At a Glance
The most important ideas for you are:

- Japan is a nation of around 3,500 islands, but the majority of the population lives on the four islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu.
- Because of its location in the Ring of Fire and in the western Pacific, Japan is subject to typhoons and earthquakes.
- The Pacific Rim is a term used to describe countries in Asia and North and South America that border the Pacific Ocean.
- From the time of the Kamakura Shogunate, the emperors ruled in name only; the real power was held by the shoguns or members of powerful families ruling in the shogun's name.
- Japan from the 1100s on was a feudal society headed by the shogun or by those ruling in the shogun's name.
- Samurai, soldier-nobles, owed allegiance to daimyos, higher lords who were large landholders and direct vassals of the shogun.
- A samurai's conduct was dictated by the code of Bushido.
- The Tokugawa Shogunate closed Japan to most outsiders to hold onto their power.
- Buddhism and Shinto are two important religions in Japanese history.

What Teachers Need to Know
A. History and Culture

Background
Students in Core Knowledge schools should have studied modern Japan in Grade 2; this unit focuses on feudal Japan, the age of the samurai and the shoguns.

Emperor and the Shogun

The title of shogun [SHOW-gun], or general, was first bestowed on military commanders in the 700s who were asked to recruit soldiers for some specific campaign. Once the campaign was over, the title of shogun reverted back to the emperor. The temporary shogun was always a member of the imperial family.

However, in the late 1100s, the shogun Minamoto Yoritomo maneuvered to make the title of shogun permanent and hereditary, meaning that it would remain in his family generation after generation. This was the beginning of the Kamakura Shogunate [kah-mah-KOOR-ah SHOW-gun-it]. A shogunate in Japan is like a dynasty in China. The term refers to both the rulers and the period during which they ruled.
VII. Feudal Japan

Teaching Idea
Have students do research on the Internet and in print sources to find out what position the emperor has in Japanese life today. They should use their information as the basis for a short report on the modern Japanese emperor.

Teaching Idea
Students in Core Knowledge schools should have studied European feudalism in Grade 4. Ask them to describe what they learned about feudalism in Europe. Use a Venn diagram to chart the similarities and differences between the two forms of feudalism.

At the time, Japan was beset with rival factions, and a strong military power was needed to keep the warring parties in check. The emperor was a child and Yoritomo conspired with the regent (the official who rules when a child occupies a hereditary office) to abolish the emperor's right to choose his own shogun. Without this power, the emperor was at the mercy of the shogun because the shogun controlled the military. In practice, the emperor became ruler in name only and the shogun, or members of powerful families ruling in the name of the shogun, held the real power through the military. This continued through three dynasties of shoguns. In the 1800s, Japan moved beyond its feudal society and began to modernize.

Feudal Japanese Society

Like Europe, Japan developed a feudal society; however, Japanese feudalism developed later than in Europe. In the 1100s through the 1300s, when feudalism was strengthening its hold on Japan, its influence in Europe was lessening through the development of stronger national states, the development of towns and cities, and the growth and spread of commerce. As students may know from their study of European feudalism in Grade 4, feudalism was a political and military system based on a concept of reciprocal self-defense.

The Japanese feudal system can be imagined as a large pyramid:

• At the top of Japanese feudal society was the shogun.
• Below the shogun were the vassal lords, known as daimyo [DIME-yo]. The daimyo were large landholders who held their estates at the pleasure of the shogun. They controlled the armies that were to provide military service to the shogun when required.
• The armies were made up of samurai [SA-moo-rye] and lesser soldiers. The samurai were minor nobles and held their land under the authority of the daimyo.
• Peasants were the next rank in feudal society. As in Europe, they were the majority of the population, and it was their labor that made possible the functioning of the rest of the society.
• Below the peasants were the artisans.
• At the bottom of society were the merchants. As buyers and sellers of others' goods, they had little status. Japanese society valued the creators—farmers and artisans—above those who merely sold and traded.

The ranks changed over time, however. By the 1600s, the samurai became less important as war became less important. Samurai moved from small estates to castle towns and became administrators. At the same time, the status of artisans and merchants rose as towns and cities developed, and trade became more important to the Japanese economy.

Samurai: Code of Bushido

The samurai were the soldier-nobles of feudal Japan, similar to the knights of feudal European society. Their position was hereditary and they served a daimyo in return for land. Below the samurai were foot soldiers.

The samurai dressed in armor made of strips of steel held together by silk cords. More colorful and less bulky than European armor, it provided greater flexibility, yet ample protection against an enemy's sword.
The samurai developed a code of ethics known as Bushido, the way of the warrior. According to Bushido, samurai were to be frugal, incorruptible, brave, self-sacrificing, loyal to their lords, and above all, courageous. It was considered better to commit ritual suicide than to live in dishonor. In time, Zen Buddhism influenced the samurai code, and self-discipline and self-restraint became two important virtues for samurai to master.

Japan Closed to Outsiders

From 1603 to 1867, the Tokugawa Shogunate ruled Japan. Early in the dynasty, the shogun closed off Japan from most of the rest of the world and reasserted feudal control, which had been loosening. In the 1500s, the first European traders and missionaries had visited the island nation and brought with them new ideas. Fearing that further contact would weaken their hold on the government and the people, the Tokugawa banned virtually all foreigners. One Dutch ship was allowed to land at Nagasaki once a year to trade.

The ban was not limited to Europeans. Only a few Chinese a year were allowed to enter Japan for trading purposes. In addition, the Japanese themselves were not allowed to travel abroad for any reason.

This isolation ended when Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy sailed into Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853 and forced the Tokugawa to sign a treaty allowing trade with the United States the next year. Other countries followed and by 1867, a group of lords removed the Tokugawa shogun and set Japan on a path to modernization and industrialization.

Religion

Buddhism

Buddhism originated with the thinking of Siddhartha Gautama in the late sixth century BCE. A son of a wealthy Hindu family in India, Gautama lived in luxury behind palace walls, shielded from poverty and human suffering. One day while out riding, he came across a sick man, a poor man, and a dead man. For the first time, he saw what it meant to be human. He gave up his life of privilege and began six years of wandering while he looked for an answer to life. After sitting under a tree meditating for 48 days, he suddenly received enlightenment, that is, he understood the answer.

Taking the name Buddha, meaning “Enlightened One,” he began to teach others the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Pain, suffering, and sorrow are natural components of life.
2. Desire is the cause of suffering.
3. Achieving nirvana—overcoming desire—is the only way to end suffering.
4. Achieving nirvana is possible by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path to nirvana means living a life that embraces “right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.”

Buddha’s followers spread his teachings throughout India and to what are now the nations of China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Sri Lanka. Buddhism reached Japan from Korea around 552 CE. The emissaries of the Korean king who