

ESSAYS

Map of the Populations of Japan and the United States and Commentary

By Peter Frost

When Japan is compared to the United States in maps and graphs of this sort, the differences are both profound and surprising.

On the profound side, Japan, with a population approaching half that of the U.S., has a total land area about the size of California. Note further that roughly 80 percent of these small islands are too mountainous to be inhabitable. Also, periodic earthquakes, typhoons, and heavy snows (in the so-called "snow country" of northwest Honshu) batter the country. Geography encourages divisions both between northern and southern areas, and between the Pacific coast and the "back" of Japan (*ura nihon*). Add to this the fact that Japan lacks most of the raw materials needed to make an industrial society, and it is easy to see why Japanese militarists prior to World War II were convinced that Japan had to expand or die. Even today, many Japanese believe that their country is small and vulnerable.

Yet all this may sound worse than it is. Historically, the isolated Japanese islands were spared many of the bloody wars that swept over Asia. Isolation also led to an "island consciousness" or profound sense of the allegedly unique Japanese nation and "race." Island consciousness may have made the Japanese more conscious of borrowing than a continental people might be, more willing to preserve traditional cultural symbols, and more eager to adapt (not copy!) ideas and institutions from abroad. Indeed, what looks here to be a "small" nation is half again as big as Britain; what was once an "isolated" nation now seems ideally located in the midst of the vibrant Pacific Rim.

Similarly, Japan's population density is not necessarily bad. While heavy rains are often damaging, they also permit much of the country to harvest rice, and hence to feed far more people per acre than other kinds of agriculture. Thickly settled farm communities necessarily cooperating over water rights may in turn have helped build a sense of community and the need for hard work. By the 1970s, a population—roughly 7 percent of the world—once seen as "crowded" now appeared to have a large number of highly skilled workers. Indeed, as huge ships unloaded Japanese cars into a willing U.S. market, observers on both sides of the Pacific commented on the advantages of sea transport, marveled at Japan's "work ethic," and wondered if Japan would now be "number one."

When economic growth tapered off after 1989, boasts (or fears) of Japanese dominance were replaced by worries about whether this tightly bound society could once again adapt to a rapidly changing world. Could Japan continue to get the relatively cheap raw materials and open export markets it needed to survive? How could the rapidly rising percentage of old people continue to be properly cared for? Would "island consciousness" allow Japan to become more multicultural, and would an ecology that encouraged people to value (if not always practice) loyalty and harmony make it hard to undertake a potentially wrenching set of economic changes? As this marvelously complex nation continued to evolve, perhaps the only thing that was clear was that the geographical influences suggested by this illustration would continue to be influential. ■

REFERENCES

1. *Education About Asia*, volume 3, no. 1, Spring 1998 is a special issue on the geography of Asia. Both articles and bibliographical references are included.
2. Edwin O. Reischauer and Marius B. Jansen, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) makes extensive comments on ecological influences. So does Roman Cybriwsky, *Japan: Nippon* (Blacksburg: McDonald & Wordward Publishing, 1995).
3. For Web maps, see The Asia Society's "Ask Asia" site: www.askasia.org/image/maps/maps.htm or sign up for the National Geographic Society's "Map Machine" at www.nationalgeographic.com.

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The Population and Sizes of Japan and the United States

Japan

Size: .37million
kilometers squared
Population: 126 million
Population Density: 341 persons
per square kilometer



United States

Size: 9.81 million
kilometers squared
Population: 274 million
Population Density: 28 persons
per square kilometer



 = Ten Million People

The relative locations of Alaska and Hawaii have been adjusted.

Graphic by Mendota Mapping, Minneapolis