

Chinese Influences on Japan

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Prince Shōtoku with his two sons, Prince Eguri (left) and Prince Yamashiro (right). Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/ycg7k95m>.

This module was developed for a seventh-grade world history and geography class, specifically to address Tennessee standard 7.09—“Explain how Japanese culture changed through Chinese and Korean influences (including Buddhism and Confucianism) as shown in the Constitution of Prince Shōtoku and the adoption of the Chinese writing system.”

However, part or all of the module is applicable to middle school world history and/or geography classes elsewhere if early Japanese history is part of the curriculum.

Estimated module length: Two ninety-minute class periods

Overview

China was the first Northeast Asian culture to develop a written language, which was transmitted, along with Chinese cultural practices, to the peninsula we know today as Korea. The country that became Japan was the last large regional polity to acquire written Chinese and other aspects of Chinese culture. Although Chinese records indicated that a government mission visited what is today Japan approximately fifty-seven years before the Common Era, evidence of the Chinese writing system appearing on the Japanese archipelago dates back to sometime between the second and third centuries CE. The purpose of this module is to introduce students to significant early Chinese influences on Japan.

Objectives

Students will:

Identify aspects of Japanese culture such as government, language, and religion that were influenced by contact with Korea and China.

Explain how and why the Japanese assimilated aspects of Chinese culture.

Explain how Japanese written language (*kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana*) evolved from Chinese.

Analyze the Constitution of Prince Shōtoku to identify Buddhist and Confucian influences and explain the constitution's significance.

Prerequisite knowledge

Students will need to know the basic principles of Buddhism and Confucianism. They will also need to understand the meaning of the concept “imperial bureaucracy” in China. Finally, a familiarity with the Sui and Tang (T'ang) dynasties will help students identify Chinese influences on Japanese culture.

Introductory activity

The worksheets and other materials for this module appear in both the module narrative and at the end of the module for the convenience of teachers wishing to use all or part of these digital materials.

Estimated time: ten minutes

Students will be asked to generate a list of words they believe are Japanese in origin, and then the class will determine the connections between the words. Example: Sushi and hibachi are both related to food. The *Fluent U* Japanese language and culture blog post, linked [here](#), has a list of words that would be familiar to most students

Ask students to consider how the Japanese words from the list came to be used in United States. Explain to students that trade, cultural exchange, and military encounters are often avenues through which language is shared.

Show students a map of East Asia. Have them hypothesize which countries would likely share language or other aspects of culture with Japan.

Author's note on class discussion

Students were able to generate a list of twenty Japanese words, including *samurai*, *katana*, *tsunami*, *sushi*, and *haiku*. Students immediately thought of five words but needed a few minutes of wait time to think of additional words, including *Shintō*, *sumo*, *anime*, and *karaoke*. Students were quickly able to name trade and entertainment as reasons for Japanese words to enter American English. Students needed some gentle prompting to remind them about the presence of U.S. military personnel in Japan since World War II. I found it useful to personalize this part of the lesson with anecdotes about my aunt, who worked for a Japanese company in the early 1980s, and a friend who served in the Navy and was stationed in Japan for a few months. Students were then able to make their own connections with the words and share their own anecdotes.

Class No. 1

Activity No. 1: Development of the Japanese written language

Estimated time, thirty-five minutes

Show the *Asia For Educators'* (AFE) videos "[Four Elements Borrowed from China](#)" (forty-nine seconds) and "[Japanese Use of the Chinese Writing System](#)" (four minutes, twenty-five seconds).

After viewing both videos, discuss the following key points with students:

Chinese was the first and only written language known in Japan.

At first, all Japanese government documents and histories were written solely in Chinese.

In the late ninth and early tenth centuries, syllabaries called *kana* were adapted from Chinese characters that allow Japanese words and foreign loanwords to be written.

As spoken languages, Japanese and Chinese are very different, so using Chinese characters to write a number of Japanese words was not a practical choice.

Next, have students read the AFE essay "[The Written Language](#)." After students read, have them generate a list of key ideas about Japan's writing systems. The list should include the key points above, as well as additional information:

Japanese has three separate sets of symbols for writing: kanji, hiragana, and katakana.

Kanji: Thousands of characters borrowed from China, each with a different meaning

Hiragana: Forty-six "smooth"-style phonetic symbols used for inflected endings, grammatical particles, and other Japanese words

Katakana: Forty-six "block"-style phonetic symbols used for writing foreign loanwords, foreign names, and for emphasis

Students must learn 881 kanji in elementary school and a total of 1,850 by the time they graduate from high school.

Having symbols that indicate both sound and meaning gives the language flexibility

Author's note on class discussion

After viewing the videos and reading the essay, students were able to articulate most of the main points noted above. They were shocked to learn that elementary students are required to master 881 kanji. Students spent some time discussing the merits of having twenty-six letters in English versus thousands of characters in Japanese. Most students thought English was much easier. One student pointed out that English has many blends that have to be represented by more than one sound, as well as letters that are silent and spelling rules with multiple exceptions. Following her comment, the class consensus was that both languages have their own unique challenges for learners. One student quipped that that he was going to stop complaining to his English teacher. Students also noted that Japanese may be written vertically or horizontally, which they found very unique.

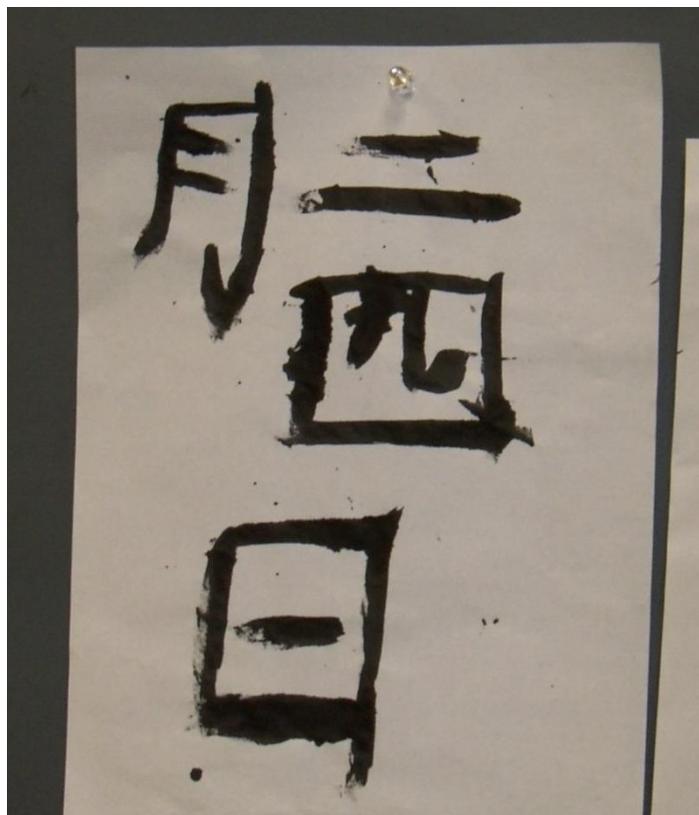
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Activity No. 2: Writing kanji

Estimated time: forty-five minutes

Print out copies of the kanji exercise found [here](#). If students have access to tablets or laptops, teachers might want to provide them with the link to the exercise. This will allow students to zoom in on the symbols, which can be very helpful. Have students complete as many of the classroom exercises as time allows. Teachers might want to give students unlined paper for their practice exercises.

This activity can be completed in the classroom using markers or just ordinary pencils on paper. However, if you can arrange for students to use calligraphy brushes, ink and calligraphy paper, it will add a great deal to student understanding and enjoyment of the lesson. Brushes, ink and paper can be purchased economically from a number of sources. You do not necessarily need a brush for each student. You may want to set up five or six stations with brushes, ink and paper. Have students practice the exercises at their desks using pencils. You can monitor their progress and send students to the ink stations in groups. This procedure will take slightly longer but will allow you to closely monitor the use of ink. Remember to tell students to wear old clothes for this lesson, or provide them with aprons or smocks to protect their clothing.



Images of the kanji activity in class.
Source: Photos courtesy of the author.



*Class No. 2**Activity No. 1: Japan timeline*

Estimated time: fifteen minutes

Divide students into teams of two or three. Give each team an event from [the timeline](#). Have students determine what, if any, Chinese influence is evident in the event. Have students organize themselves chronologically, read the event, and then share the Chinese influence on the event.

Note: All the events reflect a direct or indirect influence of Chinese culture in terms of language, government, arts, or religion—specifically Buddhism.

Author's note

A great way to connect the timeline activity to the reading in Activity No. 2 is to compare Japan's relationship to China to that of siblings. I asked my students how many of them had younger siblings. (About half the class raised their hands.) Next, I asked if their younger siblings ever tried to copy their behavior. Several students shared responses, including trying to play basketball, copying their hairstyles, and borrowing clothing without permission. I told students that their younger siblings copied them because they admired their older brothers and sisters, and that Japanese copied or borrowed aspects of Chinese culture for the same reason.

Activity No. 2: Japanese missions to the Chinese court

Estimated time: fifteen minutes

Students will read the *Japan Society* article "[Japanese Missions to China](#)," adapted from an essay by Doug Fuqua. After reading the article, students should discuss the following questions:

Why did Japan begin the missions to China?

What aspects of Chinese culture did the Japanese assimilate?

Why did Japan stop the trade missions?

Author's note on class discussion

Students were able to generate answers to all three questions in small groups and report to the class. I had students list the assimilated aspects of culture on the whiteboard to create a master class list. The student-generated list included Buddhism, architecture, tax system, written language, and ideas about governance.

Activity No. 3: Buddhism and Confucianism review

Estimated time: twenty minutes

Before analyzing [Prince Shōtoku's Constitution](#), students should review key aspects of Buddhism and Confucianism.

You may wish to show the short videos "[The Evolution of Buddhism in Japan](#)" (three minutes and seven seconds) from *PBS Learning Media* and "[Discovering China—Confucius](#)" (four minutes

and twenty seven seconds) from *NTDTV* on YouTube before reviewing the key aspects of Buddhism and Confucianism listed below.



Screen capture from “The Evolution of Buddhism.” Source: *PBS Learning Media* at <https://tinyurl.com/ybme5tll>.

Key aspects of Buddhism

Life is suffering; suffering comes from desiring what one does not have.

Liberation from suffering allows one to exit the cycle of rebirth.

Buddhism encourages wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline.

Key aspects of Confucianism

Confucianism emphasizes the need for an orderly society.

Rulers should be virtuous.

Filial piety, or respect for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors, is a key virtue.

Filial piety also requires subjects to respect their rulers.

Confucius emphasized education.

The civil service exam developed of in part because of the Confucian idea of the need for educated and virtuous leadership.

Activity No. 4: Prince Shōtoku's Constitution

Estimated time: twenty minutes

Distribute copies of the [Prince Shōtoku's Constitution handout](#) to students. You may wish to have students read and discuss each of the points before they begin to answer the questions. This can be assigned individually but works best as a small group activity. [An answer key is included.](#)

Activity No. 5: Assessment

Estimated time: twenty minutes

Have students write a short response (two to three paragraphs) to the following prompt: How did Japanese culture change as a result of Chinese influences?

Students should include specific examples from both lessons. The rubric below may be used as a scoring guide.

4	3	2	1
Student provides specific examples of the assimilation of written language, Buddhism, and Confucianism by the Japanese, as well as how the culture exchange occurred.	Student provides specific examples of the assimilation of written language, Buddhism, and Confucianism by the Japanese.	Student provides specific examples of the assimilation of two of the following: written language, Buddhism, or Confucianism by the Japanese.	Student provides specific examples of the assimilation of one of the following: written language, Buddhism, or Confucianism by the Japanese.

References and resources

<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/japanese/japanese-loanwords-in-english/>: This is a link to Poppy Reid's "32 Cool Japanese Loanwords We All Use in English" from *Fluent U*.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl_japan/cj03.html: This is a link to Robert Oxnam's "Four Elements Borrowed from China" from "Asian Topics" at *Asia for Educators*, Columbia University.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl_japan/cj09.html: This is a link to Robert Oxnam's "Japanese Use of Chinese Writing System" from "Asian Topics" at *Asia for Educators*, Columbia University.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_600ce_language.htm#written: This link takes you to Dr. Amy Vladeck Heinrich's "The Written Language" from *Asia for Educators*.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_600ce_kanji.htm: This is a link to "Chinese Characters: Kanji" from *Asia for Educators*.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/06/eaj.html>: This is the “Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Japan 500–1000 A.D.,” from the *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/the_japanese_missions_to_tang_china_7th-9th_centuries#sthash.gl42EVYe.dpbs: This is the link for Doug Fuqua’s “The Japanese Missions to Tang China, 7th–9th Centuries” from the *Japan Society*.

<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/sj14-soc-buddhism/the-evolution-of-buddhism-in-japan/#.WwHti0gvzIV>: “The Evolution of Buddhism in Japan” from *PBS Learning Media* is available here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYQ1hcpUedU>: This is a link to Discovering China’s “Discovering China—Confucius” from *YouTube*.

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/Shōtoku.pdf>: “The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku” from *Asia for Educators* is available here.

Digital Materials for the Module “Chinese Influences on Japan”

The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/byrd/theconstitutionofprinceshotuku.docx>

The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku (Answer Key)

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/byrd/shotokuanswerkey.docx>

The Japanese Missions to Tang China

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/byrd/thejapanesemissionstotangchina.docx>

The Written Language

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/byrd/thewrittenlanguage.docx>

Timeline of Events in Japan 500-1000 AD

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/byrd/timelineofeventsinjapan500to1000ad.docx>