

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

Japan: The Imperial Age

- The Chinese influence on Japan came to a peak in the Taika, Nara, and Heian periods, (645–857). The **Taika reforms** restructured the government following the Chinese model. Confucianism permeated Japanese culture from top to bottom.
- The Taika reforms were not completed because of resistance from the nobles and Buddhist monks. Moving the capital to Heian (Kyoto), the emperor Kammu hoped to avoid monastic opposition. Failing in this, he restored to the aristocracy all of their rights.
- Heian society was extremely mannered and sophisticated, developing a poetic tradition in a Chinese script tailored to the Japanese language. The classic *Tale of Genji* symbolizes the aesthetic of the period, in particular the important, albeit limited, role of women at the Heian court.
- The **Fujiwara family** was one of the most powerful, but typical in their cooperation with Buddhist monasteries to reduce the power of the emperors.
- A new force came to challenge the court aristocracy: the **bushi**, or warrior leaders. Some were of noble origin, some not, but they had in common increasing power in their small domains, and the loyalty of **samurai** troops. Unchecked use of force led to the preeminence of a warrior class and a warrior culture. The code the samurai followed included the practice of **seppuku**, or ritual suicide following defeat. Growth of samurai power accompanied the reduction of peasant status.

The Era of Warrior Dominance

- Chinese influence, and direct contact with China, waned in the 9th century. From the 11th century, court families, in conjunction with bushi allies, split the court with open rivalry. Eventually, open war broke out between the **Taira** and **Minamoto** families in the 1180s.
- The **Gempei Wars** ended with the ascendancy of the Minamoto at their new capital at Kamakura.
- The **bakufu** government of the first Minamoto ruler, Yoritomo, was supported by **shoguns**, military leaders. The following centuries saw a complex system with titular emperors and Minamoto shoguns, real power being wielded by the Hojo family. The latter were supplanted by the Ashikaga Shogunate. Royal authority

was a mere shadow, but the shoguns also lost power in the late 15th century, replaced by 300 **daimyo** kingdoms.

- Court manners became irrelevant as making war took center stage. The plight of the peasants became desperate, leading to unsuccessful revolts. At the same time, the dynamism of some daimyos led to economic growth and the emergence of a merchant class. Among the merchant and artisans, women had a more prominent role, while women of elite families saw their lives constrained.
- The revival of Zen Buddhism brought with it artistic renewal. Such traditions as the tea ceremony emerged to provide a contemplative retreat in an era of violence.

Korea: Between China and Japan

- Korea, although strongly linked to Chinese cultural and political developments, had distinct origins, and long followed its own path of development. The peninsula's first kingdom, **Choson**, was conquered by China in 109 B.C.E., and subsequently Chinese settlers arrived. Korea broke from Chinese dominance, forming three kingdoms: **Koguryo, Silla, and Paekche**. As in Japan, **Sinification**—adoption of Chinese culture—was largely mediated by Buddhism. The Koguryo ruler applied a Chinese-style law code.
- Internal conflict in the Three Kingdoms Era left Korea vulnerable to Chinese attack. The Tang allied with the Silla to destroy Paekche and Koguryo, leaving the Silla a subject kingdom.
- Sinification peaked under the Silla and Koryo rulers. Tribute and acknowledgement of Chinese authority created peaceful relations that stimulated Korean borrowing from Chinese culture.
- Under the Silla, their capital at Kumsong copied the Tang capital. Both the royal family and the Korean elite supported Buddhism. While Korean borrowing from China was heavy, in the areas of pottery and printing, they exceeded their teachers.
- Sinification was limited to Korean elite, while indigenous artisanry was allowed to decline. All of Korean society was arranged to serve the needs of the aristocracy.
- Periodic popular revolts were successful only in weakening the Silla and Koryo monarchies. The Mongol invasion in 1231 began a period of strife, ending with the founding of the **Yi** dynasty in 1392.

Between China and Southeast Asia: The Making of Vietnam

- The early history of the Viet people is little known. Early Chinese raids into Vietnam in the 220s B.C.E. increased trade. Intermarriage with Mon-Khmer and Tai language groups furthered the development of a distinct Vietnamese ethnicity. Many early traditions separated them from the Chinese, such as the nuclear family pattern and a greater role for women.
- The Han became dissatisfied with merely exacting tribute from the Viet rulers and began direct rule in 111 B.C.E. Sinification increased, and was used by the Viet rulers to consolidate their power over both their own peoples and those to the west and south.
- In spite of Chinese expectations, the Viets never became assimilated to Chinese culture. Indeed, a culture of anti-Chinese resistance developed. The rising of the **Trung**

sisters in 39 C.E. underlined the continuing prominent role of Vietnamese women.

- Continuing Chinese influence in Vietnam depended on overcoming physical barriers, and on the competence of Chinese rulers. Following the fall of the Tang, the Vietnamese freed themselves completely by 939. Yet Chinese influence continued, particularly in the administration. An important exception was the scholar-gentry who never gained an important role in the Vietnamese regime.
- The lands of the Chams and Khmers attracted the Vietnamese. From the 11th to the 18th centuries, the latter steadily expanded their territory at the expense of the Chams. Subsequently, they attacked the Khmers in the Mekong delta.
- The new southern territories were controlled only with difficulty by Hanoi. The **Trinh** family, ruling the north, was challenged by the southern **Nguyen** family. The conflict left the Vietnamese oblivious to an outside threat: the French and the Catholic Church.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The only indigenous aspect of Japanese culture during the Heian era was
 - (A) Mahayana Buddhism.
 - (B) the imperial administration.
 - (C) written characters.
 - (D) Shinto.
 - (E) court etiquette and protocol.
2. The group which most directly challenged Chinese influences in Japan and Vietnam during the postclassical era was
 - (A) the merchants.
 - (B) Buddhist monks and priests.
 - (C) the emperor.
 - (D) the imperial bureaucracy.
 - (E) aristocrats and local provincial administrators.
3. As the power of the Heian emperors declined,
 - (A) Chinese trained scholar officials assumed control of the government.
 - (B) civil war broke out between branches of the imperial family.
 - (C) local nobles carved out estates and reduced the peasants to serfdom.
 - (D) China conquered Japan.
 - (E) religious groups and the clergy became the effective government.
4. The influence of Chinese culture in Korea produced all of the following EXCEPT:
 - (A) legal reform.
 - (B) Chinese forms of Buddhism.
 - (C) an greater flow of goods between China and Korea.
 - (D) unified resistance from the three kingdoms.
 - (E) adoption of the Chinese writing system.
5. The typical pattern for relations between China and its neighbors during the postclassical period was
 - (A) military occupation by the Chinese armies.
 - (B) for these states to acknowledge Chinese superiority and pay tribute but remain independent.
 - (C) incorporation of these states as provinces in the Chinese empire.
 - (D) to form equal alliances as partners against nomadic invaders.
 - (E) to maintain no formal relations or treaties with neighboring states.
6. What passage in Vietnamese history might have been instructive to the French and United States as they attempted to conquer Vietnam?
 - (A) The majority of Vietnamese literature and art depicted Vietnam's history and mocked foreign influences.
 - (B) Vietnam had maintained its distinct

- Vietnamese identity despite centuries of Chinese rule.
- (C) Vietnam's war of independence against China and the Mongols lasted 1,000 years in order to achieve freedom.
- (D) The Vietnamese constantly invaded and defeated their neighbors including China.
- (E) Vietnam had conquered and ruled its neighbors.
7. After their independence from China, the Vietnamese
- (A) slavishly copied Chinese culture and ruling styles.
- (B) degenerated into constantly feuding clans and villages.
- (C) were conquered by the Khmers and Thais.
- (D) became a largely commercial society in southeast Asia.
- (E) conquered the highlands and coasts between the Mekong River and South China Sea.
8. Local Vietnamese officials identified most with the interests of
- (A) Confucian scholar officials.
- (B) Hindu rulers.
- (C) the imperial court and high administrators.
- (D) the peasants and local village culture.
- (E) merchants.
9. Geography, environment, and movement in Vietnam
- (A) successfully fostered the growth of a uniform Vietnamese culture.
- (B) have increasingly isolated Vietnam from its neighbors.
- (C) divided the nation into two cultural divisions—one in the south along the Mekong River and the other in the north along the Red River.
- (D) have made Chinese influence in Vietnam inevitable.
- (E) led to the spread of Christianity and Islam throughout the country.
10. In Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, the class that most welcomed Chinese influence and culture was
- (A) the local aristocrats.
- (B) the court bureaucrats (scholar-gentry).
- (C) peasants.
- (D) Buddhist monks.
- (E) the merchants.

Free-Response Question

Compare the role of the elites of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in the process of Sinification. How did borrowing from China evolve along with their own political and cultural traditions?

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- 1. (D) is correct. While the Japanese borrowed extensively in the areas of administration, and high culture, even Buddhism, Shinto retained its place.
- 2. (E) is correct. While Chinese Buddhist monks were also resistant, in both countries the aristocracy was central in opposing Sinification. The resistance fused with struggles for control between native rulers and the aristocracy. As the rulers embraced Sinification to consolidate their power, the nobles fought against the process.

- **3. (C) is correct.** The Gempei wars, fought between powerful aristocratic families, accompanied the decline of imperial power and Chinese influence. As the noble families took more power, they reduced the status of the peasants.
- **4. (D) is correct.** Instead of provoking common interests among the Korean kingdoms, Chinese influence increased hostilities among them.
- **5. (B) is correct.** While a variety of relationships appeared in the period, the most common dynamic was for China to treat the countries as subjects, while the latter remained autonomous.
- **6. (B) is correct.** Vietnamese culture remained distinct, in spite of Sinification. The Vietnamese language is not related to Chinese.
- **7. (E) is correct.** Freed from Chinese rule, the Vietnamese extended their rule at their neighbors' expense.
- **8. (D) is correct.** Local officials were much less influenced by Sinification than was the central government. Village organization had more to do with peasant traditions than imported ideas.
- **9. (C) is correct.** As the Vietnamese conquered their neighbors, intermarriage in the south with the Chams and Khmers produced a culture increasingly divided from that of the Hanoi in the north.
- **10. (B) is correct.** In all three countries, the court bureaucrats most favored importation of Chinese bureaucratic traditions that strengthened their position.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

Compare the role of the elites of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in the process of Sinification. How did borrowing from China evolve along with their own political and cultural traditions?

Japan: While Japanese rulers embraced Chinese culture, and especially Buddhism, the aristocracy and Buddhist monks, sometimes at odds and sometimes in concert, opposed Sinification. Court culture borrowed heavily from China, although indigenous traditions contributed.

Korea: Korea was originally settled by peoples unlike those that created China and had a longer tradition than Japan of development independent from China. Sinification was limited to only the upper stratum of society.

Vietnam: Like Korea, the Vietnamese people were culturally distinct from China and, moreover, separated by mountainous regions. Like Korea, Vietnamese elites were most heavily influenced by Chinese culture. Use of Chinese models of military and political organization aided the Vietnamese against their southern neighbors.

In all three, Sinification was sought, and Chinese culture was viewed as more sophisticated than native culture. Chinese culture had an impact on all facets of all three cultures. Again, in all three, the process of Sinification was embraced more by some groups than others.