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## **Japan**

by Rachel Bladon

(Adapted book. Beginner level)

Some things always stay the same in Japan. In the countryside, farmers grow rice, like the farmers of hundreds of years ago. Year after year, people stop to see the beautiful blossom on the cherry trees. In a small wooden house, tea is made, and visitors watch carefully.

But some things change very quickly. Better robots and newer phones! More exciting computer games! Taller buildings and faster trains! This is Japan - the old and the new together, always changing, and always the same.

### **Chapter 1. Old meets new**

What do people know about Japan? Japan is in East Asia, in the Pacific Ocean - most people know that. Many people like sushi, and that comes from Japan. And everyone knows about Japanese sumo wrestling. But there are a lot more amazing things about this country.

Japan is one of the most exciting countries in the world. It is also a country with many different faces. In Japan, east meets west, and old meets new. Here you can find beautiful old wooden houses and big tall modern buildings in one street. You can visit ancient temples and shrines, and buy the newest computer games. Japan has some of the biggest cities in the world, and some of the most beautiful countryside.

Japan is a country of islands. It has four big islands - Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku - and nearly seven thousand smaller ones. The country has many mountains, and there is not a lot of good land for buildings. Most Japanese people live in the big cities in the south and west of Honshu, away from the mountains. There are 128 million people in Japan, and nearly 69 million of them live near the Pacific Ocean between the capital city, Tokyo, and Osaka.

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You can find very different weather in the different islands of Japan. In the island of Hokkaido, the winters are long and cold, and the summers are warm. But in Okinawa and the Ryukyu islands in the south, it is warm in the winter and hot in the summer. So in December in Japan, you can go in the sea in the south, and go skiing in the mountains in the north!

Millions of people visit Japan every year. Japanese people like to help these visitors, and they are very polite to them. This is a very important thing for most Japanese people; they want to be polite to everyone.

Work and the family are also very important in Japan. Most Japanese people have two religions - Shintoism and Buddhism. People go to temples and shrines, and there are also many Shinto and Buddhist festivals in the year.

Some of Japan's industries make a lot of money. Japan makes about 10 million cars every year, and its electronics industry - cameras, computers, phones, and televisions - is famous around the world. Japan is always changing: it often makes or does new things first, and countries in the west often change things to be like Japan. But Japan does not forget its past. In the countryside, many Japanese work as farmers. They grow rice and catch fish, like people hundreds of years ago.

Many people come to Japan for business. But many also come to see the country's beautiful art, temples, and gardens. They go to the theatre, and eat well in Japan's many wonderful restaurants. Japan has something for everyone - its cities are new and exciting, but this amazing country has ancient buildings and culture too.

## **Chapter 2. Emperors, samurai, and shoguns**

Many of the important things about life in Japan today were also important more than 1,500 years ago. Japan is near to Korea and China,

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and many ideas came to ancient Japan from people in these countries. Like Korean and Chinese people, the ancient Japanese learned to grow rice and to make cloth. Buddhism came to Japan from Korea and China, and by the 400s, the Japanese began to use Chinese kanji, or picture-words, for writing.

From the 600s, emperors ruled Japan. Families came together into groups called clans around these important rulers. The clans fought for power all the time.

In 794, the Japanese emperor moved his home to Kyoto. This was a quiet time in Japan, and art and writing became very important. In the early 1000s in Kyoto, a woman called Murasaki Shikibu wrote *The Tale of Genji*, and people read this interesting book even now.

At this time, fighters became very powerful in Japan. At first they worked for important men in different parts of the country. When the fighters were there, the land and homes of these men were safe. But the very best fighters now made new clans, called samurai. The samurai were very powerful. The most powerful of the samurai were called shoguns, and these shoguns wanted to rule Japan.

In 1185, the emperor lost power, and Minamoto no Yoritomo became the first shogun ruler of Japan. For the next seven hundred years, different shoguns ruled Japan, and again and again the clans fought.

In 1600, the shoguns of the Tokugawa clan came to power. The first of these, Tokugawa Ieyasu, made his home at Edo (now Tokyo). Now they were in power, the Tokugawa shoguns wanted to stay there. They made a class system: they gave everyone a place, from the shoguns and samurai at the top down to farmers and workers.

Under the Tokugawa, Edo became bigger and more important, and there was a lot of art and theatre. But in 1639, the Tokugawa closed Japan to the world. For two hundred years, people from other countries could not come in and out of Japan, and Japanese people could not leave.

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This stopped in 1853, when American ships came to Japan. They wanted to buy Japanese goods, and to bring American goods into Japan. The Tokugawa shoguns now lost their power, and from 1868 the emperors again ruled Japan.

After this, Japan began to change. The emperor broke down the class system of the Tokugawa shoguns. School became a part of life for all Japanese children. Japan began to make things and sell them to other countries, and people came to Japan to do business. Toyoda Sakichi was a very important person in Japan at this time. First he changed things in the cloth industry, and after that people could work better and faster. Later his business began to make cars too, and the Toyota Motor Corporation was born.

Japan fought in the First World War (1914-18), and by the 1920s it was an important country in the world. In the Second World War (1939-45) Japan fought in the Pacific. In August 1945, US atomic bombs killed more than 200,000 Japanese in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Bombs destroyed many of Japan's cities and industries in the war. But because Japanese people worked hard and had good ideas, Japan's industries began to grow. At first, Japan made cars, ships, and steel, but in the 1970s, the electronics industry became more important. Japan began to make phones, televisions, computers, and cameras. Soon Japan was famous around the world for its new ideas in the electronics industry.

Then, from the 1990s, industries in other countries in Asia began to grow, and there were hard times for Japan. But Japan is the country of Canon, Toyota, Mitsubishi, and Sony, and we see names like these every day on things in our homes, schools, and places of work.

### **Chapter 3. Earthquakes and volcanoes**

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On 11 March 2011, there was a big earthquake east of the city of Sendai in the northeast of Japan. Then a tsunami, 40 metres high, came onto the land and destroyed everything in front of it. More than 18,000 people died, and many more lost their homes.

This was not Japan's first big earthquake. In 1995, the Great Hanshin earthquake killed more than 6,000 people in and near the city of Kobe, and destroyed more than 100,000 buildings. And in 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake destroyed a lot of Tokyo. But new buildings and roads in Japan are better now. They move a lot in an earthquake, so the earthquake does not destroy them. Because of this, in March 2011, many buildings stayed standing in the earthquake - but the tsunami brought them down.

There are about 1,500 earthquakes a year in Japan, but most of them are small. So why does Japan have so many earthquakes? In this part of the world, under the Pacific Ocean, the land is always moving. Because of this, there are often earthquakes, and many of Japan's mountains are volcanoes. About fifteen times a year, people near a volcano in different parts of Japan see smoke and hear noise from the mountain.

The most famous volcano is Mount Fuji, the highest mountain in the country at 3,776 metres. Mount Fuji is very beautiful, and many people visit it.

Because of Japan's many volcanoes, it also has more than two thousand hot springs. Many people come to the springs, to keep well or just because they like the warm water.

People in Japan must be careful about volcanoes and earthquakes, but sometimes they must keep safe in typhoons too. Typhoons come from the Pacific; they bring very bad weather with powerful winds. They usually come to Japan between July and October. Typhoons destroy buildings and roads. Hills sometimes break away in the rain, and often people die.

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When there is a big typhoon or an earthquake, Japanese people move quickly. In a typhoon, they stay in their buildings and move away from windows. In an earthquake, they move under a table and stay safe there.

## **Chapter 4. Life in Japan**

Most Japanese people live in cities. But others live in the suburbs - places near a big city - and go to and from work every day. Their working day is usually very long, and often they live far away from their work. There are many, many people and cars in Japanese cities, and sometimes there is bad air pollution.

There are lots of buses and trains in Japan, and they are usually very good. Trains carry thousands of people under the big cities. Other trains, called shinkansen, go across the country. Shinkansen are some of the best trains in the world; they can go at 300 kilometres per hour, and they are nearly always on time.

What are Japanese homes like? Old Japanese houses were wooden, and had paper doors. On the floors, they had mats called tatami. They had Japanese beds called futons. People usually put these away in the day, because their homes were not very big.

Most new houses in Japan are wooden, but many people live in apartments in big buildings. They often have beds, not futons, because their homes are bigger, but many still have some tatami mats.

In Japanese homes there are often Buddhist or Shinto altars, and families come to these small places to pray. There are many Buddhist temples in Japan, and also thousands of Shinto shrines. People go there to pray at festivals and at important times, for example when a child is born.

Like their families, children work very hard. Children must go to school from six years old, but many children begin school at only three or four. Children go to elementary school for six years, and then they

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move to junior high school and high school. Many children go to classes in things like English and music after their day at school. Children can leave school when they are fifteen, but more than 90 per cent of children stay at school. After that, many young Japanese people become students for some years.

Then they need to find work. In the cities, many people work in business, and for the big industries - steel, ships, cars, and electronics. In the countryside, people often live on small family farms, growing things like rice, tea, and apples. Fishing is an important industry in Japan too. People get fish from the sea or have fish farms.

Japanese people work very hard, but family life is very important to them too. Most Japanese families eat together at home, and some people go to live with their son's or daughter's family when they get old. Old people are very important in Japan, and people are usually polite to them. At weekends, families often go out together, or watch television or play computer games at home.

## **Chapter 5. Language and customs**

Most people can learn a little Japanese, and Japanese people like it when visitors speak their language. But to speak Japanese well - that is not easy!

There are three kinds of writing in Japanese. In kanji, pictures make words, but in hiragana and katakana there is a 'letter' for every sound. You use hiragana for Japanese words, and katakana for words from other languages, like English.

You can learn hiragana and katakana quickly, and say the words easily. But that is not everything! In Japanese, you use different words for older and younger people, and for important people. Men and women use different words too. And people speak Japanese differently in different parts of the country. So you need to learn a lot of different things!

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There are other things to learn about life in Japan. For example, never wash in the bath in Japan. Japanese people always wash outside the bath first, so the dirty water stays out of the bath. Then they get into the bath.

You must be careful about shoes in Japan too. Japanese people do not wear their shoes in the house. They leave their shoes at the door, so the floor or the tatami mats do not get dirty. Sometimes Japanese people wear wooden shoes called geta. You can get these shoes on and off easily when you need to.

Saying hello to people in Japan is different too. Japanese people bow when they meet people, and they give a bigger bow for older or more important people. When you talk to or about someone, you must always put -san or -sama after their name.

Japan has many old customs, and one of the most important is the tea ceremony. Tea came to Japan from China in the 700s. At a tea ceremony, everyone first meets the other people at the ceremony, and then walks in the garden of the tea-house. In a small room, the tea-maker then makes green tea, very carefully, and everyone watches. Now the visitors bow, drink their tea, and eat. At a tea ceremony, everyone must 'live now'. You must watch the tea and the tea-maker, and not think about other things!

Many visitors like to go to a tea ceremony, and many also like to see Japan's famous cherry blossom. There are many cherry trees in Japan, and in April they always have lots of beautiful blossom. At this time, lots of people go out to sit and eat under the trees (in the day and at night) and look at the blossom. There are cherry blossom festivals too.

These cherry blossom festivals are some of many festivals in Japan at different times in the year. Festivals are very important for Japanese people. The most important festival is New Year's Day, when families often visit temples and shrines. Many people eat noodles on the day before New Year's Day, because they want to live for a long time. Does this help? Well - perhaps!

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In November, for one of these festivals, families take three-, five- and seven-year-old children to shrines, and you can see many children in beautiful clothes. At the shrines, families say thank you for their children, and pray for them.

One of the biggest and most famous festivals in Tokyo is the Kanda Matsuri in May. For this festival, people wear clothes from old times, and carry a hundred small shrines through the streets of Tokyo. Japanese people and visitors love watching this very happy festival.

For festivals, and for other important days, many people in Japan wear wonderful clothes called kimonos.

New kimonos are very expensive, but beautiful, and people often keep them in their families for many years. Women wear kimonos, carry fans, and wear beautiful combs in their hair.

Some women, called geisha, wear kimonos to work! The first geisha began to work in Japan about three hundred years ago, and you can find them in some cities today. Geisha learn Japanese arts like music and singing. They wear wonderful kimonos, and do their hair with beautiful combs. Their faces are very white, and their mouths are red.

## **Chapter 6. Sport and culture**

What other things do Japanese people like to do at the weekends? Sport is very important in Japan, of course. Many Japanese like to watch and play baseball, and thousands of people go to see famous teams like the Yomiuri Giants and the Yakult Swallows. Many Japanese began to play football after the 2002 FIFA World Cup in Japan and Korea, and in 2011, the Japanese Women's Football Team came home from Germany with the World Cup! Sawa Homare, the best player in the team, was the 2011 FIFA Best Player of the Year.

Many people in Japan like to watch sumo wrestling. It began in Japan nearly two thousand years ago. In wrestling, two men fight in a ring. They wear only a kind of cloth called a mawashi, and they wear

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their hair like an ancient samurai. One wrestler must get the other out of the ring, or down to the floor. The best wrestlers are very famous in Japan, but they work very hard. Young wrestlers go into a heya, or wrestling club, when they are only about fifteen years old. There they must work for the older wrestlers, and learn to fight, and they do not usually go home or see their families for years.

Many Japanese children learn sports like judo and kendo in schools and clubs, and skiing, mountain walking, and running are also important sports in Japan.

Many people in Japan like to go to the theatre in the evenings or at weekends. There are different kinds of Japanese theatre. Noh theatre is the oldest kind. There are no women, and usually there are only one or two men, and there is music and singing. In Kabuki theatre you see a lot of men, with amazing clothes in many colours.

Bunraku is a kind of puppet theatre. The puppets are often 1 metre high or more, and three people in black clothes work together to move each puppet. Chikamatsu Monzaemon is one of Japan's most famous writers for theatre. He wrote about a hundred stories for the bunraku theatre, and you can see many in Japan today.

Many kinds of music are important in Japanese culture. One interesting kind of music from old times is gagaku. You can hear gagaku today at some Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. And of course many Japanese people like pop music too.

Art and crafts are important in Japanese life. Some of these first came to Japan in ancient times: calligraphy (a kind of beautiful writing), ikebana (working with flowers), and bonsai (small and beautiful trees). In the early 1800s, people began to make and sell ukiyo-e - pictures of geisha, the theatre, or beautiful things like cherry blossom. One of the most famous names from this time is Hokusai. He made pictures of the countryside of Japan, and The Great Wave, one of his pictures from the 1830s, is famous around the world.

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Japan is now known for its modern art too, and in many of its crafts people can see the arts of old Japan with new ideas from the west.

There is art in everything in Japan. Japanese food is not only very good to eat - it is also beautiful to look at. Japanese gardens, too, are works of art. They change a lot at different times of the year.

What about modern culture in Japan? Karaoke is important, of course, and many people go out to sing karaoke with friends, or do karaoke at home.

Manga and anime are also a very big part of modern Japanese culture. In manga, pictures tell a story in a book; in anime, pictures tell a story in a film. Young and old people read manga - there are manga for everything from baseball to love stories! You can buy manga at many shops, and Japan now has manga cafes. In these places you can have a drink, read manga, and watch TV or anime. Millions of people like anime too. Films like Akira and Spirited Away are famous in Japan and in many other countries.

## **Chapter 7. Tokyo**

Most visitors to Japan go to Tokyo, of course. Tokyo is the capital - the most important city - of Japan, and it is an amazing place. More than thirty-five million people live here, but it is very safe, and you can get around easily by bus or train.

People and cars make lots of noise in Tokyo. But here you can also find quiet places - ancient temples, beautiful gardens, and old wooden houses.

One of the most interesting parts of Tokyo is Shinjuku. Here there are big department stores - modern shops with many different kinds of goods. There are amazing buildings hundreds of metres high, restaurants, cinemas, art galleries, and one of Tokyo's biggest gardens too. Shinjuku has something of everything!

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People go to West Shinjuku to work, and they go to East Shinjuku to play! More than 250,000 people work in the tall buildings of West Shinjuku. One of these is the famous Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building (TMGB), by Kenzo Tange. Tange was famous for many wonderful buildings in Japan and around the world. Many of his buildings, like the TMGB, feel old and Japanese but new and exciting too.

In East Shinjuku, you can eat, shop, and go to the cinema. You can also walk in the beautiful gardens at Shinjuku Gyoen.

Near Shinjuku is Meiji-Jingu, the most important Shinto shrine in Tokyo. The shrine was made in the 1920s to remember Emperor Meiji and his wife, and there is a beautiful garden there. The emperor's wife loved to visit it and see the flowers. At New Year, more than three million people come to Meiji-Jingu to pray.

A very important place for the Buddhist religion in Tokyo is the famous Senso-ji temple at Asakusa. There are always a lot of people at the temple, and you can feel the amazing past of this ancient place.

The Imperial Palace is very old too. The Emperor and his family live in the palace now, but in 1593, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first of the Tokugawa shoguns, began to make a castle here. It soon became the world's biggest castle. On 23 December and 2 January, the gardens nearest to the palace are open, and thousands of people go to see the Emperor and his family. On other days, you can walk in the beautiful East Gardens.

There are beautiful gardens in Ueno Park, too - and here you can also see temples, shrines, and the famous Tokyo National Museum. The museum has some amazing Japanese art, and also ancient things from Japan and other places in Asia.

Many people go to Shibuya and Ginza for their shops. In Ginza, you can find big department stores, and also very small craft shops. Some people wear their best clothes in Ginza, because it is a very expensive part of Tokyo. Go to the Matsuya department store and look

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at the beautiful kimonos there. Or go into the Sony building. There you can see the newest cameras, phones, and electronics.

In Shibuya, modern Tokyo hits you in the face! Here you can shop for the newest clothes and music, and in the evening, Tokyo's young people come to the many restaurants and clubs.

You can visit many other places in Tokyo. Go to Akihabara to buy cheap electronics or manga. Visit the Tsukiji Fish Market - people from restaurants and food shops come here and buy the best fish in Japan. Go up the new Tokyo Sky Tree, the tallest building in Japan at 634 metres. Visit the art galleries at Roppongi, or more of Tokyo's many museums. And, of course, have wonderful food. There is something for every visitor in this amazing city!

## **Chapter 8. Other places to visit**

For many people, Kyoto is one of the most important cities to visit in Japan. Kyoto was the capital of Japan for more than a thousand years. Today, Kyoto has big department stores with everything for modern life in Japan. But it is an ancient city too, with mountains around it. And on the many walks around Kyoto you can see old wooden houses, beautiful temples and palaces, and wonderful gardens.

In Kyoto, visit the beautiful Kinkaku-ji temple on the lake. Walk around Higashiyama too. Here you can see the famous Kiyomizu temple, and many other temples, gardens and museums. In Gion, people in wonderful geisha clothes walk in the streets. Some of the most important people in Japan come to Gion to eat in the restaurants or visit the old wooden tea-houses.

An important visit for many people is to the Peace Memorial Park and Museum at Hiroshima. Here you can learn about the atomic bombs of 1945, and see the A-bomb Dome. This is one of the only buildings in Hiroshima from the time of the atomic bomb.

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Between Tokyo and Hiroshima is Osaka, one of Japan's biggest cities after Tokyo. Osaka is famous for its food, and also for its night life. Here you can find music and theatre, but also art galleries and some amazing new buildings. The Umeda Sky Building is 173 metres high, and the Floating Garden Observatory goes between two parts of it. You can see all of Osaka from there!

From Osaka it is not far to Himeji-jo, the best of Japan's old castles. The castle became famous at the time of the Tokugawa shoguns, and is a true samurai castle. And Nara is also near Osaka. Nara was the old capital of Japan before Kyoto, and it has many Buddhist temples. Here, in the hills, is Todai-ji temple, the biggest wooden building in the world.

But Japan is not just a place of exciting cities and ancient culture. You can get away from it all in Okinawa, in the far south of Japan. Here it is warm all year. There are 160 islands in Okinawa, and in the beautiful water of the Pacific you can see amazing fish and sea animals. Okinawa is also famous for its old castles, friendly people, good food, and beautiful crafts.

Do you like walking in the mountains and the countryside? Then you must visit Hokkaido, the big island in the north of Japan. The countryside here is beautiful, and there are many wonderful animals and flowers. In the winter, you can go skiing in Hokkaido, and in the capital, Sapporo, there is a Snow Festival every year.

From Tokyo it is not far to Hakone, a beautiful town with lakes, mountains, and hot springs. Here you can see beautiful Mount Fuji, look at some wonderful art in the Pola Museum, or visit Lake Ashinoko. Hakone is next to an old volcano; you can smell the hot air, and there are lots of hot springs. In the summer, in July and August, many people go up Mount Fuji. They take the bus first, and then walk for five or six hours to the top of the mountain. It is a hard walk, but it is beautiful at the top!

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## **Chapter 9. Japanese food**

One of the most wonderful things about a visit to Japan is the amazing food. There are many restaurants in Japan, and every town or place has different kinds of food. Different times of year bring new foods to the table too. Japanese food is always good, and it often looks beautiful. Japanese people make their food very carefully.

There are many different kinds of restaurant in Japan. You can eat at a cheap noodle shop, or have a drink with some food at an izakaya. Many restaurants are not very expensive, and you can look at the food in the windows before you eat. But for the very best food, in a beautiful place, people go to ryotei. These restaurants have gardens, and beautiful rooms - but sometimes only people known to the ryotei can get tables.

Many Japanese restaurants have just one important kind of food - for example, there are restaurants for tempura (fish and vegetables in batter). In kaiten-zusbi shops there is sasbimi (fish) and sushi (cold rice with fish or vegetables) on a moving table. When you see something nice, you take it!

Fish, vegetables, and noodles are all very important in Japanese food, but rice is the most important thing. There is always miso soup too. Often there is just a little of everything, but it all looks beautiful. People eat rice, miso soup, and fish or vegetables for breakfast!

People at work, at school, or going on a train do not usually take sandwiches - they take a bento box. A bento box has different kinds of food - always with rice - in a box, and you can find these in many shops.

Green tea is an important drink in Japan. Most people like to drink coffee too, and there are lots of coffee shops in Japan. Then there is sake. This is made from rice, and you can drink it warm in winter. People drink beer too, and you can get very good Japanese whisky.

In many Japanese restaurants, you sit on the floor, on tatami mats. Before you eat, the people in the restaurant give you a hot or cold cloth

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for your hands. Then the food arrives. You eat Japanese food with wooden sticks called chopsticks.

Here are some things to remember. Do not stand your chopsticks in your rice - this is not polite in Japan. Do not eat some things but leave others - eat all your food. Before you eat, say 'Itadakimasu,' and when you finish, you can say, 'Gochiso-sama deshita!' (That was very good!) In Japan, that is nearly always true.

## **Chapter 10. Into the future**

Some things in Japan are changing all the time, and others are no different from hundreds of years ago! So what is Japan's future?

One big change coming for Japan is in its people. The number of people in Japan is getting smaller, because people are having smaller families. Women are working for longer and having children later.

There are also many more old people in Japan today. More than 20 per cent of Japanese people are older than 65, because people now live much longer. In the past in Japan, women always helped the old people in their family, but many more women work now. So who is going to help these old people, and where is the money going to come from? These are big questions for Japan today. But perhaps the old people have the answer. Because they eat well and have good doctors and hospitals, old Japanese people often stay well for a very long time. So perhaps working longer, into their 70s or 80s, is the future for old people.

Japan's industries are changing, too. In the 1990s, countries like China and Korea began to make electronic goods very cheaply. Many countries got their electronic goods from these countries, not from Japan. So now, Japan does not make many of these goods. Japan makes more 'one of a kind' goods, for example, the very best cameras, and amazing computer games. Japan also has half of the world's robots.

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Robots are becoming more and more important in the modern world, and again, Japan is in front here.

With more and more cars in Japan, many cities have bad air pollution. Japan is working with other countries around the world to fight air pollution. Japan's car industry is working hard on this; some of their new small cars use electricity, and Japanese people are thinking of other ideas for the future.

There is also the question of nuclear power. Before 2011, about 25 per cent of Japan's electricity came from nuclear power. Japan wanted to have more nuclear power stations. But the earthquake and tsunami of 2011 destroyed part of a nuclear power station near Sendai, so it was not safe. More than 80,000 people had to leave their homes. Now many people are afraid of nuclear power. So how is Japan going to make its electricity in the future? Like many other countries, Japan is now looking at things like the sun and the wind to do this.

Japan of course has many exciting new ideas. The people of this amazing country, with their wonderful ancient culture, are so often the first to take the world into the future.

- THE END -

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