

1868-1912

MEIJI PERIOD

The Meiji period era begins as the Shogunate is dissolved and the Imperial house is restored to political authority. Under duress from American military, Japan has ended its ~250 year period of isolation and the new Emperor Meiji (only 16 years old-- his portrait when freshly deified is on left) is fiercely committed to modernization, science, militarism and nationalism, while also being fascinated by Western culture and technology. Faced with Western military strength, Meiji's tenure tackled one central concern: "Unless Japan modernised and made herself strong militarily and economically, the country would always be at the mercy of western demands" (Koutsoukis). But to do so is expensive, and those funds were ultimately from farmers, laborers, colonies and select industries-- particularly sake.

MUTSUHITO MEIJI HIMSELF

While the emperor's vision clearly shaped 20th century Japan, analysts often comment that he wasn't an especially brilliant man, an intellectual or a strategist, but he was bold, had a brilliant

retinue, and was determined: he stood the course and made dramatic, often very politically unpopular moves in service of greater objectives. Public education, making Japan a colonial

superpower, building a nationwide rail network, increasing international trade, changing to the gregorian calendar and 24-hour timekeeping, flattening the social hierarchy of the Edo period, making home brewing illegal, privatizing the forests-- countless sweeping changes.

Meiji was famously stoic, yet a prolific poet (~30,000 waka poems!) and had a weakness for drink: Japanese sake in his younger days, Western wine and champagne as he grew older, experiencing periods of despondency and depression in his life.

JAPAN IN THE WORLD

There are good and bad parts to this, the worst

of which has to be the nationalist imperatives of the Meiji era, which would one day culminate in WW2. The erasure of indigenous Ainu and Ryukyuan culture in pursuit of Hokkaido's



"Enrich the country, strengthen the military" 富国強兵
"Civilization and enlightenment" 文明開化

A day that is
Listening only to the sound
Of the summer rain -
How depressing it has been,
Even within the palace.
- Emperor Meiji



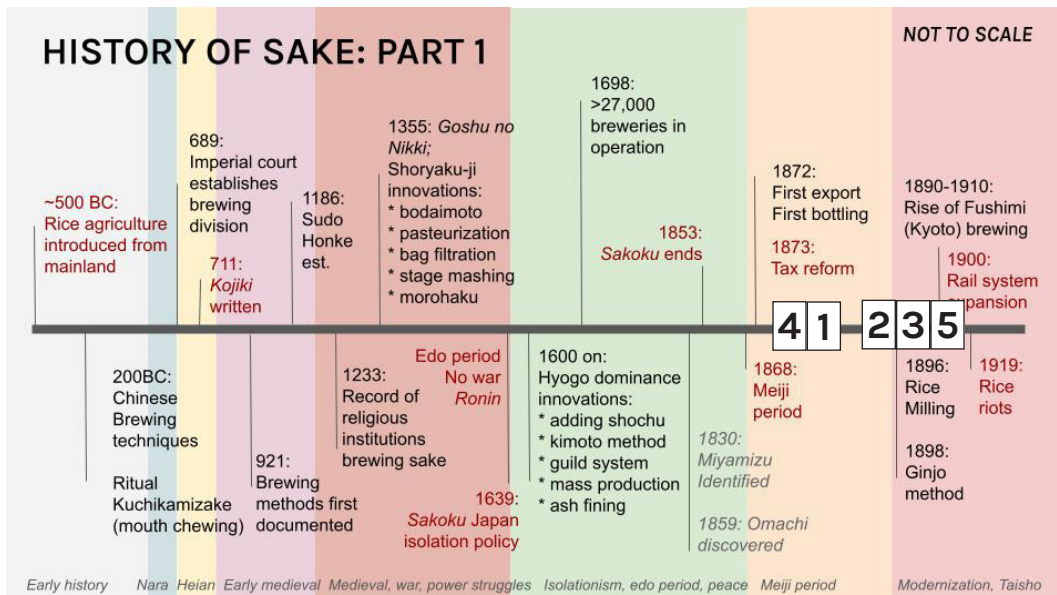
Japanese education, a "more civilized way of life," but also extractive and abusive-- exporting large quantities of grain, forcing men into hard labor, stealing farmland to give to Japanese immigrants, forbidding local culture.

On the other side, international cultural exchange

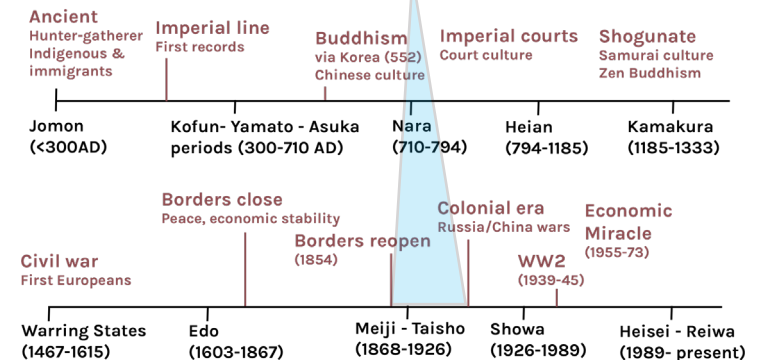
was a priority of Meiji Japan. Students and envoys were sent abroad for all sorts of purposes to bring their findings back to the motherland, from sending winemakers to France, doctors to the US. Japan welcomed researchers and writers, exported mass amounts of fine silks, natural dyes, gilded art and ceramics, participated in cultural expos, ultimately inspiring plays, fashion, vocabulary, travel and research internationally. In London, where a performance of The Mikado was cancelled on the day of Meiji's funeral, the Daily Telegraph wrote: "In the history of civilisation there is nothing more wonderful than the evolution of this island kingdom." In Vienna, a newspaper went even further: "Proudly Emperor Mutsuhito might say that he had created a great power out of nothing in one generation."

SAKE IN THE MEIJI

While adding zero farmland, Japan doubled its rice production during the Meiji & Taisho years, thanks to synthetic fertilizers, new technologies, and new rice breeds. There was simply more rice and therefore more sake, as well as a wealthy urban class to enjoy it. Sake had also never been better thanks to improvements in brewing technology. The Meiji period is a turning point, and the start of the modern era in sake.



PORTAL TO THE PAST, EPISODE 7: MEIJI PERIOD



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