Culturescope Resources: Social and Cultural Continuity and Change

Social and Cultural Continuity and Change in Japan
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The purpose of this article is to begin to prepare students for the 12 mark question on Japan in the HSC Examination. However it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this article and offer an unequivocal disclaimer.

Japan is a vast, dynamic and diverse country containing approximately 120 million people. (In other words Japan's population is 5 times larger than Australia's). This article is a synthesis of personal reflection and public knowledge by a person who has met a handful of Japanese people and has not even visited Japan. I hope this serves as a starting point for your own research, analysis and evaluations.

The Board of Studies first requirement is that students are able to:-

* apply the fundamental course concepts to that country (Japan)

I am sure we need no introduction to society, culture, persons, time and environment so all that remains is for us to construct our understanding of Japan using these tools. Of course to apply the fundamental concepts without recruiting the concepts of technology, gender, power and authority and our old friends continuity and change would immediately disadvantage our understanding and of course and our examination performance. Remember our insights and reflections on this topic are infinitely unique but our common ground is the concepts. All responses must resonate (i.e ring out like one of those annoying frogger mobile phone ring tones!) to the tune of these concepts. Further to this the syllabus also requires us to integrate a number of key concepts. I have highlighted the word integrate to emphasise that although we must use conceptual tools freely we must also use them appropriately. "Kitchen sinking" is not integration and neither your teacher nor the examiner will be fooled.

This is my attempt to apply and integrate all of the concepts to summarise my understanding of Japan. Japan's society and culture has seen enormous change over the last 100 years. The nature of society has changed as Japan has industrialised, modernised and westernised. The driving force of much of this change has been industry and technology in the pursuit of profit and modernisation to survive in the growing globalised economic and political system.

Japan's environment has changed. The development of huge cities and the trend of urban living rather than rural have impacted on society and culture. As families moved away from their traditional villages people micro and macro worlds were transformed. Their new city environment facilitated new freedoms for men and women alike. Women were now free from the burden of filial piety as society demanded a more flexible workforce i.e. Women needed to work. The societal ties within the micro and macro world began to erode as Japan sought to compete in the globalised economy. Similarly younger family members were driven to cities and their new-found micro world freedoms impacted on the macro world. The demand for democracy in the public and private sphere was beginning to become realised.

The traditional power and authority figures the Emperor, the Ujis and the family were all challenged in the c20th. In 1945 the emperor rejected his supposed deism and hundreds of years of Japanese heritage. The Uji's were replaced by corporate companies who worked closely with the government to ensure Japan's technological and economic progress. New institutions were established such as a democratic state and a western style constitution to accelerate Japan's modernisation.

Of course there was a cost. The de-stabilisation of Japan's traditional identity after world war two led to periods of uncertainty. The corporate companies (Toyota, Mitsibushi and others) filled the void. Some argue that the power and authority of traditional society and culture was replaced by these new institutions combining loyalty and cooperation (traditional values) with the new creed of profit and success. For some the company controlled all aspects of life ensuring discipline and subservience (a continuity with the heritage of
Westernisation has brought new problems and conflicts. Disgruntled elderly grow in numbers and mourn the loss of Japan's traditional identity and values such as respect, cooperation and harmony. Younger Japanese embrace commercialism, popular culture and conflict! (note: the growing suicide rate of Japanese teenagers.) The environment heaves under the weight of 120 million Japanese. The sanctity of nature often gives way to the sanctity of international commercial success.

In short Japan has modernised rapidly, but still retains much of its old traditions, albeit in new guises. Japanese society and culture has responded to global changes, technology and new power and authority structures. Gender empowerment is now a high priority in society (consider the basic laws 1999 that set out to generate gender equality within a generation), but yet women still complete most of the house work and find promotions in their careers are often tantalisingly out of reach. Shintoism and Buddhism still continue to offer spiritual guidance but success and profit, the new international currency, stretch Japan's traditions and identity almost to breaking point.

Let me again re-iterate my earlier disclaimer. This is a starting point for your own reading, research and personal reflections. Japan is fascinating country that needs to be viewed in a socially and culturally literate manner. The better informed you are the greater your understanding of this amazingly vibrant and diverse culture.

Famous Tori at Miyajima
The tori signifies the traditional entrance to a Shinto shrine. The tori at Miyajima is distinctive in that the temple site includes both Shinto and Buddhist areas, which is indicated by the extra uprights on the tori in the
photograph. The modern city of Hiroshima can be seen across the water from Miyajima.

*Photo and Caption: Marshall Leaver*