

## Chapter 19

### *The Spread of Chinese Civilization: Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*

**CHAPTER SUMMARY.** The peoples on China's borders naturally emulated their great neighbor. Japan borrowed heavily from China during the 5th and 6th centuries when it began forming its own civilization. To the north and west of China nomadic peoples and Tibet also received influence. Vietnam and Korea were part of the Chinese sphere by the last centuries B.C.E. The agrarian societies of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam blended Chinese influences with their indigenous cultures to produce distinctive patterns of civilized development. In all three regions Buddhism was a key force in transmitting Chinese civilization.

**JAPAN: THE IMPERIAL AGE.** During the Taika, Nara, and Heian periods, from the 7th to the 9th centuries, Japanese borrowing from China peaked, although Shinto views on the natural and supernatural world remained central. The Taika reforms of 646 aimed at revamping the administration along Chinese lines. Intellectuals and aristocrats absorbed Chinese influences. The common people looked to Buddhist monks for spiritual and secular assistance, and meshed Buddhist beliefs with traditional religion. The Taika reforms failed. The aristocracy returned to Japanese traditions; the peasantry reworked Buddhism into a Japanese creed. The emperor lost power to aristocrats and provincial lords.

**Crisis at Nara and the Shift to Heian (Kyoto).** The Taika effort to remake the Japanese ruler into a Chinese-style absolutist monarch was frustrated by resistance from aristocratic families and Buddhist monks. During the next century the Buddhists grew so powerful at court that one monk attempted to marry Empress Koken and claim the throne. The emperor fled and established a new capital at Heian (Kyoto). He abandoned the Taika reforms and restored the power of aristocratic families. Despite following Chinese patterns, the Japanese determined aristocratic rank by birth, thus blocking social mobility. The aristocrats dominated the central government and restored their position as landholders. The emperor gave up plans for creating a peasant conscript army and ordered local leaders to form rural militias.

**Ultracivilized: Court Life in the Heian Era.** Although the imperial court had lost power, court culture flourished at Heian. Aristocratic males and females lived according to strict behavioral codes. They lived in a complex of palaces and gardens; the basis of life was the pursuit of aesthetic enjoyment and the avoidance of common, distasteful elements of life. Poetry was a valued art form, and the Japanese simplified the script taken from the Chinese to facilitate expression. An outpouring of distinctively Japanese poetic and literary works followed. At the court women were expected to be as cultured as men; they were involved in palace intrigues and power struggles. Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*, the first novel in any language, vividly depicts courtly life.

**The Decline of Imperial Power.** The pleasure-loving emperor lost control of policy to aristocratic court families. By the 9th century the Fujiwara dominated the administration and married into the imperial family. Aristocratic families used their wealth and influence to buy large estates. Together with Buddhist monasteries, also estate owners, they whittled down imperial authority. Large numbers of peasants and artisans fell under their control. Cooperation between aristocrats and Buddhists was helped by secret texts and ceremonies of esoteric Buddhism, techniques to gain salvation through prayer and meditation. Both groups failed to reckon with the rising power of local lords.

**The Rise of the Provincial Warrior Elite.** The provincial aristocracy also had gained estates. Some carved out regional states ruled from small fortresses housing the lord and his retainers. The warrior leaders (*bushi*) governed and taxed for themselves, not the court. The *bushi* created their own mounted and armed forces (*samurai*). Imperial control kept declining; by the 11th and 12th centuries violence was so prevalent that monasteries, the court, and high officials all hired *samurai* for protection. The disorder resulted in the emergence of a warrior class. The *bushi* and *samurai*, supported by peasant dependents, devoted their lives to martial activity. Their combats became man-to-man duels between champions. The warriors developed a code that stressed family honor and death rather than defeat. Disgraced warriors committed ritual suicide (*seppuku*, or *hari-kiri*). The rise of the *samurai* blocked the development of a free

peasantry; they became serfs bound to the land and treated as the lord's property. Rigid class barriers separated them from the warrior elite. To counter their degradation the peasantry turned to the Pure Lands salvationist Buddhism. Artisans lived at the court and with some of the bushi; they also, despite their skills, possessed little social status.

**THE ERA OF WARRIOR DOMINANCE.** By the 11th and 12th centuries provincial families dominated the declining imperial court. The most powerful families, the Taira and Minamoto, fought for dominance during the 1180s in the Gempei wars. The peasantry suffered serious losses. The Minamoto was victorious in 1185 and established a military government (*bakufu*) centered at Kamakura. The emperor and court were preserved, but all power rested with the Minamoto and their samurai. Japanese feudalism was underway.

**ANALYSIS: Comparing Feudalisms.** Fully developed feudal systems developed during the postclassical age in Japan and western Europe. They did so when it was not possible to sustain more centralized political forms. Many other societies had similar problems, but they did not develop feudalism. The Japanese and western European feudal systems were set in political values that joined together most of the system's participants. They included the concept of mutual ties and obligations and embraced elite militaristic values. There were differences between the two approaches to feudalism. Western European stressed contractual ideas while the Japanese relied on group and individual bonds. The shared feudal past may have assisted their successful industrial development and shaped their capacity for running capitalist economies. It may also contribute to their tendencies for imperialist expansion, frequent resort to war, and the rise of right-wing militarist regimes.

**The Declining Influence of China.** Chinese influence waned along with imperial power. Principles of centralized government and a scholar-gentry bureaucracy had little place in a system where local military leaders predominated. Chinese Buddhism also was transformed into a distinctly Japanese religion. The political uncertainty accompanying the decline of the Tang made the Chinese model even less relevant. By 838 the Japanese court discontinued its embassies to the Tang.

**The Breakup of Bakufu Dominance and the Age of the Warlords.** The leader of the Minamoto, Yoritomo, because of fears of being overthrown by family members, weakened his regime by assassinating or exiling suspected relatives. His death was followed by a struggle among bushi lords for regional power. The Hojo family soon dominated the Kamakura regime. The Minamoto and the emperor at Kyoto remained as powerless, formal rulers. In the 14th century a Minamoto leader, Ashikaga Takauji, overthrew the Kamakura regime and established the Ashikaga Shogunate. When the emperor refused to recognize the new regime he was driven from Kyoto; with the support of warlords he and his heirs fought against the Ashikaga and their puppet emperors. The Ashikaga finally won the struggle, but the contest had undermined imperial and shogunate authority. Japan was divided into regional territories governed by competing warlords. From 1467 to 1477 a civil war between Ashikaga factions contributed to the collapse of central authority. Japan became divided into 300 small states ruled by warlords (*daimyo*).

**Toward Barbarism? Military Division and Social Change.** The chivalrous qualities of the bushi era deteriorated during the 15th and 16th centuries. Warfare became more scientific, while the presence of large numbers of armed peasants in daimyo armies added to the misery of the common people. Despite the suffering of the warlord period there was economic and cultural growth. Daimyos attempted to administer their domains through regular tax collection and support for public works. Incentives were offered to settle unoccupied areas, and new crops, tools, and techniques contributed to local well-being. Daimyos competed to attract merchants to their castle towns. A new and wealthy commercial class emerged, and guilds were formed by artisans and merchants. A minority of women found opportunities in commerce and handicraft industries, but the women of the warrior class lost status as primogeniture blocked their receiving inheritances. Women became appendages of warrior fathers and husbands. As part of this general trend, women lost ritual roles in religion and were replaced in theaters by males.

**Artistic Solace for a Troubled Age.** Zen Buddhism had a key role in maintaining the arts among the elite. Zen monasteries were key locations for renewed contacts with China. Notable achievements were made in painting, architecture, gardens, and the tea ceremony.

**Seeds of Unity and Japanese Nationhood.** The period of the daimyos provided the basis for the lasting unification of Japan. The emerging regional commercial and artisan classes later transferred their wealth and skills to a national system. The legal and administrative reforms made by daimyos supplied the infrastructure for a unified state.

**KOREA: BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN.** Korea, because of its proximity to China, was more profoundly influenced over a longer period than any other state. But, despite its powerful neighbor, Korea developed its own separate cultural and political identity. Koreans descended from hunting and gathering peoples of Siberia and Manchuria. By the 4th century B.C.E. they were acquiring sedentary farming and metal-working techniques from China. In 109 B.C.E. the earliest Korean kingdom, Choson, was conquered by the Han and parts of the peninsula were colonized by Chinese. Korean resistance to the Chinese led to the founding in the north of an independent state by the Koguryo people; it soon battled the southern states of Silla and Paekche. After the fall of the Han an extensive adoption of Chinese culture - Sinification - occurred. Buddhism was a key element in the transfer. Chinese writing was adopted, but the Koguryo ruler failed to form a Chinese-style state.

**Tang Alliances and the Conquest of Korea.** Continuing political disunity in Korea allowed the Tang, through alliance with Silla, to defeat Paekche and Koguryo. Silla became a vassal state in 668; the Chinese received tribute and left Silla to govern Korea. The Koreans maintained independence until the early 20th century.

**Sinification: The Tributary Link.** Under the Silla and Koryo (918-1392) dynasties Chinese influences peaked and Korean culture achieved its first full flowering. The Silla copied Tang ways and through frequent missions brought to Korea Chinese learning, art, and manufactured items. The Chinese were content with receiving tribute and allowed Koreans to run their own affairs.

**The Sinification of Korean Elite Culture.** The Silla constructed their capital, Kumsong, on the model of Tang cities. There were markets, parks, lakes, and a separate district for the imperial family. The aristocracy built residences around the imperial palace. Some of them studied in Chinese schools and sat for Confucian exams introduced by the rulers. Most government positions, however, were determined by birth and family connections. The elite favored Buddhism, in Chinese forms, over Confucianism. Korean cultural creativity went into the decoration of the many Buddhist monasteries and temples. Koreans refined techniques of porcelain manufacture, first learned from the Chinese, to produce masterworks.

**Civilization for the Few.** Apart from Buddhist sects that appealed to the common people, Chinese influences were monopolized by a tiny elite, the aristocratic families who dominated Korea's political, economic, and social life. Trade with China and Japan was intended to serve their desires. Aristocrats controlled manufacturing and commerce, thus hampering the development of artisan and trader classes. All groups beneath the aristocracy in the social scale served them. They included government officials, commoners (mainly peasants), and the "low born," who worked as virtual slaves in a wide range of occupations.

**Koryo Collapse, Dynastic Renewal.** The burdens imposed by the aristocracy upon commoners and the "low born" caused periodic revolts. Most were local affairs and easily suppressed, but, along with aristocratic quarrels and foreign invasions, they helped weaken the Silla and Koryo regimes. Over a century of conflict followed the Mongol invasion of 1231 until the Yi dynasty was established in 1392. The Yi restored aristocratic dominance and tributary links to China. The dynasty lasted until 1910.

**BETWEEN CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE MAKING OF VIETNAM.** The Chinese move southward brought them to the fertile, rice-growing region of the Red River valley. But the indigenous Viets did not suffer the same fate as other, to the Chinese, "southern barbarians." Their homeland was far from the main Chinese centers and the Viets had already formed their own distinct culture. They were prepared to receive the benefits of Chinese civilization, but not to lose their identity. The Qin raided into Vietnam in the 220s B.C.E. The contact stimulated an already existing commerce. The Viet rulers during this era conquered the Red River feudal lords. They incorporated the territory into their kingdom, and

Viets intermarried with the Mon-Khmer and Tai-speaking inhabitants to form a distinct ethnic group. The Viets were part of Southeast Asian culture. Their spoken language was not related to Chinese. They had strong village autonomy, and favored the nuclear family. Vietnamese women had more freedom and influence than Chinese females. General customs and cultural forms were very different than those of China.

**Conquest and Sinification.** The expanding Han empire first secured tribute from Vietnam; later, after 111 B.C.E. the Han conquered and governed directly. Chinese administrators presided over the introduction of Chinese culture. Viets attended Chinese schools where they learned Chinese script and studied the Confucian classics. They took exams for administrative posts. The incorporation of Chinese techniques made Vietnamese agriculture the most productive in Southeast Asia and led to higher population density. The use of Chinese political and military organization gave the Viets a decisive advantage over the Indianized peoples to the west and south.

**Roots of Resistance.** Chinese expectations for absorption of the Viets were frustrated by sporadic aristocratic revolts and the failure of Chinese culture to win the peasantry. Vietnamese women participated in the revolts against the Chinese. The rising led by the Trung sisters in 39 C.E. demonstrates the differing position of Viet and Chinese women. The former were hostile to the male-dominated Confucian codes and family system.

**Winning Independence.** The continuing revolutions were aided by Vietnam's great distance from China. When political weakness occurred in China the Viet took advantage of the limited Chinese presence. By 939 Vietnam was independent; it remained so until the 19th century.

**The Continuing Chinese Impact.** A succession of dynasties, beginning with the Le (980-1009), ruled Vietnam through a bureaucracy modeled upon the Chinese system. But the local scholar-gentry never gained the power that class held in China. Local Viet officials identified with village rulers and the peasantry instead of the ruling dynasty. Buddhist monks also had stronger links with common people, especially women, than the Confucian bureaucrats.

**The Vietnamese Drive to the South.** The Chinese legacy did help the Viets in their struggles with local rivals. Their main adversaries were the Indianized Khmer and Chams peoples of the southern lowlands. A series of successful wars with them from the 11th to the 18th centuries extended Viet territory into the Mekong delta region.

**Expansion and Division.** The dynasties centered at the northern capital city of Hanoi were unable to control distant frontier areas. Differences in culture developed as the invaders intermarried with the Chams and Khmers. Regional military commanders sought independence. By the end of the 16th century a rival dynasty, the Nguyen, with a capital at Hue, challenged the northern ruling Trinh family. The dynasties fought for control of Vietnam for the next two centuries.

**CONCLUSION: Divergent Paths in East Asian Development.** During the 1st millennium C.E. Chinese civilization influenced the formation of three distinct satellite civilizations in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Unlike China's nomadic neighbors, each contained areas suitable for sedentary agriculture - wet rice cultivation - and the development of civilization. Common elements of Chinese culture - writing, bureaucratic organization, religion, art - passed to each new civilization. All the imports, except Buddhism, were monopolized by courts and elites. The civilizations differed because of variations in the process of mixing Chinese and indigenous patterns. China's nearness to Korea forced symbolic political submission and long-term cultural dependence. In Vietnam Chinese conquest and control stretched over a thousand years. Although the Viets eventually obtained independence, Chinese culture helped form their civilization and allowed the Viets to counterbalance Indian influences among their Southeast Asian rivals. The Japanese escaped direct Chinese rule; Chinese culture was first cultivated by the elite of the imperial court, but rival provincial, militaristic clans opposed Chinese influences. Japanese political patterns became very different from the centralized system of China. The preoccupation with interaction within the East Asian sphere left the region's inhabitants with limited awareness of larger world currents when compared with other major civilizations.

## KEY TERMS

*Taika reforms*: attempt to remake Japanese monarch into an absolutist Chinese-style emperor; included attempts to create professional bureaucracy and peasant conscript army.

*Heian*: Japanese city later called Kyoto; built to escape influence of Buddhist monks.

*Tale of Genji*: written by Lady Murasaki; first novel in any language; evidence for mannered style of Japanese society.

*Fujiwara*: mid 9th century Japanese aristocratic family; exercised exceptional influence over imperial affairs; aided in decline of imperial power.

*bushi*: regional warrior leaders in Japan; ruled small kingdoms from fortresses; administered the law, supervised public works projects, and collected revenues; built up private armies.

*samurai*: mounted troops of the bushi; loyal to local lords, not the emperor.

*seppuku*: ritual suicide in Japan; also known as *hari-kiri*; demonstrated courage and was a means to restore family honor.

*Gumpei wars*: waged for five years from 1180 on Honshu between the Taira and Minamoto families; ended in destruction of Taira.

*bakufu*: military government established by the Minamoto following Gumpei wars; centered at Kamakura; retained emperor, but real power resided in military government and samurai.

*shoguns*: military leaders of the bakufu.

*Hojo*: a warrior family closely allied with the Minamoto; dominated Kamakura regime and manipulated Minamoto rulers; ruled in name of emperor.

*Ashikaga Takauji*: member of Minamoto family; overthrew Kamakura regime and established Ashikaga shogunate (1336-1573); drove emperor from Kyoto to Yoshino.

*Onin war*: struggle between rival heirs of Ashikaga shogunate (1467-1477); led to warfare between rival headquarters and Kyoto and destruction of old capital.

*daimyo*: warlord rulers of small states following Onin war and disruption of Ashikaga shogunate; holdings consolidated into unified and bounded mini-states.

*Choson*: earliest Korean kingdom; conquered by Han in 109 B.C.E.

*Koguryo*: tribal people of northern Korea; established an independent kingdom in the northern half of the peninsula; adopted cultural Sinification.

*Sinification*: extensive adaptation of Chinese culture in other regions.

*Silla*: Korean kingdom in southeast; became a vassal of the Tang and paid tribute; ruled Korea from 668.

*Yi*: Korean dynasty (1392-1910); succeeded Koryo dynasty after Mongol invasions; restored aristocratic dominance and Chinese influence.

*Trung sisters*: leaders of a rebellion in Vietnam against Chinese rule in 39 C.E.; demonstrates importance of women in Vietnamese society.

*Khmers and Chams*: Indianized Vietnamese peoples defeated by northern government at Hanoi.

*Nguyen*: southern Vietnamese dynasty with capital at Hue that challenged northern Trinh dynasty with center at Hanoi.

## LECTURE SUGGESTIONS

**1. Discuss the impact of the shifting dynastic fortunes in China on the relationships of China to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Which of the three states was the least affected by Chinese political developments? Why?** Periods of cultural exchange were strongest during the expansive phase of Chinese dynasties. Satellite civilizations were able to win independence and reject Chinese models during the eras of civil disruption between dynastic governments. The conquests of Vietnam and Korea first occurred during Han times. Korea gained independence in the early Tang period after the collapse of the Sui; Vietnam won independence after the fall of the Tang. Of the three regions Japan is the least affected by internal Chinese developments; it never was part of the Chinese empire and was able to accept or reject Chinese influences. The growing authority of regional warlords in Japan led to a reduction in Chinese cultural influence since it was linked to the central government and Confucian bureaucracy.

**2. Compare and contrast the degree of Sinification in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.** Korea was the most sinified, although Chinese influence was limited to the aristocratic elite. The Koreans into the 20th century had to accept Chinese political dominance and pay a tribute; they were heavily influenced by Chinese art, writing, Confucian bureaucracy, and commercial practices and goods. Vietnam was in the middle. It was under Chinese rule from Han times to the 10th century. A Confucian bureaucracy was established that was dominated by the aristocracy; Chinese agricultural and military organization were followed. The impact of Chinese culture separated the Vietnamese from the more Indianized indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia. After the 10th century Chinese influence declined. The scholar-gentry lost influence to local village leaders and Buddhist monks. Japan was the least affected. Many Chinese influences came early - Confucian ideas and bureaucracy, script, art, Buddhism - but because of their political independence the Japanese were able to select among elements of Chinese culture. Chinese influence declined after the Taika reform failures and the rise of the aristocracy. An end to centralized bureaucracy and a decline in Confucian influence went along with a revival of indigenous culture combining Buddhism with Shintoism.

## CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What led to the failure of the Taika reforms and what was the political result?
2. Describe the nature of Japanese government between the Gumpai wars and the Onin war.
3. What was the nature of Japanese society and economy during the period of the daimyos?
4. How was Sinification imposed on Korea and how did it affect the social development of the country?
5. What accounts for the cultural differences between Vietnamese and Chinese?
6. What was the nature of Vietnamese government following the expulsion of the Chinese?
7. What were the common elements of Chinese culture passed to all three of the satellite civilizations?
8. How was East Asian civilization different from other postclassical civilizations?

## THE INSTRUCTORS TOOL KIT

### ***Map References***

Danzer, Discovering World History through Maps and Views  
Source Maps: S22, S28. Reference Maps: R2, R4, R17, R31.

### ***Documents***

Marco Polo, "The Rise of the Samurai in Japan"

### ***Video/Film***

The Silk Road. 6 vols. Filmic Archives.