to form a distinct ethnic group. The Viets were part of Southeast Asian culture. They had strong village autonomy, and favored the nuclear family. Vietnamese women had more freedom and influence than Chinese females. General customs and cultural forms were very different than those of China, and their spoken language was not related to Chinese.

Conquest and Sinification. The expanding Han Empire first secured tribute from Vietnam; later, after 111 B.C.E. the Han conquered and governed directly. Chinese administrators presided over the introduction of Chinese culture. Viets attended Chinese schools where they learned Chinese script and
studied Confucian classics. They took exams for administrative posts. The incorporation of Chinese techniques made Vietnamese agriculture the most productive in Southeast Asia and led to higher population density. The use of Chinese political and military organization gave the Viets a decisive advantage over the Indianized peoples to the west and south.

**Roots of Resistance.** Chinese expectations for absorption of the Viets were frustrated by sporadic aristocratic revolts and the failure of Chinese culture to win the peasantry. Vietnamese women participated in the revolts against the Chinese. The rising led by the Trung sisters in 39 C.E. demonstrates the differing position of Viet and Chinese women. The former were hostile to the male-dominated Confucian codes and family system.

**Winning Independence and Continuing Chinese Influences.** The continuing revolutions were aided by Vietnam’s great distance from China. When political weakness occurred in China, the Viet took advantage of the limited Chinese presence. By 939 Vietnam was independent; it remained so until the 19th century. A succession of dynasties, beginning with the Le (980–1009), ruled Vietnam through a bureaucracy modeled upon the Chinese system. But the local scholar-gentry never gained the power held by that class in China. Local Viet officials identified with village rulers and the peasantry instead of the ruling dynasty. Buddhist monks also had stronger links with common people, especially women, than the Confucian scholars.

**The Vietnamese Drive to the South.** The Chinese legacy helped the Viets in their struggles with local rivals. Their main adversaries were the Indianized Khmer and Chams peoples of the southern lowlands. A series of successful wars with these groups, from the 11th to the 18th centuries extended Viet territory into the Mekong delta region.

**Expansion and Division.** The dynasties centered at the northern capital city of Hanoi were unable to control distant frontier areas. Differences in culture developed as the invaders intermarried with the Chams and Khmers. Regional military commanders sought independence. By the end of the 16th century a rival dynasty, the Nguyen, with a capital at Hue, challenged the northern ruling Trinh family. The dynasties fought for control of Vietnam for the next two centuries.

**GLOBAL CONNECTIONS: In the Orbit of China: The East Asian Corner of the Global System.** During the 1st millennium C.E., Chinese civilization influenced the formation of three distinct satellite civilizations in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Unlike China’s nomadic neighbors, each contained areas suitable for sedentary agriculture—wet rice cultivation—and the development of civilization. Common elements of Chinese culture—writing, bureaucratic organization, religion, art—passed to each new civilization. All the imports, except Buddhism, were monopolized by courts and elites. The civilizations differed because of variations in the process of mixing Chinese and indigenous patterns. China’s nearness to Korea forced symbolic political submission and long-term cultural dependence. In Vietnam, Chinese conquest and control stretched over a thousand years. Although the Viets eventually obtained independence, Chinese culture helped form their civilization and allowed the Viets to counterbalance Indian influences among their Southeast Asian rivals. The Japanese escaped direct Chinese rule; Chinese culture was first cultivated by the elite of the imperial court, but rival provincial, militaristic, clans opposed Chinese influences. Japanese political patterns became very different from the centralized system of China. The preoccupation with interaction within the East Asian sphere left the region’s inhabitants with limited awareness of larger world currents when compared with other major civilizations.

**KEY TERMS**

**Taika reforms:** attempt to remake Japanese monarch into an absolutist Chinese-style emperor; included attempts to create professional bureaucracy and peasant conscript army.

**Heian:** Japanese city later called Kyoto; built to escape influence of Buddhist monks.
**Tale of Genji**: written by Lady Murasaki; first novel in any language; evidence for mannered style of Japanese society.

**Fujiwara**: mid-9th-century Japanese aristocratic family; exercised exceptional influence over imperial affairs; aided in decline of imperial power.

**Bushi**: regional warrior leaders in Japan; ruled small kingdoms from fortresses; administered the law, supervised public works projects, and collected revenues; built up private armies.

**Samurai**: mounted troops of the bushi; loyal to local lords, not the emperor.

**Seppuku**: ritual suicide in Japan; also known as hari-kiri; demonstrated courage and was a means to restore family honor.

**Gumpei wars**: waged for five years from 1180 on Honshu between the Taira and Minamoto families; ended in destruction of Taira.

**Bakufu**: military government established by the Minamoto following Gumpei wars; centered at Kamakura; retained emperor, but real power resided in military government and samurai.

**Shoguns**: military leaders of the bakufu.

**Hojo**: a warrior family closely allied with the Minamoto; dominated Kamakura regime and manipulated Minamoto rulers; ruled in name of emperor.

**Ashikaga Takuaji**: member of Minamoto family; overthrew Kamakura regime and established Ashikaga shogunate (1336–1573); drove emperor from Kyoto to Yoshino.

**Daimyos**: warlord rulers of small states following Onin war and disruption of Ashikaga shogunate; holdings consolidated into unified and bounded mini-states.

**Choson**: earliest Korean kingdom; conquered by Han in 109 B.C.E.

**Koguryo**: tribal people of northern Korea; established an independent kingdom in the northern half of the peninsula; adopted cultural Sinification.

**Sinification**: extensive adaptation of Chinese culture in other regions.

**Silla**: Korean kingdom in southeast; became a vassal of the Tang and paid tribute; ruled Korea from 668.

**Yi**: dynasty (1392–1910); succeeded Koryo dynasty after Mongol invasions; restored aristocratic dominance and Chinese influence.

**Trung sisters**: leaders of a rebellion in Vietnam against Chinese rule in 39 C.E.; demonstrates importance of women in Vietnamese society.

**Khmers and Chams**: Indianized Vietnamese peoples defeated by northern government at Hanoi.

**Nguyen**: southern Vietnamese dynasty with capital at Hue that challenged northern Trinh dynasty with center at Hanoi.