

Seeds of the Sakura: Living the Formation of Modern Japan.

Introduction:

Welcome to Seeds of the Sakura. This experience explores the formation of modern Japanese society during the Meiji regime. On your left are exhibits that examine important developments in Meiji era Japan as new leaders attempted to create a modern nation that both borrowed models from abroad but was still distinctly Japanese, and on your right the exhibits follow the experiences of Sanji Muto, as he lived many of the profound national changes. The process of modernization for any nation requires defining a national identity, and promoting a series of shared experiences, ideas, and symbols. The fundamental question that Meiji reformers had to answer as they sought to borrow ideas, practices, and institutions from other industrialized nations was “what does ‘modern’ Japan look like?” These struggles with identity can be seen on the individual level in the lives of people like Sanji Muto. Sanji believed strongly in adopting foreign practices and technology, but also sought to constrain his behavior by his own moral code, “behave well, sleep well.” Whether or not he connected this philosophy to traditional Japanese values, he attempted to define a Japanese businessman as a capitalist that considered more than maximizing profits and provided for the welfare of his workers.

Japan Script:

From 1603 to 1868, Japan was ruled as a collection of fiefdoms under the Tokugawa shogunate, a military dictatorship that was based in Edo, or present-day Tokyo. During this Edo period, the emperor had very little political power, expressed only in the ceremonial practice of “choosing” the Shogun. By the 19th century, the Tokugawa Shogunate was fairly weak and unable to assert its power over feudal lords, or *daimyōs*, in all its domains.

Society was highly stratified, with the feudal warlords, or *daimyo*, at the top, and the samurai warrior class just below them. Merchants, artisans, and farmers were below these top tiers and a class of outcasts occupied the bottom rung with the fewest opportunities.

For two centuries, the shoguns had followed a policy of seclusion, avoiding trading agreements and significant relationships with other countries. However, Western nations were eager to “open” Japan up for trade. This “opening” of Japan helped to further destabilize the Tokugawa Shogunate’s rule and usher in a new era.

Often called the Meiji restoration, this new era would see the emperor and members of his court restructure the country and pursue rapid industrial modernization, dramatically reforming its political, social, and economic institutions by borrowing elements from the models of governments in the United States and Europe.

In 1868, Meiji leaders laid out the path to modernization in five articles of the Charter Oath. While the first four articles proved difficult to define and implement, officials acted on the fifth immediately, “the seeking of knowledge throughout the world in order to strengthen the country”. The Iwakura Mission took place from 1871-1873 and epitomized their dedication to this initiative. This was a diplomatic voyage to the United States and Europe by leading political leaders and

scholars. While the new leaders studied the political, economic, and social institutions of the Western powers, they selectively adopted those that suited their purposes. Political reforms in 1889 led to a new constitution which established a parliamentary government but left it accountable to the emperor.

Compulsory public education was introduced to teach the skills needed for the new nation. The values included teaching a mix of Confucian and Shinto morals with loyalty to the Emperor as the foundation of a new nationalism.

In 1871, the Meiji government granted occupational freedom to citizens, including the samurai, and abolished the early modern status system, as well as the 'outcast' class. The samurai and their lords lost their feudal privileges, while the role of merchants — formerly despised as profit hungry — increased their influence. This also created widespread resistance from rural farmers who suddenly found themselves in the same category as former outcasts.

The enthusiastic adoption of new Western technologies caused an explosion of industrial productivity and diversification. Japan invested much more heavily in its own economic growth, leading to a period of economic flourishing in the country which lasted until the Great Depression. Imports and exports more than doubled between 1885 and 1905 and Entrepreneurs who founded the First National Bank, spearheaded the development of Japan's cotton textile industry.

Among the more radical economic reforms Meiji officials undertook were the Land tax reforms. Landowners had to pay a 3 percent tax on land value to the government, instead of the old feudal method of measuring taxes to a lord based on crop yield. This became a key source of funding for government reforms, but the tax burden was greater for small landholders in low yield seasons. Much of the countryside suffered economically under the Matsukata Deflation in the 1880s, resulting in many small landowners losing their land due to the reduced value of rice.

Frustration with party politics between 1918 and 1931 led to the rise of political tensions. Party politics became associated with corruption and greed, angering right-wing nationalists. By the 1920s and 1930s, political infighting led to what one observer called a "government by assassination." Many right-wing nationalist groups blamed politicians and their industrialist partners for international setbacks and economic decline during the Great Depression. Several prime ministers and businessmen were assassinated.

Muto Script:

In the Aichi prefecture in 1867, Sanji Muto's father, a Village headman read Fukuzawa Yuckichi's *Seiyō Jijō* while he looks after his newborn son. Fukuzawa, an advocate of Western Liberalism and leading thinker at the time was the first to translate the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution into Japanese and would later become a mentor to Sanji. Fukuzawa supported opening up trade, pursuing cultural exchange, and reforming the feudal system.

Sanji Mutō, having just finished his studies at Keiō Gijuku and studying under Fukuzawa, graduated in 1884. He returned home excited to study literature at Cambridge University in England. Upon arriving home, he found out that a relative, who borrowed money from his father was bankrupted by the “Matsukata Deflation” and could no longer pay him back. Unfortunately, his father had reserved this money for his education abroad but could no longer pay for Sanji’s studies. After consulting with Fukuzawa, who encouraged him to go to the United States to be a pioneer of the development of the Japanese, he boarded the *City of Tokio* ship bound for San Francisco.

Following his time in San Francisco, Sanji became a strong advocate for Japanese spending time in other countries and decided to publish a guide to help. His *Beikoku Iju Ron* reflected his experiences in the United States. Muto worked in a cigarette factory and worked as a waiter in a dormitory, while attending the University of the Pacific in San Jose, California from 1885-1887. This guide, based on his experiences in the United States, was intended to encourage Japanese immigration to the United States. Mutō’s *Beikoku Ijū Ron* encouraged the poor and the unemployed as well as students to embark on a new life in the United States.

Upon returning to Japan, Muto pursued a successful career in industry. While managing the Kanebo spinning company in 1894 and becoming its president in 1921, his innovative management style garnered him international recognition. All of these management decisions served both Muto’s desire to avoid unionizing in his factory and his philosophical belief that capitalist business management could also be moral.

By the 1920s, his innovative business management practices made Muto a national figure. He pursued a short-lived career in politics. His most notable success was the 1917 Military Relief Act, which provided federal social security provisions to victims of national conflicts. His frustration with his experiences in politics, led Muto to believe that the Japanese public lacked sufficient education in political discourse and established the Kokumin Kaikan in 1931, which today still engages the public via lectures, discussions, and publications.

At the request of Fukuzawa’s pupils, Muto took over management of the failing publication Jiji Shinpo. While turning the newspaper’s finances around, his coverage of perceived political corruption placed Jiji Shinpo at the center of a significant public scandal, the Teijin Incident. To Muto, this scandal violated his business philosophy that “morality and economic rationality coincided,” rejecting the idea that capitalist success justified violations of moral codes or, simply, “good behavior.”

Conclusion:

This overview of modern Japanese history illustrates the challenges of remaking a nation that is at once modern, international, and culturally local. On March 9, 1934, Sanji Muto was assassinated by an unemployed man named, Shinkichi Fukushima. The life of Sanji Muto intersects with the key challenges faced by Japanese reformers who tried to define what modern Japan was and what it should be. For Muto, progressive ideas and management systems could be adopted from abroad as long as such adoptions followed a particular moral code of accountability. His philosophy was singular: “Behave well, sleep well.” As his work at Kanebo illustrates, he was a capitalist and

prized profit, yet developed a paternalistic management structure that both reflect this philosophy and improved production. Despite his tremendous successes, Sanji Muto remained grounded, believing that men should be honest and earnest. Like the samurai, who followed the ethical code of bushidō, Sanji too embodied such values as benevolence, courage, foresight, honor, humility, integrity, loyalty, and righteousness. Sanji Muto remains an unsung hero and one of Japan's earliest modern-day samurai.