

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5

Mount Fuji: a Japanese Geographic and Religious Structure

Mount Fuji is located near the central portion of the island of Honshu, Japan. With its nearly perfect cone-shape and snow-covered peak, Mount Fuji is considered one of the world's most beautiful mountains.

Mount Fuji is an active volcano. Its first recorded eruption was in A.D. 864. Its last eruption was in 1707. Mount Fuji is considered to be a young mountain, having formed about 25,000 years ago. Another volcano is believed to have erupted over the original between 10,000 and 8000 B.C., giving the mountain its present shape. It is the tallest mountain in Japan at 12,389 feet (3,776 m).

The name *Fuji* has several possible meanings. In ancient Japanese it could mean "fire" or "deity of fire." Today it is often called "Fuji San." (When "san" is added to a name, it shows respect, similar to "mister" in English.) For many centuries Mount Fuji has been considered a sacred site by Japan's major religions, Buddhism and Shintoism. Early priests built shrines at the foot of the mountain and said prayers to keep it from erupting.

The Legend of Asama

Since ancient times, Mount Fuji's awe-inspiring beauty has given rise to many legends. In one of them, a Shinto goddess known as Princess Asama resides inside the volcano. She is believed to have the power to make the flowers bloom and the crops grow. In order not to make her jealous, women were forbidden to climb the mountain for 1,000 years. It was feared that the volcano might erupt if her anger was provoked. This ban against women was finally lifted in 1872. On the summit of Mount Fuji is a Shinto shrine dedicated to Asama. There are also shrines to her at the base of the mountain and in the homes of many Shinto pilgrims.

According to another legend, an ancient emperor received a magical liquid that would give immortality. Afraid of its power, the emperor ordered the elixir destroyed on the peak of Mount Fuji. After that, it was believed that anyone who inhaled the smoke from an eruption would breathe in the fumes of the elixir and become immortal.

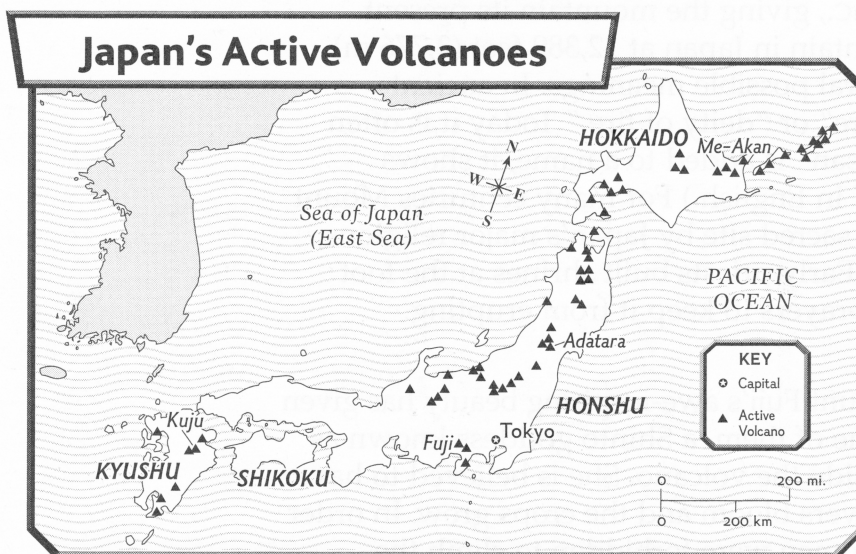
Pilgrimages to the Summit

The first recorded climb of Mount Fuji was in the A.D. 700s. A Buddhist monk made the ascent and described it as a spiritual experience. Pilgrimages to the summit became popular in the 1300s and, at various times, shrines to Shinto and Buddhist gods have been erected on the mountain. Many pilgrims still climb Mount Fuji today.

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5 (continued)

Mount Fuji: a Japanese Geographic and Religious Structure

Since the early 1600s, a Shinto group called Fuji Ko has practiced a set of rituals at the mountain. In the beginning of July, they hold religious ceremonies at shrines at the base of Mount Fuji, officially opening climbing season. Then they make the ascent and worship at shrines at the summit. At the end of August, they hold a fire ceremony in honor of Asama, officially closing the peak climbing season. Today Mount Fuji draws hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the world.



Directions: Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. How did Mount Fuji gain its present shape? _____

2. What does the name *Fuji* mean? _____
3. What is the legend of Princess Asama and how did it affect worship at Mount Fuji?

4. To which religions do the shrines found on Mount Fuji belong? _____

5. Which island has no active volcanoes? _____
6. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think legends about Mount Fuji developed in ancient Japan?
