

Component 2: Centripetal Forces in Japan

Applying geographical concepts is an excellent way to develop the analytical skills of students. This geography component will give students an opportunity to learn useful geographical terms, apply factual information, and analyze why Japan is a relatively cohesive society compared to many other countries. The specific terms used in this exercise are relative location, nation-state and centripetal forces. Japan's relative location is its regional position or situation relative to the position of other places. It is considered a nation-state, "a country whose population possesses a substantial degree of cultural homogeneity and unity" (De Blij, 2006). It has relatively strong centripetal forces which bind the country together to make a strong nation-state.

Japan is a particularly good example of a country that has strong centripetal forces and relatively few divisive or centrifugal forces. Students should be able to recognize similarities to their own country and also see how divisive issues, such as language, religion, and ethnicity have more power in the US compared to Japan.

Five important characteristics of Japan which may be considered centripetal forces are: the physical setting, the Japanese language, the Shinto religion, Japanese traditional cultural emphasis upon beauty, and the cultivation, consumption, and celebration of rice.

Literature Cited

De Blij, H.J. and Peter O. Muller. 2006. *Geography, Realms, Regions, and Concepts*. NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

The Physical Setting

Part 1

The Japanese archipelago consists of four major islands and numerous smaller islands. The archipelago is separated from the Asian mainland by the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, and the East China Sea. Japan is the "Land of the Rising Sun" as depicted on the Japanese flag.

The Japanese language

Part 2

The Japanese language is a key centripetal force in Japan. Not only is the spoken language unique to Japan, but over 95 percent of the population is literate as well. While many Japanese believe that their spoken language is unique, it is most likely a language originally resulting from migration of people from the Korean peninsula. Many Japanese words are derived from Chinese.

The Shinto religion

Part 3

The indigenous Japanese religion of Shinto is another centripetal force in Japan. It is tied to the natural landscape as well as to the Japanese sense of identity (Gerbert, 2001). Doctrine and creed are not as significant in Shinto as practice. Shinto claims over 106,000,000 followers out of a population of 127,900,000 (Swanson, 2006).

Cultural Appreciation of Beauty

Part 4

A strong cultural centripetal force is the concept and appreciation of beauty. Many Japanese see beauty in the landscape, in art, music, crafts, gardens, dress, architecture, and flowers. A useful website on the history of ikebana, the art of flower arrangement, and photographs of the various styles is <http://www.ikebanahq.org/index.html>.

Rice Cultivation

Part 5

Rice is the final centripetal force in this lesson. According to legend, Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, gave her grandson rice grown in Heaven so that he could turn the Japanese islands into productive farmland. Rice grains came to represent the peaceful soul of the Sun goddess (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2004)(Figure 19).

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