

The sounds of Japanese

- **50 sounds (goju-on)**

Contemporary Japanese involves the alphabetic arrangement "goju-on". Despite originally having 50 sounds, 4 were removed as time passed (only 46 today). These include basic sounds, which gets built up to more sounds as seen later. There are 5 vowels: a, i, u, e, o which combine with the consonants w, r, y, m, h, n, t, s, k. 3 irregular (shi, tsu, chi) sounds are formed due to the lack of a "c" sound in Japanese. Another irregular sound is "N", which cannot start a syllable, only end one.

- **Muddy and half-muddy sounds (daku-on and handaku-on)**

Daku-on (muddy) sounds are the changes in h, t, s and k sounds following the addition of a ten-ten. Handaku-on (half-muddy) sounds are where all consonant sounds change to "p" sound.

- **Contracted sounds (yo-on)**

-i line and add ya, yu, yo.

- **Long sounds (cho-on)**

Study long vowels. If long sounds are not pronounced properly, whole new word with different meaning is created.

- **Assimilated sounds (soku-on)**

Study double consonants.

- **Syllables (onsetsu)**

Each kana is a syllable (ni-ho-n = 3 syllables).

- **Accent and Pitch accent**

The Japanese language has no stress or tone so all syllables are pronounced the same way. However, Japanese utilizes pitch accents, whereby one syllable in a word would have pitches higher or lower relative to another syllable. These accents are used to differentiate different words with the same spelling.

Religion in Japan

- **Shinto (lit. way of the gods)**

One of the 2 main religions of Japan, Shinto is the only religion indigenous to Japan which originated back in ancient civilization but revolutionized during the 19th/20th century. It

carries the belief that spirits “kami” reside everywhere, especially in famous landmarks. It is concerned with life, with no notion of the afterlife.

- o *Shinto purification*

A hallmark Shinto tradition, purification/exorcism is performed by both worshippers and priests.

There are 2 types of purifications: 1. personal purification performed by the worshipper through washing their hands/cleansing mouth with holy water (water from shrines) and 2. purification (exorcism) of a location or object performed by a priest, usually before erecting a house or buying a car etc. (asking deities to be benevolent).

- o *Shinto mythology*

Like other religions, Shinto also has its own creation myth on the world and origin of Japan.

In the beginning of time, heaven and earth were together. When they split, many kami materialized. Amongst those were a brother and sister, instructed to create a drifting land. The brother thrust his sword into the sea and when he withdrew, the brine (blood) dripped from the tip and coagulated into islands which formed Japan.

- o *Amaterasu- the sun kami*

The brother and sister were lovers, and gave birth to more kami. Among them was Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, the greatest kami of all. She was appointed to rule the plains of high heaven. This made Amaterasu the most prominent figure in Shinto mythology.

One story linked to Japanese culture was when Amaterasu hid herself in a cave, which plunged the world into darkness as the sun set. The other kami tried to lure her out to illuminate the world again by planning a “matsuri” (lit. to worship), a grand festival with a lot of noise. They also placed a rooster atop a “torii” in front of the cave to make even more noise. Amaterasu couldn’t stand the noise and came out and when she did, the kami sealed the entrance to the cave. This established toriis as a symbolic entrance to any Shinto shrine (all have one).

- o *Jimmu- the first emperor*

Amaterasu had children of her own, and her great grandson was the first emperor (Jimmu tenno). Although no historical evidence proved his existence, it was calculated he ascended the throne in 660BCE. He was a man of kami ancestry, and is an ancestor to the imperial dynasty ruling Japan today. Amaterasu bestowed Jimmu the “3 regalias”, the sword, mirror and jewel. The emperor today is the 125th in an unbroken lineage to Jimmu.

- o *Shinto shrines (jinja)*

Shinto shrines can be found in many places, from the middle of major cities (like Shinjuku) to remote rural areas. Any location identified with the existence of a kami will have a shrine dedicated to it.

There are two kinds of shrines, shrines linked to places which mark a site of natural significance or beauty, and shrines linked to important people who have died (eg. soldiers, shoguns, emperors) such as the “Yasukuni jinja”.

Most famous shrine in Japan is “Ise jingu” (lit. Grand shrine of Ise), as it is the shrine dedicated to Amaterasu. And as Jimmu was a descendant of Amaterasu, by association it is also a shrine to the imperial family.

- **Buddhism “bukkyo” (lit. the teachings of Buddha)**

Buddhism originated from nearby continents and came to Japan in the 6th century. When it came to Japan, Buddhism was already 1000 years old, a well-developed religion and represented the apex of civilization. However it wasn't immediately accepted as many people saw it as a threat to Shinto, but others viewed it as a tool to reinforce and elevate the status of the emperor.

o *Prince Shotoku*

Shotoku Taishi was a champion of Buddhism and Chinese institutions. He tried to reform Japanese political systems along the lines of China. He sent a letter to the emperor of China in the 7th century saying “from the land of the rising sun to the land of the setting sun” to establish Japan as an equal to China, a powerhouse of culture and civilization at the time. It was also how “Nippon” (lit. source of the sun) became the official name of Japan. He was once the face of the 10,000 yen note.

o *Early Japanese Buddhism*

Buddhism became an official religion to the emperor and high court in the 700s. It was also campaigned to build a network of temples, so that at least 1 official Buddhism temple (kokubunji) had to be in each province. Through this, the court sought to increase its influence on a national level.

Early Buddhism was elitist, tied to political power and authority, and could be characterized by two words: esoteric (understood by a small number of people) and exclusive (reserved for the small elite).

o *Medieval religious “reformation”*

During the 12th century period of the samurai, there was a great blossoming of culture and age of political strife. Monks began to formulate new notions of Buddhism. Among them a monk called Shinran created “pure land” Buddhism (jodo-shu). This new notion of Buddhism stated that it wasn't through studying or elaborate and expensive rituals which granted salvation, rather faith and the expression of faith. Shinran taught that through reading sutras, or even just chanting the core phrase of the lotus sutra “namu amida butsu” repeatedly, one could be reborn in heaven. This increased Buddhism popularity as it was more egalitarian- salvation was reachable for anyone with faith.