

Component 2, Part 1

Centripetal Forces in Japan: The Physical Setting

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 ([Figure 1](#)). Japan is the "Land of the Rising Sun" as depicted on the Japanese flag ([Figure 2](#)).

Because this is an island nation there have historically been strong physical barriers to migration. Not only are there three seas to the west, but there is the expanse of the Pacific Ocean to the east. The strong, warm Kuroshio Ocean current travels northward along the east coast of Japan. The cold Oyashio current flows south along the coast of Asia. The Oyashio meets the Kuroshio off the east coast and fogs develop along the boundary between the currents. The cold, foggy condition known as *yamase* can occur from June to mid-August in northern Japan adding localized climatic barriers.

Japan's Neolithic people, the Jomon Culture (ca. 10,000 BCE - ca. 300 BCE) used the marine and coastal resources (Karan, 2005). Japan extends across 24 degrees of latitude, which would be similar to going from Boston to Mexico City in North America. This expanse, plus the climatic variations and the insular and ocean current factors limiting access, accounted for some of the isolation and separate development. It was during the Yayoi Period (ca. 300 BCE - ca. 300 CE) that Mongoloid immigrants crossed the Strait of Tsushima separating Japan from the Korean Peninsula in significant numbers bringing the knowledge of rice paddy cultivation, weaving, and smelting of iron. Although greatly influenced by contact with Korean and Chinese cultures, the Japanese began before 1000 CE to form what is now considered largely an ethnically homogeneous state. The Portuguese and other Europeans did not arrive until the mid-sixteenth century after centuries of cultural development had taken place with the physical barriers still in place. The barriers limited immigration and contact and aided the Japanese in becoming, for the most part, an ethnically homogeneous society. Even though Japan imported a writing system from China via Korea, the Japanese, despite regional dialects, shared a common spoken language. This acted as a centripetal force.

Note To Teacher

Students are encouraged to compare a map of Japan with one of the US ([Figure 3](#)). The unfortified borders of the US and Mexico are in sharp contrast to the open seas surrounding Japan. The long history of Mexican/US land ownership promoted ethnic diversity in the US Southwest which still exists today. Japan's relative historical isolation promoted ethnic homogeneity. Students may also compare and contrast the United Kingdom's physical, cultural, and linguistic separation from continental Europe with the separation of Japan from continental Asia. The English Channel may be compared to the Sea of Japan. Students should measure the distances between both island nations and their continental mainlands. Though the English Channel is narrow, it served as a significant cultural divide. Even the relatively small distance between Britain and the Continent contributed to English cultural propensities that were quite distinct from the European mainland. Such distinctions were even more pronounced in Japan given the much larger distances between the archipelago and the Asian mainland.

References

- De Blij, H.J. and Peter O. Muller. 2006. *Geography, Realms, Regions, and Concepts*. NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- Karan, Pradyumna P. 2005. *Japan in the 21st Century*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Schirokauer, Conrad. 1989. *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Additional Resources

A useful website concerning the physical geography of Japan is: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/japan/japanworkbook/geography/japgeo.html>. For general maps on Japan's geography go to <http://www.japan-guide.com/list/e1000.html>. For contemporary and historical maps of Japan go to <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/japan.html>. For a physical map go to <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/resources/ngo/maps/view/images/japkorm.jpg>.

Photos



Figure 1: Topographic Map of Japan

This topographic map shows the mountainous character of Japan, the extensive coastline, and the many islands which make up the Japanese archipelago.

Source: photo from [Dive Japan](#)



Figure 2: The Japanese Flag

Japan's flag represents the rising sun. The sun rises out of the Pacific Ocean to the east; it is also a metaphor for the nation. Since the end of World War II, use of the flag in Japan is often controversial.

Source: photo from [CIA - The World Fact Book -Flag of Japan](#)



Figure 3: Outline of Japan over a US map

This map illustrates Japan's 24 degrees of latitude superimposed on a map of the US.

Source: maps from [about.com](#)