Early Korea and Japan

**Korea’s Geography**
Korea is located on a peninsula that juts south from the Asian mainland and points towards Japan. Korea’s location on China’s eastern border has played a key role in its development. From China, Korea received many cultural and technological influences. At various times in history, China extended political control over the Korean peninsula. Korea has also served as a cultural bridge linking China and Japan. Koreans have, from early times, adapted and transformed Chinese traditions before passing them on to the Japanese. Korea has a long coastline with hundreds of good harbors. Thus, Korea has developed a fishing industry to support its people. Three dynasties, the Silla, Koryo, and Choson, ruled Korea during its golden ages. During this time, Chinese advancements from the Tang and Song dynasties were adopted by Koreans and sometimes changed to meet their needs. For example, Buddhism was spread throughout Korea, while written Chinese was transformed into the Korean alphabet.

**Japan’s Geography**
Japan is located on an archipelago, or chain of islands, about 100 miles off the Asian mainland and east of the Korean peninsula. About four-fifths of its land are too mountainous to farm. As a result, most people settled in narrow rivers valleys and along the coastal plains. Some of the farming took place on terraces, much like mountainous regions of China and Mesoamerica. The seas that surround Japan served as trade routes and offered plentiful food resources for the Japanese people. The seas have also both protected and isolated Japan. The country was close enough to the mainland to learn from Korea and China, but too far away for the Chinese to conquer. Buddhism, Confucian principles, and other aspects of Chinese culture spread to Japan during the Tang and Song dynasties, influencing the development of Japan. However, the Japanese also chose to discard or modify many Chinese way in a process known as selective borrowing.

**Early Japanese Traditions**
Early Japanese society was divided into clans, each with its own chief and a special god or goddess. Early Japanese clans honored kami, or superior powers that were natural or divine. The worship of the forces of nature became known as Shinto, meaning “the way of kami.” Although Shinto never evolved into an international religion, its traditions still survive in Japan.

**The Heian Period**
The blending of Japanese and Chinese culture took place from 794 to 1185. During this time, the imperial capital was in Heian, present-day Kyoto. There, emperors performed traditional religious ceremonies, while wealthy court families wielded actual power. At the Heian court, an elegant and sophisticated culture blossomed. Noblewomen and noblemen lived amongst beautiful pavilions, gardens, and lotus pools. Etiquette, delicacy, and fine art was celebrated. During this time period, Heian women produced works of Japanese literature that reflected these themes.
Establishment of Feudalism

In the 1400s, Japan developed a feudal system much like that of medieval Europe. In theory, the emperor stood at the head of Japanese feudal society. In fact, he was only a figurehead, while the real power lay in the hands of the shogun, or supreme military commander. Often the shogun controlled only a small part of Japan. He distributed lands to vassal lords who agreed to support him with their armies in time of need. These great warrior lords were called daimyo. They then granted land to lesser warriors called samurai. Like medieval Christian knights in Europe, samurai were heavily armed and trained in the skills of fighting. They also developed their own code of values known as bushido, or the “war of the warrior.” Like chivalry, the code emphasized honor, bravery, and absolute loyalty to one’s lord. Below the samurai in the social hierarchy were the peasants, artisans, and merchants. Peasants made up seventy-five percent of the population. They cultivated rice and other crops on the samurai’s estates, and also served as foot soldiers in feudal wars.

The Tokugawa Shogunate

In 1600, the daimyo Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his rivals to become master of Japan. In 1603 he was named shogun, beginning the Tokugawa Shogunate that would rule Japan until 1868. The Tokugawa shoguns were determined to end feudal warfare. They maintained the outward forms of feudal society but imposed central government control on Japan. Thus, their system of government is called centralized feudalism. To control the daimyo, the Tokugawa’s required them to live in the shogun’s capital at Edo every other year, while their family had to remain in Edo full time. New laws fixed the old social order rigidly into place by allowing only samurai to hold government positions and restricting peasants to the land. During this time period agriculture and trade flourished. This led to a food surplus, population growth, and wealth.

Achievements

Urban culture in cities such as Edo and Osaka emphasized luxuries and pleasures, differing greatly from the feudal culture elsewhere. In the 1600s a new form of drama called Kabuki arose. It contained comedic and melodramatic themes. Japanese paintings often reflected the influence of Chinese landscape paintings, yet Japanese artists developed their own styles. They produced colorful woodblock prints and brilliant scrolls.

Zen Buddhism

During Japan’s feudal age, a form of Buddhism from China became popular. Zen Buddhism emphasized self-reliance, meditation, and devotion to duty. Zen Buddhists believed that people could seek enlightenment through meditation and through the precise performance of everyday tasks. For example, the elaborate rituals of the tea ceremony reflected the Zen values of peace, simplicity, and beauty. Zen reverence for nature also influenced the development of fine landscape paintings.
Cultures of Southeast Asia

Geography of Southeast Asia
Southeast Asia is made up of two major regions. The first, mainland Southeast Asia, includes several peninsulas that jut south between India and China. The second region consists of more than 20,000 islands scattered between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The mainland is separated from the rest of Asia by mountains and high plateaus. The islands of Southeast Asia have high strategic importance as they sit on trade routes between India and China. The Strait of Malacca, in between present-day Malaysia and Indonesia, became a vital link between cultures and harbored many rich trading cities along its route. The monsoons, or seasonal winds, shaped trading patterns in the southern seas. Ships traveled northeast in summer and southwest in winter. Between seasons, while waiting for the winds to shift, merchants harbored their vessels in Southeast Asian ports. Soon, an international trade network linked India, Southeast Asia, and China to East African and the Middle East. The key product of Southeast Asia for trade was spices.

Influence of Indian Culture
Indian merchants and Hindu priests filtered into Southeast Asia in the early centuries A.D., slowly spreading their culture. Later, Buddhist monks and scholars introduced their own beliefs. Following the path of trade and religion came the influence of writing, law, government, art, architecture, and farming. Indian influence over the ideas and beliefs of Southeast Asian people reached its peak between 500 and 1000. Indians also carried Islam into the region. Traders spread Muslim beliefs and Muslim culture throughout the islands of Indonesia and as far east as the Philippines. Today, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any nation in the world.

Kingdoms and Empires of Southeast Asia
The blend of Indian influences with local cultures produced a series of kingdoms and empires in Southeast Asia. The kingdom of Pagan arose in present-day Myanmar. Buddhism spread to the region in the 1000s. Many stupas, or dome-shaped shrines, were built, making Pagan a major Buddhist center. In Indonesia, the trading empire of Srivijaya flourished from the 600s to the 1200s by controlling trade along the Strait of Malacca. Indian influences also helped shape the Khmer empire, which reached its peak between 800 and 1350. Located in present day Cambodia, the Khmer empire combined Hindu and Buddhist practices. This can be seen at the temple complex at Angkor Wat, where hundreds of carved figures tell religious stories. Vietnam’s development was largely influenced by China, rather than India, because it was under Chinese control for almost 1000 years.