

Japanese in English

Kron

Japanese

Though the first European contact with Japan was made by Portuguese sailors in the sixteenth century, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the United States forced the opening of trade with the West. As this small island nation has developed into a great economic power in the last generation, we have become more familiar with its traditions. Many of our more recent borrowings from the Japanese are business terms; others are artistic or religious. The growing popularity of the martial arts has given us still other new words and concepts.

The following selection of Japanese words is designed to introduce you to this increasingly important culture and perhaps even give you some insight into the Japanese mind.

futon (fōō'ton) a thick, quiltlike mattress placed on the floor for sleeping and folded up for seating or storage.

geisha (gā'shə, gē'-) a young woman trained as a gracious companion for men; hostess.

haiku (hī'kōō) a short, pithy verse in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

kabuki (kə bōō'kē) a popular entertainment characterized by stylized acting, elaborate costumes, and exaggerated makeup.

karaoke (kar'ē ō'kē) an act of singing along to a music video, especially one that has had the original vocals electronically eliminated.

koan (kō'än) a nonsensical proposition or paradoxical question presented to a student of Zen as an object of meditation; unsolvable riddle.

noh (nō) classical lyric drama characterized by chants, the wearing of wooden masks, and highly stylized movements drawn from religious rites.

origami (ôr'i gä'mē) the art of folding paper into representational forms.

roshi (rō'shē) a Zen master; a teacher in a monastery.

satori (sə tôr'ē) enlightenment; ultimate insight into the nature of reality.

Shinto (shin'tō) the traditional Japanese system of nature and ancestor worship.

shoji (shō'jē) a room divider or sliding screen made of translucent paper.

tanka (täng'kə) traditional verse form having five-line stanzas with alternate lines of five and seven syllables.

tatami (tə tä'mē) a woven straw mat used as a floor covering.

tsunami (tsōō nä'mē) a huge sea wave produced by an undersea earthquake or volcanic eruption.

Zen (zen) a sect of Buddhism that emphasizes enlightenment through meditation.

Japanese

Most of the Japanese words that have entered the English language relate specifically to Japanese culture, food, and history. These include *basho*, *haiku*, *kamikaze*, *kimono*, *sake*, *shiitake*, *sumo*, *sushi*, *teriyaki*, *tofu*, and *yakuza*. Words particularly associated with the *samurai* period of Japanese history include *bushido*, *hara-kiri*, *katana*, *ninja*, and *seppuku*.

Sometimes a product or concept has been imported into British life from Japan, together with the Japanese word for it. Examples are *bonsai*, *futon*, *karaoke*, *manga*, *origami*, *reiki*, *shiatsu*, *sudoku*, and *tamagotchi*. And much of the language of martial arts is Japanese in origin: for example, *aikido*, *dan*, *dojo*, *ippon*, *judo*, *ju-jitsu*, *karate*, and *kendo*.

Since the 1980s a number of Japanese business terms have become familiar in English-speaking countries. *Kanban*, for example, is a just-in-time manufacturing system evolved in Japan, in which the supply of components is regulated by the use of instruction cards. *Kaizen* is a Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices and personal efficiency. A *keiretsu* is a conglomeration of closely associated Japanese companies linked by cross-shareholdings. *Karoshi*, however, is a rather alarming word meaning 'death caused by overwork'.

How do you sudoku?

*From the ancient culture of the samurai to modern electronic gadgets, cutting-edge business terms, and foods such as sushi, **Japanese** has provided English with some distinctive Far Eastern touches.*

THE **samurai** were a powerful military class in feudal Japan, from the 7th to the 19th century, who carried the **katana**, a long, single-edged sword. Samurai warriors expert in **ninjutsu**, or stealthy spying, were known as **ninja**, from *nin* 'stealth, invisibility' and *sha* 'person, agent'. The term became well known from the **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles**, four cartoon turtles who first appeared in a US comic book in 1984. They were skilled ninja warriors, with a battle cry of 'Cowabunga!' (originally surfers'

slang), who battled criminals and alien invaders from their home in the sewers of Manhattan.

According to the **bushido**, or code of honour, a disgraced samurai was expected to commit suicide by the gruesome method of **hara-kiri** or **seppuku**. As the literal meaning of *hara-kiri* ('belly-cutting') implies, the samurai had to disembowel himself with a single stroke of a knife or short sword across the belly. As soon as he had made the cut his head was severed by a friend or 'second' to spare him further suffering.

Japanese martial arts, or forms of unarmed combat, were first known in Europe in the late 19th century. The name **aikido** is literally 'spirit way', **karate** means 'empty hand', **judo** is 'gentle way', and **ju-jitsu**, from which judo evolved, means 'gentle skill'.

By no means all Japanese terms used in English are aggressive. A **geisha**, or 'performing arts person', is a hostess trained to entertain men with conversation or dance and song—the geisha has been known in English since the end of the 19th century, as has the unsprung mattress the **futon**. **Bonsai**, the practice of cultivating artificially dwarfed potted plants or small trees, is literally 'tray planting', and came into English in the early 20th century, while **origami**, the art of folding paper, is a still more recent import, recorded only from the 1950s.

As the Second World War turned against them, Japanese pilots in the Pacific became suicide bombers, loading their aircraft with explosives, and deliberately crashing on to enemy targets. These were known as **kamikaze** attacks. The word *kamikaze* means literally 'divine wind', and referred originally to a supposedly divine wind which blew up in 1281 and destroyed the navy of the invading Mongols. Today the term is used of any reckless or apparently self-destructive behaviour, as in 'A wonderfully exhilarating night of gung-ho attacking and kamikaze defending' (*Guardian*, 2006).

After the war America occupied Japan, and many of its servicemen were stationed there. They brought back the word **honcho**, 'the person in charge', from Japanese *honchō* 'group leader'. It first appeared in print in 1947.

It was only at the end of the 1970s that British people first became aware of the often excruciating possibilities of **karaoke**. Both the word and the entertainment were borrowed from Japanese, where its literal meaning is 'empty orchestra'.

In the 1990s **manga** cartoons and **anime** cartoon films became popular in the West. Anime was taken by the Japanese from French and just means 'animated', whereas **manga** is from *man* 'indiscriminate', and *ga* 'picture'.

A **tamagotchi** is an egg-shaped electronic toy featuring a pet whose animated image is displayed on a screen, and whose needs are met by pushing buttons. The name is made up of the two words *tamago* 'egg' and *votchi* 'to watch'. It was chosen in 1996 by Japanese schoolgirls from a shortlist prepared by market researchers for the manufacturers.

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The beginning of the 21st century saw many people become obsessed with Japanese number puzzles, in particular **sudoku**, which involves filling in a nine-by-nine grid of squares with the numbers 1 to 9. Its name is based on *su* 'number' and *doku* 'single', and is a shortening of its original Japanese name *Sūji wa dokushin ni kagiru*, which can be translated as 'only single numbers allowed' or 'numbers can only occur once'.

Since the 1980s an increasing number of Japanese business terms have become known in the West. In the **kanban** or **just-in-time system** the supply of components in a factory is regulated by the use of a card or sheet sent along the production line and to suppliers, ensuring that parts arrive exactly when they are required. **Kaizen** is a business philosophy of continuous improvement in working practices and personal efficiency. All this striving for improvement can be a strain for the **salarymen** and **office ladies**, as male and female workers are known—the term **karoshi**, 'death caused by overwork', was coined in the late 1980s.

See also MARCH, TSUNAMI, TYCOON

Japanese words

The old culture of Japan has long fascinated the West and was particularly influential in the arts in the 19th century. The **samurai** [E18th], from a verb meaning 'to serve', and their customs have been a particular interest in popular films and books. From the 7th to the 19th century Samurai were a powerful military class in feudal Japan, who followed the code of **bushido** [L19th] 'military knight code'. They carried a **katana** [E17th], a long, single-edged sword. They might also be **ninjas** [M20th] from words meaning 'stealth, invisibility' and 'person', hence 'spy', or be trained in one of Japan's martial arts. **Aikido** [M20th], literally 'way of adapting the spirit' but usually translated as 'The Way of Spiritual Harmony', is the art of using an opponent's strength against himself. Others are **karate** [M20th] 'empty hand', **judo** [L19th] 'gentle way', or **ju-jitsu** [L19th], from which judo evolved, meaning 'gentle skill'. A disgraced samurai would kill himself by **hara-kiri** [M19th] 'belly cutting'. A survivor of this culture is the **geisha** [L19th] a 'performing arts person'.

When Japan opened up to the West in the 19th century, it was a country effectively ruled by a **shogun** [E17th], a title borrowed from a Chinese phrase meaning 'barbarian-subduing great general' or **tycoon** [M19th] 'great lord'. Also 19th century is the **tsunami** or 'harbour wave'. Further military terms which became familiar from the Second World War were the suicidal pilots called **kamikaze**, meaning literally 'divine wind', referring to a wind which blew up in 1281 and destroyed the navy of the invading Mongols, and **honcho**, originally a military group leader which was rapidly transformed in English into 'boss'.

The success in reviving the Japanese economy after World War II has introduced the hard-working **salaryman**, an obvious borrowing from English, who might work so hard that he suffers **karoshi** [L20th] 'excess labour death'. More recently, at least half a million Japanese have responded to the pressure of modern life by becoming self-isolated **hikikomori** [L20th], literally 'staying indoors, (social) withdrawal'.

But Japan has also given the West many forms of entertainment. **Bonsai** [L19th] 'tray planting' is one of the older ones, as is **origami** [M20th] 'fold paper'. More recent are **manga** [M20th], literally 'aimless picture', an etymology which must displease its many admirers, and **anime** [L20th] derived from English 'animation'. The social might enjoy singing **karaoke** [L20th], 'literally 'empty orchestra', or the quieter charms of **sudoku** [E20th], a contraction of *sūji wa dokushin ni kagiru* 'the numbers are restricted to single status'.

The Japanese also take their food very seriously, and many dishes have been eagerly adopted into English. **Ramen** [M20th] is a term meaning 'hand-pulled noodles' borrowed from Chinese. **Sashimi** [L19th], thin slices of raw fish, comes from *sashi* 'pierce' and *mi* 'flesh'. **Sushi** [L19th] originally referred to the rice rather than the trimming such as fish or **nori** [L19th] 'seaweed' or the hot root paste **wasabi** [E20th]. **Tofu**, borrowed from the Chinese for 'fermented beans', has been in English since the 19th century, but the other fermented bean paste, **miso**, has been known since 1615. **Katsu**, recent enough not to be in many dictionaries at the time of writing, is a shortening of *katsuretsu*, a Japanese form of the English 'cutlet', itself a borrowing from French. The rice wine **sake** [L17th] is simply the Japanese for alcohol.

See also CHINESE WORDS, EMOTION, SOY, YEN.