

Teradaya: Sakamoto Ryōma and the Bakumatsu

Sakamoto Ryōma (1836–1867) was born into a low-ranking samurai household in Tosa (now Kōchi Prefecture). Ryōma is one of Japan's most popular historical figures; his popularity shows no signs of fading more than 150 years after his death.

By 1848, Ryōma was already an accomplished swordsman despite his youth and by 1853, he was training at the famed Chiba School in Edo (now Tokyo). He was training there, when he witnessed the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his fleet which the forced opening of Japan to the West.

Seeing how weak Japan was compared to the foreign powers stirred in him a powerful anti-foreign sentiment. By the time he returned to Tosa and joined its anti-shogunate Loyalist Party in 1861, Ryōma was a firm believer in *sonnō jōi*, the movement to “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians.” He was also strongly determined to rid Japan of the social injustices and draconian restrictions imposed by the Tokugawa Shogunate by restoring imperial rule.

Ryōma's achievements during his brief lifetime were impressive. He brokered the crucial Satchō military alliance between Satsuma Domain (now Kagoshima Prefecture) and Chōshū Domain (now Yamaguchi Prefecture). In partnership with fellow revolutionary Saigō Takamori (1828–1877), he founded Japan's first trading company, the Nagasaki-based Kameyama Shachū. He also formulated the *senchū hassaku*, a comprehensive eight-point plan for restoring imperial rule through peaceful means. Yet it is his swashbuckling flair, samurai ethos, and many close brushes with death—including an assassination attempt at Teradaya in 1866—that cement his place in the collective imagination of the Japanese. He was assassinated in Kyoto on December 10, 1867, at age thirty-two.