

The Showa Era

The Japanese calendar is organized by *nengo*, or “eras” which correspond to the reigns of successive emperors. The Showa era refers to the reign of the Showa Emperor, also known as Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989), which lasted from December 25, 1926, until January 7, 1989, which was the longest reign of any monarch in Japanese history.

The Showa era encompassed several major events in Japanese history including the 1927 financial crisis, the Second World War, and the rapid economic growth during the mid-1950s to 1972, a period in which Japan recovered from the ravages of war and experienced rapid modernization and cultural development.

Following the death of the Showa Emperor in 1989, his son Akihito succeeded to the throne, becoming the Heisei era which would last until 2019. During the Heisei era, Japan’s economic bubble crashed and memories of the golden Showa era faded away.

Around 70 percent of the current Japanese population was born during the Showa era and many people have fond memories of this prosperous time. Modern-day Japanese pop culture, including manga and anime, was cultivated during the Showa era—a time when people had more disposable income and household televisions became increasingly common. It was also a time of significant national achievements such as the 1964 Summer Olympics—the first to be hosted by an Asian nation—and the inauguration of the first bullet train.

Memories of the Showa era are still thriving in Bungotakada. The historic shopping district “Showa no Machi” (Showa Town), recreates the atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, a nostalgic period for many generations of Japanese people. The area was a popular stop on trade routes leading to Kansai from the Edo period (1603–1868) through the mid-Showa era and prospered from a high amount of maritime activity. After modernization during the Heisei era, fewer tourists visited, and the once-thriving town began to seem quiet and isolated. In 2001, the “Showa no Machi” initiative was launched to preserve and promote the town. Now, there are 40 “Showa no Machi Certified Shops” offering one-of-a-kind Showa souvenirs such as cookies, clothing, and toys. Some of these shops also showcase a specific Showa antique or “treasure.” At Showa Roman-gura, museums display replicas of Showa era streets, retro games, and collections of toys.