RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO
FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

From Treaty Port to Global Metropolis

The Making of Modern Japan, 1853–2026

A Companion Guide to the Presentation Slides

Dr Christopher Gerteis
Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History
SOAS University of London

Executive Brief

In a single long lifetime, Japan went from feudal archipelago to industrial power, from industrial power to colonial empire, from colonial empire to occupied territory, and from occupied territory to the world's second-largest economy. This final lecture traces that arc — and its aftermath — from the arrival of Commodore Perry's black ships in what was then Edo Bay in July 1853, to the peak of the Bubble economy in December 1989, and on to the tourism boom that almost every guest in the lounge is now, in the statistical sense, part of.

The first movement is forced opening. Perry anchored four warships at the mouth of Tokyo Bay with sixty-one guns between them and refused to leave. The 250-year-old Tokugawa order began to come apart inside a forty-eight-hour window. The treaty ports that followed — Yokohama as prototype, laboratory, and foreign settlement — gave Japan its first rehearsal in every modern industry at once: tea and raw silk flowing out, cotton cloth and firearms and ideas flowing in, extraterritorial jurisdiction for the foreigners who brought them. Fourteen years after Perry, armed forces from Satsuma and Chōshū seized the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, the last shogun surrendered Edo Castle peacefully, and the young Meiji Emperor rode east along the Tōkaidō to install himself in the shogun's former seat — renamed that November Tōkyō, the Eastern Capital. Within five years the new government sent half of itself abroad on the Iwakura Mission, meeting President Grant in Washington, Queen Victoria at Windsor, and Chancellor Bismarck in Berlin. They came back with a shopping list: a Prussian constitution, a British navy, a French then Prussian army, an American-structured education system. Nothing was copied. Everything was assembled. The state built model factories in the countryside, sold them cheap to politically-connected entrepreneurs, and made the zaibatsu. And in 1889 the emperor 'bestowed' a Prussian-modelled constitution on his subjects — a document that made Japan look modern and, in the long run, made it impossible to stop the militarists forty years later.

The second movement is empire and collapse. Victorious wars against China in 1894 and Russia in 1905 brought Taiwan, Korea, and a foothold in Manchuria. The 1920s produced a brief Weimar-style experiment in urban modernity — department stores, electric trams, jazz, universal male suffrage in 1925, and a generation of cloche-hatted 'modern girls.' On the first of September 1923 that modernity was destroyed by the Great Kantō Earthquake and the firestorms that followed, and then rebuilt in concrete and wide boulevards by a former colonial administrator named Gotō Shinpei. The Tokyo guests will walk tomorrow is, in its underlying bones, Gotō's city, not Perry's. Then came the militarist turn of the 1930s, the war of aggression against China, Pearl Harbor, the firebombing of sixty-seven Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in September 1945 a single photograph — MacArthur open-necked in khaki, Hirohito stiff in morning coat — that inverted a century of imperial iconography and told a country it was now occupied.

The third movement is reinvention, and it is the chapter that still defines the city at the end of this voyage. Under seven years of American supervision, Japan acquired a pacifist constitution, a democratic parliament, a reorganised economy, and eventually a baseball obsession. In 1964 it hosted the first Olympic Games ever held in Asia; the torch was carried into the stadium by a student born in Hiroshima on the day the bomb fell, and the Shinkansen had opened nine days earlier between Tokyo and Osaka. By the late 1980s the land under the Imperial Palace was reportedly worth more than California, Mitsubishi Estate owned Rockefeller Center, and the Nikkei closed 1989 at 38,957 — a peak the market would not reclaim for thirty-five years. Then the Bubble burst. An entire generation came of age under what the Japanese called first the Lost Decade, then the Lost Two Decades. On 11 March 2011 a magnitude-9 earthquake and tsunami killed nearly twenty thousand people on the Tōhoku coast and triggered a triple meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi. The seawalls that now run for kilometres along that coast are still debated. And from 2013 onwards, the same country that had spent two decades writing obituaries for

itself became one of the fastest-growing tourism destinations in the world — 8.4 million inbound visitors in 2012, 42.7 million in 2025.

Tomorrow morning we sail into the same harbour that Perry sailed into in 1853. The shoreline has been reclaimed and rebuilt many times over; the shipping lanes have moved; but the bay is still the bay. One hundred and seventy-three years separate Perry's arrival and Luminara's. What changes is who is arriving, and on whose terms. That is the arc this lecture closes, and that the voyage as a whole has been tracing since Hong Kong.

About This Guide

This companion document accompanies the PDF slides from Dr Christopher Gerteis's guest lecture, delivered aboard the RCYC Luminara on the Hong Kong to Tokyo voyage. It is designed to be read alongside the slides, providing the narrative and context that a live audience would hear during the presentation. Dr Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. You can email him anytime at cg24@soas.ac.uk. All inquiries are welcome.

Slide-by-Slide Companion

Slide 1 — Title

The lecture title appears over a stylised rendering of Luminara at sea, with the subtitle 'The Making of Modern Japan, 1853–2026.' The lecture's arc is announced here: a single long lifetime in which Japan transforms itself three times over. The slide remains on screen as guests settle. No spoken delivery over this slide.

Slide 2 — Warships off Uraga

A lithograph by Wilhelm Heine from the Narrative of the Expedition (1856), showing four American warships anchored at the mouth of what was then Edo Bay. The date is the eighth of July 1853. Two of the ships — the Susquehanna and the Mississippi — are paddle steamers moving against the wind, their black hulls trailing black smoke. Behind them, two sloops under sail: the Plymouth and the Saratoga. Sixty-one guns between them. Small Japanese coastguard boats called tenma-bune row out to meet the Americans. A few samurai in straw hats and blue hakama try to deliver a scroll telling Commodore Matthew Perry to leave and proceed to Nagasaki — the one port where the shogunate permitted foreigners.

Perry refuses the scroll. He refuses to leave. He has a letter from President Millard Fillmore that he intends to deliver, in person, to the shogun. The shogunate has forty-eight hours to decide whether to resist or receive them. There is no good answer. And the 250 years of Tokugawa seclusion policy begin to come apart inside that interval.

Slide 3 — The Central Question

A graphic slide pairing two figures. On the left: a Japanese samurai of the 1850s — topknot, two swords, kimono and hakama — from a world of feudal domains, a hereditary shogunate, and near-total seclusion. On the right: a Japanese naval officer of 1905 in a Prussian-cut uniform and peaked cap, standing at a modern harbour with a battleship behind him. That officer's generation had just destroyed Imperial Russia's fleet at Tsushima — the first Asian power to defeat a European navy in a set-piece engagement.

Fifty-two years separate the two figures. A child born when Perry arrived could have seen his grandchildren celebrate Admiral Tōgō's victory. How does a country go from feudalism to defeating a European empire in one lifetime? That is the question this lecture answers — and the answer, as will become clear, is neither simple nor only triumphant.

Slide 4 — Part One: Forced Open

A section divider reading 'Part One — Forced Open — Treaty ports, 1854–1868.' This marks the opening of the lecture's first movement: the fourteen years between Perry's arrival and the collapse of the shogunate, when Japan was not yet reformed from within but forced open from without. Modern Japan begins here — not with a revolution, but with a humiliation.

Slide 5 — Yokohama Boomtown, 1860

A Yokohama-e aerial print from 1860 anchors the slide, with three content cards covering why the port was chosen, what flowed out, and what flowed in. When Perry's fleet left, the shogunate negotiated a series of treaties — with the United States, then Britain, France, Russia, and the Netherlands — that forced the opening of specific ports to foreign trade. Yokohama, opened in 1859, was the prototype. It was not an existing major port like Nagasaki. It was a fishing village, chosen precisely because it was far enough from Edo that foreigners could be contained there, kept at a distance from the political centre. Wooden Western-style buildings went up within months. A foreign settlement — gaikokujin kyoryūchi — was laid out with its own streets, customs house, police, and consular courts. Extraterritorial jurisdiction meant that a British merchant who committed a crime was tried by a British consul under British law, not Japanese law. That is what the unequal treaties were.

What flowed out of Yokohama were three commodities that mattered: tea, raw silk, and copper. Raw silk in particular overtook Chinese output within a generation and became Japan's leading export. What flowed in were cotton cloth from Lancashire, firearms from the United States, opium from the China coast, and — harder to quantify but more important in the long run — ideas. Engineers, diplomats, missionaries, and merchants all brought with them the scaffolding of a different kind of state. The Yokohama-e print genre documented all of this — half documentary, half curiosity. Yokohama was not just a port. It was a laboratory. Everything Japan would later do — the railways, the steamships, the postal service, the newspaper press — had its first Japanese rehearsal inside this one settlement.

Slide 6 — The Capital Moves East

A period print showing the Meiji Emperor's procession of roughly three thousand retainers moving east along the Tōkaidō road in November 1868, paired with a three-point timeline of the Restoration. In January of that year — fourteen years after Perry — armed forces from the southwestern domains of Satsuma and Chōshū seized the Imperial Palace in Kyoto and announced that the boy emperor, fifteen years old, was now the direct ruler of Japan. The last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, had formally resigned the previous November. The civil war that followed — the Boshin War — was brief and lopsided. By spring 1868, Edo Castle, the shogun's seat for 250 years, was peacefully surrendered. Not burned, not stormed. Negotiated.

In November, the young emperor travelled east. The palanquin in the middle of the image carries him; the road is lined with kneeling villagers. At the end of that road, Edo was renamed Tōkyō — the Eastern Capital. The imperial residence was installed on the former shogun's castle grounds, where the Imperial Palace stands today. The telling detail is the costume. Some of the retainers wear the stiff traditional kamishimo — the old court dress. Others are already in Western-style uniforms with brass buttons. The

revolution is visible in the clothes. It was not a clean break. It was a negotiated hybrid, and the negotiation itself is the story of the next forty years.

Slide 7 — Japan Studies the West

A graphic slide on the Iwakura Mission of 1871–73: twenty-two months abroad, twelve European countries, the most senior figures of the new Meiji government travelling together. Iwakura Tomomi, a court aristocrat, was the titular head. Travelling with him were Ōkubo Toshimichi, the most powerful politician in the country; Kido Takayoshi, the architect of the new administrative system; and a brilliant young bureaucrat named Itō Hirobumi, who would later draft the Meiji Constitution. Plus fifty students, many in their teens, who would study in Europe and return as specialists.

They met President Ulysses S. Grant in Washington. They had an audience with Queen Victoria at Windsor. They met Chancellor Bismarck in Berlin, who gave them advice that would shape Japanese political thinking for forty years: international law, he said, is what the strong impose on the weak; survival means becoming strong. What they came back with was not a single model. It was a shopping list. The constitution, they decided, should be Prussian. The navy should be British. The army should be French at first, then Prussian after 1870. The education system, initially French, eventually American in structure. The industrial policy, more Prussian. Nothing was copied. Everything was assembled. And that deliberate, eclectic assembly is the unsung genius of the Meiji settlement.

Slide 8 — Silk, Steam, and Rails

A photograph of the Tomioka Silk Mill in Gunma Prefecture — a long red-brick hall with tall arched windows — opened in 1872 and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the factory that made Japan. The engineer was a Frenchman, Paul Brunat. The workers were young Japanese women — most of them from former samurai families, recruited because their families had lost their stipends when the feudal system was abolished and because the government needed them to set a patriotic example. Reeling silk was not considered demeaning when it was framed as national service.

Tomioka was the prototype. The state's industrial strategy had three phases. First, build a model factory with government money and foreign engineers. Second, prove the method works. Third, sell it to a politically connected entrepreneur at an extraordinarily favourable price — and let that entrepreneur scale it up, with continuing government support. The recipients of those sales built what became the zaibatsu — the great industrial conglomerates: Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Yasuda. The four of them dominated the Japanese economy until the American Occupation broke them up in 1947. Three of the four reconstituted themselves afterwards and still dominate today.

Slide 9 — The Meiji Constitution

A colour woodblock print by Adachi Ginkō from 1889 — View of the Issuance of the State Constitution in the State Chamber of the New Imperial Palace (Met Museum, JP2839). Inside the audience hall of the new Imperial Palace, built on the footprint of the old Edo Castle, the emperor stands on a dais in a Prussian-cut military uniform — dark indigo tunic, heavy gold braid, a sash across his chest, white gloves, a Western sword at his hip. Kneeling before him is Prime Minister Kuroda Kiyotaka, in full Western court dress. And the emperor hands Kuroda a scroll.

That scroll is the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, promulgated on the eleventh of February 1889. It was drafted primarily by Itō Hirobumi — one of the young men on the Iwakura Mission seventeen years earlier — after a further study trip to Berlin in the early 1880s. It was modelled on the Prussian constitution of 1850. It established a bicameral parliament called the Diet, but with an upper house of

peers and imperial appointees. It gave the emperor supreme command of the army and navy, independent of the civilian government. The first election, in 1890, had a franchise of about one per cent of the population: men over twenty-five who paid a minimum of fifteen yen a year in taxes.

This is the lecture's mask-drop. The document was not demanded by the Japanese people. There was no popular convention, no revolutionary assembly. It was 'bestowed' — that is the official word, kashi — by the sovereign upon his subjects. The rights it listed were grants from above, not claims from below. And because of that, when the militarists took power in the 1930s, there was no constitutional mechanism to stop them. The document that made Japan look modern was the document that made the collapse of the 1930s legally possible.

Slide 10 — Part Two: Empire and Collapse

A section divider reading 'Part Two — Empire and Collapse, 1894–1945.' Between those dates Japan fought, won, won again, expanded, overreached, and finally lost catastrophically. The same bureaucratic and military machinery that made modernisation possible also made empire possible, and then made total war possible. This is the chapter the lecture does not glamorise.

Slide 11 — Modernity Built, Modernity Destroyed

A 1923 photograph of the Nihonbashi and Kanda districts after the Great Kantō Earthquake — a field of rubble and charred structural beams, with the silhouette of a surviving masonry building in the middle distance. Before the fall, though, there was a brief golden age of Japanese liberalism called the Taishō period, from 1912 to 1926. Universal male suffrage was enacted in 1925. Political parties genuinely contested elections. Tokyo acquired cafés and department stores — Mitsukoshi, Matsuzakaya — and electric trams, and jazz, and a generation of young women called moga, modern girls, who wore cloche hats and knee-length dresses and worked in cafés and offices. It was, briefly, a Weimar-style experiment in urban modernity.

On the first of September 1923 at two minutes before noon, the ground beneath Tokyo and Yokohama heaved. The Great Kantō Earthquake — magnitude 7.9 — destroyed both cities. The earthquake itself would have been bad enough; but it struck at lunchtime, when thousands of charcoal braziers were lit, and within hours firestorms engulfed neighbourhoods of wooden houses. About 140,000 people died — more than Hiroshima. About two million were displaced.

What followed was one of the most remarkable reconstruction projects of the twentieth century. Gotō Shinpei, a former colonial administrator from Taiwan, was appointed to rebuild the city. He widened the boulevards, laid out parks, introduced building codes, and replaced wooden structures with reinforced concrete. The Tokyo guests will see tomorrow is, in its underlying bones, Gotō's city, not the city Perry would have seen. The earthquake is why Tokyo looks the way it does.

Slide 12 — Defeat and Occupation

The photograph taken on the twenty-seventh of September 1945 inside the US Embassy in Tokyo by US Army Signal Corps photographer Gaetano Faillace. On the left is General Douglas MacArthur, newly arrived as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers — tall, gaunt, in an open-necked khaki summer uniform with no tie and no medals, hands on his hips, looking straight at the camera with easy American confidence. On the right is Hirohito, emperor of Japan, shorter, in formal Western morning dress — black tailcoat, striped trousers, stiff white collar, rimless spectacles — standing stiffly, hands at his sides.

The Japanese press initially refused to publish this photograph. The imperial household asked that it be suppressed. MacArthur ordered it released. Within three days, every major Japanese newspaper was required to print it on the front page. Its effect on the Japanese public was extraordinary. For the first time, many people saw their divine, living-god emperor rendered diminished, human, small, next to an American in rolled shirtsleeves.

This is the moment when a century of imperial iconography — the emperor as semi-divine sovereign, established by the Meiji Constitution in 1889 and sacralised through the militarist 1930s — was publicly inverted. The man standing stiffly on the right would, five months later, renounce his divinity by radio broadcast. The country that had spent seventy-seven years building itself into an equal of the European empires had become, in this photograph, occupied. Almost everything now associated with modern Japan — the pacifist constitution, the democratic politics, the consumer capitalism, the keiretsu corporate model, even the baseball — was constructed in the seven years that followed this photograph, under American supervision.

Slide 13 — Part Three: Reinvention

A section divider reading 'Part Three — Reinvention — From Ashes to Metropolis, 1945–1989.' This is the chapter that still defines the Japan guests will see tomorrow. Between the defeat of 1945 and the peak of the Bubble in 1989 — forty-four years — Japan rebuilt not only its cities but its place in the world. By the end of that arc it was the second-largest economy on the planet, and the country synonymous, for most of the world, with the future.

Slide 14 — 1964: Japan Returns to the World Stage

An image of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, with three content cards covering the torch, the stadium, and the Shinkansen. These were the first Olympic Games held in Asia, nineteen years after Hiroshima. The torch was carried into the stadium by a nineteen-year-old university student named Yoshinori Sakai, who was born in Hiroshima on the sixth of August 1945 — the day the bomb fell. His hometown was ground zero. The International Olympic Committee did not choose him. The Japanese organising committee did. It was a deliberate, explicit statement: the same country that had been destroyed twenty years earlier was now hosting the world, and the person lighting its flame was a child of that destruction.

The stadium he ran into was itself a statement. Kenzō Tange's Yoyogi National Gymnasium — a curving, suspended-cable roof that looked like nothing else in the world — was built in two and a half years. Foreign architects came to Tokyo during the Games specifically to study it. Nine days before the opening ceremony, on the first of October, the Tōkaidō Shinkansen — the first high-speed rail line anywhere in the world — opened between Tokyo and Osaka. Four hours and twenty-five minutes end to end. Tokyo to Kobe, roughly three and a half hours. Those Olympics were the moment Japan announced — to itself as much as to anyone else — that the recovery was complete.

Slide 15 — 1989: The World's Most Expensive City

An image of Shibuya scramble crossing at its peak — late 1980s Tokyo, after a light rain, wet asphalt reflecting neon. Salarymen in boxy dark suits with thin ties. Office workers with shoulder pads. Younger people in stone-washed denim. A wall of advertising already as vertical and saturated as anything Blade Runner tried to imagine. Ridley Scott, incidentally, has said he based the Los Angeles of that film on 1980s Tokyo.

On the twenty-ninth of December 1989 — the last trading day of the decade — the Nikkei 225 closed at 38,957. That peak would not be reached again for thirty-five years; Tokyo regained it only in early 2024.

Real-estate valuations reached levels hard to reconcile with physical reality. The grounds of the Imperial Palace — about a square kilometre of central Tokyo — were reportedly worth more than all of California. Mitsubishi Estate bought Rockefeller Center in New York. Sony bought Columbia Pictures. A Tokyo golf club membership could cost three million dollars.

This was the peak of something — and the end of something. Within eighteen months the Bubble would burst. The Tokyo guests will walk through tomorrow is a city still partly shaped by this moment of global confidence, and partly shaped by its collapse.

Slide 16 — The Lost Decades

A data slide on the long aftermath of the Bubble. From the Nikkei peak of December 1989, the index fell more than half by the end of 1992; at the depth of the global financial crisis in March 2009 it bottomed out around 7,000 — roughly eighty per cent below the peak. It would not reclaim its 1989 high until February 2024. That is thirty-four years. An entire generation came of age under the long shadow of a price chart that would not recover.

The Japanese call the first ten years of this ushinawareta jūnen — the Lost Decade. Then, when it didn't end, they extended the phrase: ushinawareta nijūnen, the Lost Two Decades. The banks — particularly the four main zaibatsu-successor groups, Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, Fuji — sat for a decade on a mountain of non-performing loans issued against collateral that had lost most of its value. Roughly one hundred trillion yen in bad debt was eventually written off or absorbed through forced mergers in the late 1990s. Long-Term Credit Bank failed in 1998. Nippon Credit Bank failed later that year. The Bank of Japan cut its policy rate to zero per cent in February 1999 — the first major central bank to do so — and has spent most of the years since trying, and mostly failing, to restart inflation.

Japanese culture of the 1990s — the fiction of Haruki Murakami, the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda — is suffused with this register. The economy did not collapse. It simply stopped moving forward. An entire country's assumptions about where the future was taking it had to be rewritten.

Slide 17 — Rebuilding the Tōhoku Coast

An image of the reconstructed Pacific coast of northeastern Honshū after the eleventh of March 2011. On that day at 2:46 in the afternoon, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake — the fourth-largest ever recorded anywhere in the world — struck off the Tōhoku coast. The tsunami that followed reached heights of up to forty metres in some bays. About 19,700 people were killed or remain missing. And, most consequentially for the country's political life, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant suffered a triple meltdown — the worst civilian nuclear accident since Chernobyl. The whole country went into a prolonged trauma response that reshaped energy policy, coastal planning, and the implicit contract between the Japanese state and the communities it governs.

What the image shows is what recovery has looked like. A concrete seawall — in places along the Tōhoku Pacific coast these walls run ten, twelve, fifteen metres high and for kilometres at a stretch. A Shinkansen on an elevated viaduct above reclaimed coastal land. Trains were running between Tokyo and Sendai within a month of the earthquake; the full Jōban Line through the Fukushima exclusion area was not reopened until 2022. Reclaimed rice fields behind the wall. A Reconstruction Project sign marking one of the hundreds of public-works operations funded under the Reconstruction Agency established in 2012, originally for ten years and then extended to 2031.

There is no single view on whether the seawalls are a success. They protect the land. They also cut coastal towns off from the sea they depended on for fishing, for tourism, and for their sense of themselves. Some

communities asked for them. Others resisted. The debate is still live. What is not debatable is that the Japanese state demonstrated, again, a capacity for rapid large-scale infrastructural recovery that almost no other polity in the world could match. Gotō Shinpei rebuilt Tokyo after 1923. The Meiji state rebuilt the country after 1868. The Occupation rebuilt it after 1945. And the current state rebuilt the Tōhoku coast after 2011.

Slide 18 — Japan as Destination

A data slide tracking inbound tourism from 2012 to 2025. In 2012, Japan received about 8.4 million inbound visitors for the whole year. Most of those were from South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States — a relatively modest international tourism sector for a country of Japan's size. Then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's government made inbound tourism a specific policy target. Visa rules were relaxed, particularly for Southeast Asian and Chinese visitors. The consumption-tax refund for foreign tourists was expanded. A weak yen — driven by the Bank of Japan's quantitative easing programme from 2013 — made Japan dramatically cheaper for visitors from almost everywhere.

The growth was explosive. By 2015 inbound visitor numbers had doubled to nearly twenty million. By 2019, the pre-pandemic peak, 31.9 million — almost a fourfold increase in seven years. Kyoto became so crowded that residents began to speak of kankō kōgai, tourism pollution. Hotel construction boomed in Tokyo, Osaka, and the ski resorts of Hokkaidō. Then the pandemic closed the country's borders more completely than at any time since the Edo period — under two hundred thousand visitors in all of 2021. And then, as the borders reopened in late 2022, the wave came back even larger. 2024 set a new all-time record of 36.9 million visitors. Early figures for 2025 run to 42.7 million — another new high.

Almost every guest in the lounge is, in the statistical sense, part of this wave. It is worth noting something: the group photograph you would take in central Tokyo today would not look remarkably different from the photograph you would take in central Paris or central Barcelona. That globalisation of the visitor experience is itself a story — and a live political one in Japan right now, as small communities debate how much inbound tourism they want, and on whose terms.

Slide 19 — Tokyo Bay at Dawn

A full-bleed closing image of Tokyo Bay at dawn: Tokyo Tower on the left, Rainbow Bridge arcing across the centre, the skylines of Shiodome and Ginza catching the first light. Tomorrow morning, from an upper deck with a cup of coffee, this is roughly what guests will see. The harbour in front of them is the same harbour Perry sailed into in July 1853. The shoreline has been reclaimed and rebuilt many times over. The shipping lanes have moved. But the bay is the bay. The water is the water.

Over the past nine days the voyage has traced a single long story — from the pirate waters of the South China Sea to this bay. Hong Kong through Taiwan, Ishigaki, Naha, Amami, Kagoshima, Kobe, Shimizu, and into Tokyo Bay. Every one of those places was a node in the maritime system that made modern Japan possible. The commodities moved. The wealth accumulated. The political order changed, and changed again, and is changing still.

What changes is who is arriving, and on whose terms. In 1853 it was Perry with sixty-one guns and a letter from a president Japan had not asked to hear from. In 1945 it was MacArthur in a khaki shirt with no tie. And in 2026 it is Luminara — welcomed, booked, paying her harbour fees, following the rules of a country that now largely sets the terms of its own engagement with the world. That is the arc. It took one hundred and seventy-three years. And it is still unfinished.

About the Lecturer

Dr Christopher Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. His books include Gender Struggles (Harvard University Press, 2010) and Mobilizing Japanese Youth (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is General Editor of the six-volume Bloomsbury Cultural History of East Asia (forthcoming in 2027–28) and director of the Simulating Silence digital heritage project. His research examines how institutions produce the categories through which societies are governed — from postwar Japan to the sugar colonies of the East China Sea. You can read more about Chris at https://christophergerteis.net

RCYC Luminara · Hong Kong to Tokyo · Featured Guest Lecture Series