Japan Essay, Research Paper

The Political, Economical, Social, and Cultural Aspects of Japan

Japan has a particularly homogeneous culture. In fact, both racially and culturally, Japan is the most homogeneous of the world?s major nations. This situation has allowed Japan to Westernize its economy and yet maintain a unique sense of identity. It began in 1639, when Japan?s rulers begin to notice the conversion of thousands of Japanese to Catholicism by Portuguese missionaries and by the potential for dissidents to form military alliances with foreign nations that suppressed Christianity and Japan sealed the island form the rest of the world. It was not until 1853 with the arrival of an American naval squadron under Commander Matthew Perry that Japan was opened to the outside world. The Japanese had developed a strong sense of national consciousness and pride in their own culture. The Japanese realized in the 1860’s that they had to adopt Western technology, to modernize their society if they were to avoid Western domination. Their culture was able to absorb foreign influences without losing its uniqueness. Thus, the Japanese proved themselves extremely flexible in borrowing from other cultures while maintaining their own.

Japan is mostly a middle class society. Those at the bottom of the social scale are either foreigners, Koreans, or native Japanese. Japanese think of themselves as belonging to a relatively classless society, even though they are mainly a middle class society. Many working-class Japanese rank themselves as middle class because of Japan?s prosperity in the 1980’s, which allowed them to enjoy high level of consumption of goods and services. Thus their sense of well-being inflated their self assessment of class position. An estimated four percent of Japan?s population qualifies as upper class. The upper class consists of those who run the large corporations, the conservative politicians, and senior bureaucrats that collaborate to make up Japan?s ruling stratum. The middle class, by contrast, consist of owners of small and medium size businesses, supervisors and managers, professional and technical workers, and some farmers. The middle class accounts for an estimated thirty-five percent of the Japanese class structure. Another forty to fifty percent of the population is represented largely by blue-collar workers and farmers also know as the working class. Ten to fifteen percent are lower class and consist of a variety of semiskilled and unskilled workers in industry and agriculture. One percent of Japan?s population is on welfare.

The Japanese were plagued by colonialism. They had to show the Western world that they could become modernized in order to prevent them from being colonized. The first thing was to switch the economy from agricultural to industrial. The Japanese brought in help from other countries such as Britain and Germany. The Japanese learned to modernize their navy from Britain and modernized their army with the help of Germany. Means of transportation increased,

railways were built to connect major cities with the addition of new ports and facilities. The second order of business was to reconstruct the government. The new system of the government was modeled after the Western political system, with components such as executive branch, legislative branch, judicial branch, and political parties and leaders. During this period of modernization some of the Japanese customs/traditions began to fade from the forefront, such as the samurai warrior. Samurai became officers in the reformed army, while others entered industry and help expand the Japanese economy quickly. Tokyo became the central government, the decisions that were made in Tokyo became national policy. Also, with the use of Western technology, farm production increased tremendously. All of these things helped to modernize the Japanese, however they paid a price for it. There was an increase in tax, which fell upon the the peasantry. At the end of the nineteenth century Japan had a modern navy, which was considered to be one of the best, along with an expanding industry.

As a result of Japan becoming modernized, they now had the respect of the West and had the power imperialize and capitalize on other non-modern nations. Japan?s first test was to colonize on Korea.The Japanese proceeded to colonize the Chinese with the island of Taiwan. By doing this they gained the opportunity to control the markets and ports of these regions.

The family is very important to the Japanese. Japan has seen the nuclear family replace the extended family as the dominant form of family life. The extended family in premodern Japan, was not a large kinship group consisting of all or most family members living together. The Japanese extended family consisted of the main family and separate branch families. The Japanese family consisted of three generations living together: grandparents, parents, and children. The eldest son and his wife were expected to remain with the parents and take over the family farm or business. All other children were expected to leave home on reaching adulthood and establish branch families.

The younger sons secured their livelihood elsewhere as workers, tradesmen, or samurai warriors. The daughters were intended to be married off and were not considered essential to the family?s well-being. Until married, the role of the woman was limited to helping in the household, working low-wage jobs as domestic servants, or working in rice and cotton production. Since weddings were expensive and were paid for by the brides parents, no family wanted a large number of girls. The Japanese refer to this arrangement, which had its origin in Japan?s sixteenth century feudal period, as the ie system. As it applies to the Japanese extended family, the ie system refers to a lineal (up and down) structure, with the main family at the top and the various branch families arranged downward. Although there was no reason to suppose that daughters and younger sons were loved any less by their parents, the ie system was normative, requiring them to leave and form their own branch families. The ie system fostered sexual discrimination and status distinctions both within and between families. The highest status went to males of the main family, while the branch families and especially females were considered less important. The eldest son was clearly privileged in this arrangement. Although the ie system sequesters the family, it has its favorable opportunities. Elderly people gain social support in their old age and adult children gain a residence in their parents? home. This is important because Japan?s housing is among the most expensive and space for homes are scarce. Since day-care facilities for children are not widespread in Japan. The children also gain household helpers and baby-sitters. This enables young wives to be employed outside the home. since day-care facilities for children are not widespread in Japan. Living with one?s parents is not a relic of the past, but an adaption to the lack of affordable housing.

In the nineteenth century, the Japanese began to move away from the extended family. This was caused by the forces of industrialization and urbanization, which drew increasing numbers of people from agriculture work in rural areas to employment in factory cities. Japan has been an isolated and backward agrarian island empire until it was forced to open its ports for trade by an American naval force under Commander Matthew Perry in the early 1850’s. This event triggered the Meiji Restoration, which was intended as a restoration of imperial power through modernization. Driven by the threat of Western colonialism, the Japanese welcomed Western technology. Half way through the beginning of the nineteenth century Japan had become an industrial nation with a strong military whose eventual defeat in World War II accelerated social change. As time went on and things changed, the nuclear family emerged to become the typical family structure.There were other changes such as, greater sexual equality within the family between spouses and the waning of arranged marriages. In premodern Japan, the husband and the wife might never have spoken to each other before their wedding ceremony. In modern Japan, people generally choose their own marriage partner, and newlyweds begin their married life in their own home. However, about thirty to forty percent of all Japanese marriages are still arranged by outside parties, so the custom persists. One of the most distinctive characteristics of the modern Japanese family is that the wife is dominant in the household. Japanese women have the strongest role in the home and men have a dominant role outside of the home . While the norm of the Japanese woman is to be a full time wife and mother, about fifty percent of all Japanese women are employed outside the home.

As one can see Japan has changed and progressed since the beginning. They have learned how to adopt others cultures and maintain their own. The political, economical, social, and cultural changed that took place went from one end of the spectrum to the other. That is what makes Japan so unique, there are countries that have adopted Western politics and still have major problems unlike the Japanese. As time goes Japan will become a super world power with their already outstanding economy and their technology that is far more superior to any nation