

LESSON NOTES

All About #8

Top 5 Things You Need to Know About Japanese Society

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Japanese Society

Japanese society is a very broad topic and is hard to summarize in a single lesson. That's why we're narrowing it down to its top five most important aspects!

Major Cities of Japan

Tokyo is the capital of Japan and the largest city in the country. Tokyo is also one of Japan's forty-seven prefectures, but it is referred to as a *to* ("a metropolis") instead of a *ken* ("a prefecture"). The metropolis of Tokyo is made up of twenty-three *ku* ("city wards"), twenty-six cities, five towns, and eight villages, as well as numerous small Pacific islands.

The name Tokyo means "the Eastern Capital," and it became the capital of Japan during the nineteenth century when its name changed from Edo to Tokyo. As of 2007, the population of the city of Tokyo is estimated to be about 12.8 million people. The Greater Tokyo area, which is made up of Tokyo and surrounding prefectures Chiba, Kanagawa, and Saitama, has an estimated population of 35.6 million people. Because of the large number of people living in Tokyo, downtown Tokyo is often very crowded and busy, especially in and around major commuting areas like train stations.

Shinjuku, one of the twenty-three special wards of Tokyo, is a major commercial and administrative center, and most consider it the heart of downtown Tokyo. It is home to the busiest train station in the world, Shinjuku Station, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, the administration center for the government of Tokyo.

There is no shortage of things to do and see in Tokyo. From the numerous museums and famous zoo in Ueno to the fancy high-end stores and restaurants in Ginza to the throng of discount electronics stores in Akihabara, each neighborhood offers something different and unique. Whether you're visiting Tokyo as a tourist or making a life there, you're sure never to get bored.

Kyoto, one of the oldest cities in Japan, was the capital of Japan until 1868, when Tokyo became the capital. Now it is a major city in the Kansai area, known for its traditional atmosphere because of its numerous temples and shrines. Thousands of tourists come from all over the world to visit these temples and shrines, especially in spring to see the cherry blossoms and in autumn to see the leaves change color.

Osaka is a large city that is located in the Kansai area close to Kyoto. It is the capital of Osaka prefecture as well as the economic and cultural center of the Kansai region. People from Osaka are characterized as friendly with a good sense of humor. Many famous Japanese comedians hail from Osaka. Older women in Osaka especially are known for being bright and full of energy, as well as good at bargaining. Osaka also boasts regional specialties, among them *okonomiyaki*, a pancake-like dish containing a variety of ingredients cooked on a hot plate, and *takoyaki*, fried dumplings with small pieces of octopus inside.

Family Life

Families in Japan are generally traditional, and the family is a focal point of life.

Immediate families are a bit smaller compared to those of other countries; it is not uncommon for Japanese parents to have only one or two children. It was very common for three generations (children, parents, and grandparents) to live together in the same household; however, lately you can see a trend toward nuclear families in larger cities. It is also very common for adult children to continue to live with their parents well into their twenties or thirties until they get married. Japanese gender roles are still quite traditional, with women expected to stay home and take care of their children and men expected to support the family financially. However, this is also slowly changing, with the number of working mothers and stay-at-home dads slowly increasing.

A few problems have recently plagued Japanese family life and society. One of them is the decreasing birthrate, which hit a record low in 2005 when the number of deaths outnumbered the number of births. If this trend continues, Japan's population will start shrinking. Many factors are contributing to this problem, with the delay in marriage being one of the major ones. More and more men and women are waiting until they are older to get married, with the number of single people in their thirties and forties increasing steadily every year. Another problem is the lack of support and benefits for parents with children, which makes the decision to have children an undesirable one in the eyes of young people.

Work Culture and Economy

Japan's economy is ranked second in the world after that of the United States, and some of its main industries include motor vehicles, electronics, industrial and transportation equipment, and chemicals. Some major, well-known Japanese companies include Sony, Mitsubishi, Toyota, and Honda.

In Japan, the dominant work culture is quite rigid. Employees in their first years at a company often have to work long hours for little pay. Working overtime, which is often unpaid, is an everyday occurrence at Japanese companies. The hierarchy in Japanese companies is very strict as well, with relationships following a rigid system based on seniority. Companies require subordinates to address their superiors formally and treat them with respect. It is very common for employees to all go out drinking together after a long day at work; the Japanese see this as a way to strengthen relationships and build work camaraderie. There are some disadvantages to the seniority system, however. When managers promote employees, they focus more on age and the amount of the time the person has worked at the company rather than individual accomplishments and achievements.

Another important part of the Japanese work economy is the custom of lifelong employment. This system, however, is becoming less common due to a decrease in the number of full-time employees and an increase in the number of part-time and contractual employees. There is even a term, *freeter*, the Japanese have coined to refer to young people who work one or more part-time jobs as an alternative to obtaining full-time employment. *Freeters* cite a flexible schedule and the ability to take more time off with relative ease as advantages to working part-time jobs.

Politics

Japan is a parliamentary monarchy governed by a Prime Minister and his cabinet. The

bicameral parliament is called the Diet and is made up of the upper House of Councillors and the lower House of Representatives. The lower House holds most of the power. The Japanese people elect members of the Japanese Diet, who in turn elect the Prime Minister of Japan. Japan has a figurehead Emperor whose role is mostly symbolic and traditional; he possesses no political power.

Unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, Japanese political parties tend to change constantly with one major exception—the Liberal Democratic Party, which has held power for more than fifty years—since the end of World War II. The second and third most popular parties at the moment are the *Kōmeitō*, the Clean Government Party (CGP), and the newly founded *Minshutō*, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Generational Trends

Generally speaking, the older and younger generations tend to do things differently and hold different ideas about things. The older generation tends to have a strong sense of loyalty to their companies and place work high on their priority lists, even above family. The younger generation, however, is not averse to changing jobs if there is something they are dissatisfied with, and as mentioned before, many see no problem with not pursuing full-time employment. Members of the younger generation also seem to keep more of their own interests in mind as they wait longer and longer to get married and have children. Many members of the older generation view these trends of young people today as signs that they are selfish and fickle. As attitudes continue to change, it will be interesting to see in what ways Japanese culture and society change along with them.