

RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO

From Treaty Port to Global Metropolis

The Making of Modern Japan, 1853–2026

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Illustration, 2026.

Warships off Uraga

8 July 1853 — American warships at the mouth of Edo (Tokyo) Bay



W. Heine, lithograph, *Narrative of the Expedition* (1856).

**How did a feudal
archipelago
become a global
power
in one lifetime?**



Meiji, Emperor of Japan, 1852–1912 (LoC, LC-USZ62-26388, 1905)

PART ONE

Forced Open

Treaty ports, 1854–1868



Yokohama Boomtown: 1860

CHOSEN TO CONTAIN

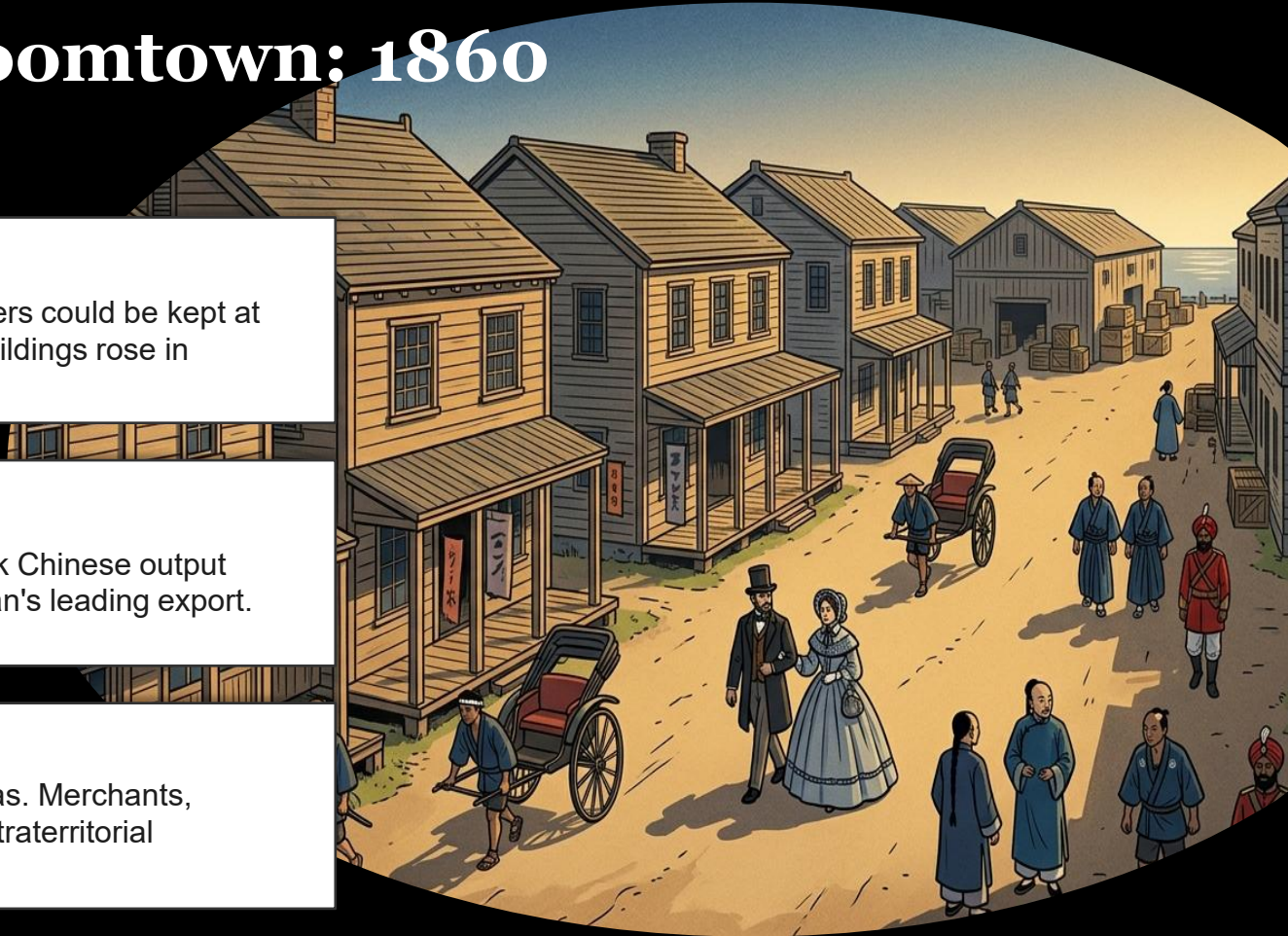
Far enough from Edo that foreigners could be kept at arm's length. Wooden Western buildings rose in months.

WHAT FLOWED OUT

Tea, raw silk, copper. Silk overtook Chinese output within a decade and became Japan's leading export.

WHAT FLOWED IN

Cotton cloth, firearms, opium, ideas. Merchants, diplomats, missionaries — and extraterritorial jurisdiction for all of them.



The Capital Moves East

November 1868 — Emperor Meiji's procession from Kyoto to Edo, renamed Tōkyō

3 Jan 1868

Satsuma–Chōshū forces seize the Imperial Palace in Kyoto.

Spring 1868

Peaceful surrender of Edo Castle; shogunate ends.

Nov 1868

Emperor's procession east;
Edo becomes Tōkyō.



Japan Studies the West

The Iwakura Mission, 1871–1873



12

European countries

22

months abroad

Iwakura Tomomi led half the new government — including oligarchs Ōkubo, Kido, and Itō — to the United States and Europe. They met Grant, Queen Victoria, and Bismarck. They returned with a blueprint for industrialisation, constitutional government, and military modernisation.

Silk, Steam, and Rails

Tomioka Silk Mill, Gunma, opened 1872

MODEL FACTORY

Designed by French engineer Paul Brunat. State-owned. Its point was to demonstrate the method, then privatise.

THE FIRST SKILLED WORKFORCE

Young women from former samurai families — educated, patriotic, and, crucially, cheap. Silk became Japan's leading export earner.

THE ZAIBATSU

Once the model worked, the state sold the mills to politically connected entrepreneurs. Mitsui. Mitsubishi. Sumitomo. Yasuda.

11 February 1889

The Meiji Constitution

"Bestowed" by the Emperor

Prussian

MODEL
(ITŌ HIROBUMI, 1882 STUDY)

Bicameral

LEGISLATURE WITH IMPERIAL
VETO

~1%

OF POPULATION COULD VOTE,
ONLY MEN

Adachi Ginkō, View of the Issuance of the State Constitution in the State Chamber of the New Imperial Palace, 1889. The Met, JP2839.

PART TWO

Empire and Collapse

1894–1945



Modernity Built, Modernity Destroyed

1 September 1923 — the Great Kantō Earthquake

~140,000

killed across Tokyo and
Yokohama

~2 million

displaced; much of Tokyo
destroyed

Gotō Shinpei

rebuilds the city on a modern
grid



Desolation of Nihonbashi and Kanda after the Great Kantō Earthquake, Sep 1923

Defeat and Occupation

27 September 1945 — US Embassy, Tokyo



One photograph inverted a century of iconography.



PART THREE

Reinvention

From Ashes to Metropolis,
1945–1989



1964: Japan Returns to the World Stage

Tokyo Olympics, 1964

THE TORCH

Lit by Yoshinori Sakai — born in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, the day the atomic bomb fell. The choice was deliberate.

THE SHINKANSEN

Opened nine days earlier — 1 October 1964 — between Tokyo and Osaka. The fastest scheduled passenger train in the world.

THE STADIUM

Kenzō Tange's Yoyogi Gymnasium: a suspended-cable roof that made the building a statement about what Japan could design.

1989: The World's Most Expensive City

Tokyo at the peak of the Bubble, 1985–1989

38,957

NIKKEI PEAK, 29 DEC 1989

> California

LAND UNDER THE PALACE,
VALUED

#1

AUTO MAKER; #2 ECONOMY

Tokyo Stock Exchange closing figure, 29 December 1989 (peak not reached again until 2024).



The Long 1990s

Stagnant economy and tough times, 1990–2012

-80%

Nikkei fall, 1989 peak to 2009 trough

¥100 trillion

non-performing loans written off by 2002

0%

BOJ policy rate, set 1999, still normalising in the 2020s

Post-2011 Reconstructions & Recovery

An illustration showing a coastal reconstruction project. In the foreground, a large concrete seawall with a sloped top edge runs along the coast. To the right, a high-speed train is traveling on a bridge over the water. In the background, there are mountains under a hazy sky. A Japanese flag is visible on a pole in the lower right. A sign in the foreground reads 'RESTORATION PROJECT'.

Rebuilding the Tōhoku Coast after 11 March 2011

~19,700

killed or missing in the Great East Japan Earthquake

~400 km

of new seawalls along the Tōhoku Pacific coast

2022

Jōban Line reopened Tokyo ↔ Sendai in full

The International Tourism Boom



Inbound visitors, a weak yen, and Japan as destination, 2013–2025

8.4 million

inbound visitors in 2012

31.9 million

inbound visitors in 2019, pre-pandemic peak

42.7 million

inbound visitors in 2025, new record

Tokyo Today



What changes is who is arriving.

Luminara entering Tokyo Bay, dawn, 22 April 2026.

