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From Rice to Barley: Whisky as an Imagined National Symbol of Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

As a latecomer to Western modernity in the late nineteenth century, Japan launched the domestic production of whisky in the 1920s. Through the unswerving efforts of Torii Shinjirō of Suntory and Taketsuru Masataka of Nikka, Japan's whisky industry has become a globally competitive component of the nation's economy. Undergoing several decades of effort and wartime hardship, the quality of Japanese whisky has been internationally recognized, as proven by prestigious awards and increasing global market demand. Alongside industrial development, the Japanese whisky has woven a rich cultural tapestry that constitutes multiple factors, including Suntory's creative marketing strategy, a television drama featuring Taketsuru's epic biography, and the rise of craft distilleries. While *saké* (rice wine) used to be the symbolic product of Japan, as its consumption has declined, whisky has risen in turn to the status of a quasi-national symbol. Then, unlike traditional scotch whisky, the salient trait of Japanese whisky tends to be conditioned by terroirs specific to local ingredients, climates, and cultural life or cuisine based on people's palates. Whereas these local references might reflect a contemporary form of Orientalist discourse and exoticism, from the vantage point of the global market, mystification is a favorable feature of Japanese whisky. Finally, in a period of low economic growth, Japanese whisky has grown into a driving force helping rebuild a new sociocultural identity through refined craftmanship.

Introduction

Since the antiquity of *Kojiki* [Records of Ancient Matters] (712) and *Nihonshoki* [The Chronicles of Japan] (720), Japan has long embraced its collective identity as "*mizuho no kuni*," which translates to English as "the rich country blessed with the growth of rice." Intertwined with this poetic epithet, rice has constituted a metonymic as well as metaphoric component of the national body at both individual and communal levels of consumption (Ohnuki-Tierney 130). Fermented by rice, *saké* has also borne the same figurative significance in the social, cultural, and

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even religious realms. Indeed, the presence of *saké* has never lost its prominence in Japan's alimentary culture, expanding its breweries to overseas locations such as the United States and France. On the other hand, whereas its hallmark nature as Japan's native product is inarguable, according to the National Tax Administration Agency's report, the taxable consumption of *saké* in Japan dramatically shrank from 1.77 million kiloliters in 1973 to mere 0.41 million kiloliters in 2023 (3). The decline of domestic consumption can be attributed to such factors as changing consumer palates, gastronomic trends, and diversified choices of alcoholic drinks. Besides, unlike other liquors such as beer and wine, the *saké* industry has stringent national regulations that make it difficult to obtain a new production license for controlling the market supply since the 1950s, the age of economic high growth (Tsuru 25).

In contrast to the native liquor *saké*, whisky has occupied an intriguing position in the context of Japan's global market and cultural politics. As the whisky blender of Suntory Co. Ltd., Koshimizu Seiichi asserts, despite its provenance in Scotland, whisky has attained the position of "Japanese liquor" as it surpassed the (Scottish) predecessors' accomplishments by means of innovation (198). Also, according to Koshimizu, while Scotch distilleries tend to preserve traditional methods, the Japanese have experimented the maturation process with barrels made of mizunara oak, cedar, Japanese cypress, and cherry blossom (197–98). These efforts originated from the insufficient supplies of oak in the postwar years; however, substitute materials have resulted in the creative success, which helped to build the image of distinctive characteristic of flavor typical of Japanese whisky. Such a need-based creativity is highly commensurate with the current trajectory of the national government in rebranding cultural capital, not only popular cultural content under the Cool Japan campaign but also alimentary traditions. As the economic growth rather stagnated over the last thirty years, the government gestured to reestablish the authenticity of Japanese cuisine as the source of the nation's soft power. Such attempts led to the Intellectual Property Strategic Program in 2005, as well as collaboration with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which recognized traditional Japanese cuisine as *washoku* in 2013. These government efforts helped establish Japan's gastronomic tradition as an intangible cultural world heritage (Assmann 118–19). To extend these efforts, the government submitted another application for UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage in 2022, with a hope for a recognition of traditional Japanese *sáke* brewing techniques that includes *honkaku shōchū* and *awamori* in 2024 (Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association).

In stark contrast to these government-based initiatives, Japanese whisky has cultivated the international reputation fundamentally by virtue of its private industrial efforts, innovation, and global marketing. Acknowledged as one of five major whisky-producing countries in the globe next to Scotland, Ireland, United States, and Canada, Japan has gained unprecedented global attention in the past few decades. This is especially conspicuous in international trading, consumption, and even at the realm of speculative investment. For example, in 2015 a single

bottle of legendary Karuizawa (1960, 52 years old) sold at Bonham's Hong Kong for USD 118,000, and Ichiro's Card Series (54 bottles) for USD 490,000 (Van Eycken 100). Karuizawa and Chichibu Distilleries stand out from the crowd with these achievements, which were eye-opening to international whisky markets, aficionados, and dealers alike. Consumers may certainly wonder what factors contributed to such a drastic change. The reason is rather simple: in a nutshell, prestigious international voices began to recognize the quality of Japanese whisky around two decades ago, which immediately had an impact on the status of the national product. The most notable was the 2001 case of Yoichi Single Cask 10-Years selected as "Best of the Best" in a blind tasting by Whisky Magazine UK. In the following years, the International Spirit Challenge awarded Yamazaki 12-Years the gold in 2003, and Hibiki 30-Years the overall trophy in 2004 (Japan Distilled). Given these international endorsements of Japanese whisky, proven also by the growth of its worldwide market, this article probes multiple cultural and economic conditions through which whisky, despite being a Western liquor, has become a staple Japanese product. International commendation stems not only from corporate business success but also the unswerving spirit of micro/craft distilleries throughout Japan (Suwabe 3). Along with large corporate distilleries such as Suntory, Nikka, and Kirin, the geographical spread of craft distilleries established whisky as an emblematic Japanese product in the changing national industry, which used to be largely represented by electronics, appliances, and automobiles. Furthermore, the global visibility of Japanese whisky now symbolically commemorates the history of material acculturation that began in the late eighteenth century with Japan's modernization vis-à-vis the geopolitical correlation with the United States and Britain. For the country suffering from economic stagflation and a declining manufacturing industry, Japanese domestic whisky cannot rescue the national economy by itself, rather displaying rising national ambition and optimism foregrounded by innovative craftmanship.

An Abridged History: Japanese Whisky Revisited

Despite the recent prominence of Japanese whisky in domestic and global markets, the presence of whisky in Japan dates back only to the mid-eighteenth century, the final phase of the Tokugawa Shogunate of the Edo period (1603–1868), when US naval officer Matthew Commodore Perry arrived at the port of Uraga and demanded a treaty with Japan in 1854. Perry brought "a barrel and 110 additional gallons (416 liters) of American whiskey as a gift for the Emperor and his subjects" (Roskrow 29). The recipients of the gift of whisky were Commissioner Hayashi and Abe, Prince of Ise, the first councilors (20 gallons each), the other five councilors (10 gallons each), and the other commissioners (5 gallons each) (Van Eycken 26). The gift served as a token of the new national alliance. When the Treaty of Peace and Amity between the United States and Japan was signed, whisky accentuated the historical moment (26). Those who attended the signing are considered the first Japanese who actually savored whisky, and knowledge of whisky was gradually extended from them to the general public. However, in the ensuing Meiji

period (1868–1912), unlike wine and beer, whisky did not gain significant attention for multiple reasons, including distaste for the flavor of whisky and the lack of government subsidiary funds for domestic production. This is a notable contrast with Japanese wine, whose funding and production were initiated by the Ministry of Finance in 1872 (Tsuru 52). In addition, there was neither technical expertise nor appropriate facilities for whisky production in the Meiji period. A historical episode metaphorically insinuates the government's epochal stance grounded on the slogan of *shokusan kōgyō* (build and develop industries). The Iwakura Mission, a group of high-ranking statesmen who visited the United States and Europe, brought back a case of Old Parr blended Scotch whisky in 1872 (Roskrow 29). They visited Britain, including Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland. However, their main interest in the region was the national development of factories, and they thus paid attention only to facilities like iron refineries. To them, the Scottish cities appeared to be nothing but another industrially advanced region, like London, Newcastle, and Liverpool (Checkland 28).

Various sources and critics assert that Japan's first encounter with whisky was through Perry's arrival, and until the 1920s the country made no attempt to produce whisky. However, Japanese chemist Jōkichi Takamine (1854–1922) successfully made American corn whisky in Manhattan Distillery in Peoria, Illinois, from 1894–95 (Japan Distilled). In the process of fermentation, Takamine utilized "*kōji*," a type of mold commonly employed for Japanese beverages and cuisine as a fermentation catalyst in lieu of traditional enzymes from malted barley used for scotch whisky (Newman). Takamine could have become a Japanese pioneer of corn whisky; however, local malt producers interfered with his project because of racial prejudice against his Asian ethnicity (Japanese Whisky Information Center). If the practical application of *kōji* was realized, the American production of bourbon might have expanded its methods for fermentation process.

Unlike the heavy industry backed by the national government, whisky production in Japan originated in private business. Even within the category of alcoholic drinks, whisky was excluded from the government's subsidiary programs, while the earliest beer breweries and wineries were launched by the government in Hokkaido and Yamanashi in the 1870s (The Brewers Association of Japan; Tsuru 52). Compared with beer and wine, the startup of whisky was slow, partly because the flavor was unfamiliar to Japanese palates. In the late nineteenth century, the whiskies produced in Japan were imitations that mixed alcohol and aromatic flavors (Tsuchiya 110). In reality, those imitation products were used to contain "grain spirit mixed with fruit juice, spices, and perfume," while the producers borrowed such names as "Old Scotch" or "Scottish liqueur" (Roskrow 30). One of the reasons imitation whiskies flourished is the low tariff levied on imported goods to Japan. Consequently, many companies such as Kansendō and Kanzaki Saburōbei utilized affordable alcohol from the United States to produce mixed imitation whiskies (Japan Whisky Information Center).

After the phase of mass-produced imitation whisky, the turning point finally arrived in the late Taishō period (1912–26). In 1923, the founder of Kobobukiya (to-

day's Suntory Holdings), Torii Shinjirō, launched the production of genuine whisky. To achieve this goal, he built the first domestic distillery in Yamazaki in northern Osaka and hired Taketsuru Masataka (1894–1979) to direct production and manage the facility. Torii entrusted the operation of the distillery to Taketsuru because he was the first and only Japanese expert who studied whisky production at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, thanks to Iwai Kiichirō, a distillation technician of another liquor company Settsu Shuzō (today's Takara Holdings), who helped send him there (Clark 19). Through trial and error, Kotobukiya finally managed to release the first domestic Japanese whisky named "*Shirofuda*" (White Label) in 1929. The company's excitement was tremendous, and the advertisement well reflects the sense of pride in the accomplishment:

> 醒めよ人！
> 舶来妄信の時代は去れり
> 酔はずや人
> 吾に國産
> 至高の美酒
> サントリーウヰスキー
> はあり！
>
> Wake up, people!
> The age of blindly worshipping imports has gone.
> People, we cannot help being intoxicated.
> Here is Suntory Whisky, the supreme domestic liquor!
>
> —Suntory Whisky, 1929
> (*Mizu to ikiru*, my translation)

As stated in the advertisement, White Label embodied the company's desire to emulate the West from a conspicuously nationalistic vantage point. Since Perry's arrival in Japan, whisky metonymically represented Western power over a tiny Far Eastern country that needed to renounce its ancient regime and learn foreign technology. By "[w]orshipping imports," Japanese consumers accepted a submissive position vis-à-vis the United States and the West in general. In geopolitical terms, producing the nation's own whisky could be a great move forward in its industrial history. Although the production of White Label began in the early Shōwa period (1926–89), the advertisement can be considered a manifesto expressing the spirit of the Meiji Restoration in terms of *shokusan kōgyō* (promotion of industry) and *datsua nyūō* (leaving Asia, entering the West). During the Meiji Restoration and after, the government emphasized the importance of heavy industry in building a vigorous nation to avoid being colonized. On the other hand, privately owned enterprises like Kotobukiya probed the development of light industries to catch up with Western standards.

Despite mutual cooperation in the 1920s, the two founding fathers of Japanese whisky, Torii and Taketsuru, discontinued their partnership in 1932 due to conflicting views on the growth of the whisky industry. Torii was a skilled businessman

who planned on promoting whisky for mass consumption by producing affordable popular lines that met Japanese drinkers' palates. In stark contrast, Taketsuru was a quintessential artisan who pursued a high-quality whisky that could emulate genuine Scotch whisky made in Japan. Finally, Torii's mass-focused business scheme drove Taketsuru out of Kotobukiya, and consequently, Taketsuru built his own company, Dai Nippon Kajyū (today's Nikka Whisky Distilling Co. Ltd.) and its distillery in Yoichi, Hokkaido in 1934 (Uematsu 294). Although branching out after a decade of collaboration, these two corporate lineages have exerted a commanding influence over Japan's whisky industry and determined its trajectory to date. These two companies' representative bottles, namely Yoichi (Nikka), Yamazaki, and Hibiki (Suntory), are the earliest Japanese awardees for excellence of quality at renowned international competitions in the 2000s. Their nearly century-long effort paid off, and the two companies have remained in an oligopolistic competition until today.

Despite its new mass production, whisky was not yet a popular commodity in Japan in the 1930s and 40s. At the time, it was mainly consumed by the Navy (Checkland 32) and foreigners residing in the country. Unlike Japanese commoners at the time, the Navy cultivated its own palate in frequent stopovers at foreign ports and exposure to whisky as a major international liquor. In addition, the modern Japanese Navy was modeled after the British Navy. In response to the Japanese Navy's demand, Dai Nippon Kajyū (today's Nikka) saw a remarkable growth in the 1940s, with sale volume increasing from 0 in 1934 to 9 million yen in 1945 with the release of its first products, Rare Old Nikka Whisky and Nikka Brandy (Van Eycken 44). World War II prevented the whisky industry from achieving consistent growth, due to the military's demand of knowledge and skills available to those companies. For example, Kotobukiya (today's Suntory Holdings) was ordered to use their manufacturing technologies to produce aircraft fuel, butanol, and ethanol (Van Eycken 45). While such shifting use of resources financially damaged the company, the postwar transition and rebuilding of the company's production line went smoothly since the navy and the military had privileged access to raw materials such as barley. The military eventually supported the company's recovery since they had the highest demand for whisky (Van Eycken 46–47).

Even with such demand, the growth of a substantial domestic whisky market in Japan took at least until the end of World War II. Although Kotobukiya triumphantly released White Label in 1929, most Japanese found whisky almost impossible to drink because of the burnt smell from its excessive peaty flavor (Koshimizu 33). While the domestic whisky market was slow to grow, Kotobukiya did not passively wait for the tastes of Japanese consumers to change. Instead of the immature domestic market, as early as 1931, the company became a pioneer in cultivating the US market by exporting their domestic whisky (*Mizu to ikiru*). Capturing the moment when the country ended Prohibition in 1933, Kotobukiya made an audacious move to the American continent in 1934.

As far as the domestic market was concerned, the end of World War II was a significant milestone for the next phase of Japanese whisky. Given the pervasive shortage of raw materials in general, postwar black markets were dominated by

the low-quality and illegally produced drinks known as *kasutori* (literally "skimming scams," implying a sort of moonshine made out of sweet potato) or *bakudan* (bomb), a mixture of *shōchū*-like liquor and other obscure ingredients, and methanol-based, potentially dangerous distilled drinks. These poorly conceived ersatz drinks were the only options available in the defeated nation immediately after the war. Naturally, "real whisky" was an unattainable luxury for most commoners. Whisky with the manufacturer's list price of JPY 120 was sold on the black market for JPY 1500, the price equivalent to that of 132 pounds (60 kilograms) of rice (Van Eycken 47). Furthermore, those who contributed to the survival of whisky in postwar Japan were the occupying US forces. As early as 1945, Kotobukiya catered to the demands of Douglas MacArthur's General Headquarters (GHQ) and supplied "Rare Old Whisky" with its label reading "Specially Blended for American Forces." The brand catered to high-ranked officers, while for GIs the company created a more affordable brand named "Blue Ribbon" (Van Eycken 47–48). Kotobukiya thus utilized a business opportunity to refocus its own line of whisky production.

The pragmatic approach enabled the company to quickly meet GHQ demands, not out of subservience, but to take advantage of demand for postwar Japanese whisky. In the 1940s, the majority of Japanese consumers were used to drinking low-quality whiskies containing less than 10% real whisky malt (Kawai 87). Without knowing genuine whisky in the West, Japanese drinkers were reluctant to try something unfamiliar to them. Even so, as the national economy gradually recovered, Japanese consumers began to crave whisky as though the liquor symbolized the emancipation from twofold domination: Japan's military government and the US occupation army. As Shimatani Yukio and Koshimizu Seiichi interpret, whisky galvanized people's upflifting sense patriotism while advancing Westernization (30). Then, in the post-occupation phase of the 1950s, whisky turned out to be not only a symbolic commodity for the new epoch but also a typical demand in the domestic Japanese market. The push for whisky consumption was the abolishment of an officially controlled price in 1949, which was followed by the free sale approved in 1950 (Japanese Whisky Information Center). This governmental deregulation enabled the emergence of third-grade whisky, which required less than 5% actual whisky and other types of blended alcohol (Van Eycken 50). The new policy fed the growing popularity of whisky, and in fact it was the most consumed liquor until 1958 (52). Then, in the 1950s and '60s, the skyrocketing popularity of whisky owed much to the rampant emergence of nightlife venues where those whiskies were exclusively served. The most successful bars were Suntory's Tory's bars, which had 1500 venues by the mid-1950s. Central to the success of these bars was the company's keen marketing strategy targeting white-collar corporate workers (so-called "salarymen") who were accustomed to drinking after work (Roskrow 32). The epochal image of model drinkers was Suntory's commercial character known as Uncle Torys, who is modeled after the company's founder, Torii Shinjirō. As the image of the character portrayed in the company's TV commercials, the targeted consumers were middle-aged men who enjoy a glass of whisky in the evening, a token of their masculine dandyism. In the postwar decades, whisky was commer-

cially promoted as an exclusively and quintessentially masculine liquor, reflecting women's lower inclination to harder spirits like whisky (Hendry 184).

In the next few decades until the early 1980s, major corporates such as Suntory and Nikka continued more or less similar promotion strategies for their products, featuring images of masculine whisky aficionados who enjoy their private time with the liquor. A few variations included such cases as Suntory Red, which featured the actress Ōhara Reiko. However, her constant role in the series of TV commercials was a housewife waiting for her husband, and thereby reinforced the male image as the primary consumer of whisky (Ōhara Reiko Suntory Red/Old CM shū). This gender-specific marketing tendency continued in the next few decades, as exemplified by Suntory's popular "Kakubin" (literally, "boxy bottle") and Suntory Whisky Old, two major lines of production originally released in 1937 and 1950, respectively. These Suntory products outgrew to the level of the national whiskies, gaining momentum by the period of high economic growth in the 1960s. Driven by the "*shotoku baizō keikaku*" (the national plan of doubling people's income) proposed by Prime Minister Ikeda's cabinet in 1960, the improved economy helped advance whisky as a luxury commodity. Increased disposable income helped boost consumer demand for non-basic subsistence goods of high quality. In 1968, Japan's GNP and trade balance recorded dramatic profits, becoming the second-largest economy in the world after the United States. In 1971, when Japan's currency market shifted to the floating exchange rate system ("*hendō kawase sōba*"), Suntory gained more momentum by radically expanding the market to the consumers who were not habitual drinkers. According to the company's webpage, "The History of Suntory Old: from the 1960s to the 1970s," the most notable strategy was the "*Nihonbashi Sakusen*" (The Operation Two Chopsticks) campaign that focused on sales of Suntory Old (Suntory Holdings Ltd.). For this initiative, Suntory targeted various commercial venues like "sushi restaurants, tempura restaurants, traditional Japanese restaurants [. . .] [as well as] individual households," while promoting those venues as new loci of whisky consumption where the liquor can be drunk with meals. As part of the campaign, a 1970 newspaper advertisement read: "Ten years ago, we used to savor hot *saké*. . . .the conclusion of a day. Kuromaru." The web article titled "Ōrudo no ayumi '60s–'70s" [The Footstep of Suntory Old] of Suntory Holding Ltd. adds a footnote to the copy: "After the proprietor of a sushi restaurant closes his business for the day, the man savors a glass of Suntory Old, instead of *saké*—this image was deemed to be a dynamic proposal of *wakon yōsai* [Japanese Spirit with Western Learning]" (Suntory Holdings Ltd.). As the campaign was a great success, Suntory Old sold more than 12 million cases (one case is a dozen, so nearly 150 million bottles were sold, the top selling record for Japanese whisky to date) (Tsuchiya 112).

Such corporate ad strategies were commensurate with the decades of high economic growth (ca. 1956–73). People's disposable income was increasingly allocated to commodities of non-essential subsistence, including liquors like whisky, along with automobiles and leisure activities. As though responding to those avid consumers, both Suntory and Nikka shifted their focus to the production of first-grade

(40–42% abv) and special-grade (43% abv) whiskies, departing from the previously popular second-grade (37–39% abv) versions (Van Eycken 64–65). While the quantitative growth of whisky production was apparent (from 58,000 to 166,000 kiloliters from 1964 through 1972), both companies launched their specialty lines such as Suntory Reserve and Super Nikka. From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, the two prominent companies Suntory and Nikka became unmatched rivals, continuously rolling out new marketing and promotion campaigns—a small shot glass attached to the bottles enticed customers as a free gift. Additionally, the invention of the "bottle-keep" system led clients to particular bars associated with the companies (Van Eycken 64). While the production quantitatively increased, Suntory and Nikka became increasingly conscious of the quality of their respective products. What galvanized the trajectory of the liquor industry was the government's adoption of "comprehensive external economic measures" in 1971 that involved the liberalization of imports and capital, lowering of tariffs, and removal of nontariff barriers (Van Eycken 66; Tsuchiya 112). The implication of this transition to a new free trading system was fundamentally the "*gai-atsu*" (foreign pressures) that consequently forced Japan to develop its own whisky to protect the domestic industry and thereby compete in the world whisky market (Roskrow 33). Suntory Reserve's advertising copy of the time certainly reflects its corporate self-consciousness in the global market: "Don't call it a Japanese product. Call it an international product" (Van Eyken 66). The phrase echoes the nationalistic tone of the White Label advertisement published in 1929, suggesting the same corporate consciousness and desire to compete in the global market. Having passed the acculturation phase some decades ago, Suntory now clearly perceives their products as exemplars of world-class whisky.

The demand for whisky grew significantly since the postwar years throughout the 1970s, not only in terms of quantity but more exponentially of quality. During that decade, the production and consumption of the *tokkyū* (special-grade) whisky outperformed their first- and second-grade counterparts. Spurred by new trading policies, the 1970s was another milestone phase for Japanese whisky. When tariffs on imported liquors decreased, the amount of imported whiskies such as Johnnie Walker tripled by 1973 (Van Eycken 66–67). In the domestic industry, the notable newcomer Kirin-Seagram began to operate its distillery, built at the foot of Mount Fuji. In addition, small craft distilleries began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s, thanks to the rise of the "*ji-uisukī*" boom (local craft whisky boom). Notable distilleries that began operation include Chichibu Distillery of Venture Whisky, Mars Shinshū Distillery of Honbō Shuzō, and Egashima Akashi White Oak Distillery of Egashima Shuzō, among others. Despite rapid development of new distilleries at the time, whisky consumption in Japan peaked in 1983, and sales consistently dropped thereafter (Koshimizu 10; Tsuchiya 112). This decline began only a few years before the Bubble Economy (1986–91), which brought about enormous disposable surplus income that could have been spent on domestic and imported whiskies. The declining sales resulted from competition with other alcoholic drinks, above all the increased demand for domestic beer and the boomed

popularity of *shōchū* (Koshimizu 10). In addition, popular foreign brands such as Chivas Regal, Johnnie Walker, and Jack Daniel's were becoming far more available and affordable than in earlier decades. Japan's purchasing power was boosted by the increased value of the Japanese yen in the foreign currency market as a result of the Plaza Accord in 1985. The political agreement among G5 nations of the time depreciated the value of the US dollar against the German mark and Japanese yen, consequently triggering the country's Bubble Economy (1986–91). Alongside this economic phenomenon, Japan faced American demands that Japan increase its domestic consumption of imported commodities (Amano 17–18). The result of these geopolitical conditions was Japan's drastic exposure to imported products such as various liquors—including wine, champagne, brandy, whisky, and gin, to name a few. It was the epochal phenomenon that collectively advanced the Westernization of people's palates, or at least familiarization with those Western products.

Japanese Whisky Resurrected: International Recognition and New Domestic Market

After two decades of stagnancy, in the early 2000s the domestic consumption of Japanese whisky finally began to see an upward trend. A notable turning point was 2001, when high-end Japanese whisky brands started gaining global attention by winning prestigious international whisky competitions. The most remarkable game changer was, as noted earlier, Nikka's "Single Cask Yoichi 10 Years," which won the Best-of-Best Award in the prestigious Whisky Magazine's World Whisky Awards (Tsuchiya 113). Reflecting such global recognition, the International Spirits Challenge Awards established the new category of Japanese whisky in 2007 (International Spirits Challenge 2024). However, even with this international endorsement, the domestic sales of whisky in Japan did not recover in the early 2000s.

The demand for Japanese whisky began to grow around 2008, but not immediately for high-end products. What galvanized the stagnant market was Suntory's Kakubin ("*kaku*" refers to a boxed-shape, and *bin* means a bottle). In September 2007, the company began to broadcast a TV commercial for the product, a blended whisky at an affordable price for mass consumers (700 ml, JPY 1910, about USD 16 in 2007), featuring a popular model and actress, Matsuyama Koyuki. Playing a proprietor of a small bar, she cracks an ice cube and pours sparkling club soda into a glass slightly filled with Kakubin whisky, to make a mixed drink widely known as a highball. The campaign was a great success, to the point that the Kakubin highball became "the go-to" drink for many Japanese (Suntory). Since then, the same series of Kakubin commercials featured two other popular actresses, Kan'no Miho (2011–14) and Igawa Haruka (2014–19). They also played the same role as Matsuyama assumed, with different narrative patterns and scenes where they cook bar meals such as deep-fried chicken and serve them together with the highball. The last scene always features the same image: After serving the clients at the bar counter, both actresses also end up savoring the highball themselves, quenching their thirst with expressed satisfaction. Throughout the decade-long campaign,

Suntory successfully established the image of Kakubin as a versatile whisky in a bottle with a square-cut, tortoiseshell design that meets the needs of Japanese consumers suffering from the long post-Bubble recession. The refreshing flavor of a highball with less alcohol by percentage also matches well with various meals, and its availability contributed to the gradual increase in the sale of whisky (Tsuchiya 113). In addition, it is noteworthy that the success of the Kakubin campaign owes much to the three actresses, although women already constituted a significant group of consumers during the phase of the Bubble Economy. What is significant is the role they played in the commercials that stepped out of Japan's patriarchal convention, which used to dictate clear divisions of gendered labor in nightlife: men as drinkers/consumers and women as hostesses/servers. The commercials for Kakubin stopped portraying the women as passive servers waiting for their clients to empty their bottles. Instead, they are presented as capable entrepreneurs who own their business and consume their whisky whenever they want on their property.

Another significant milestone for Japanese whisky came in 2014–15, when NHK (Nihon hōsō kyōkai, or Japan Broadcasting Association) aired a six-month-long drama series titled *Massan*, which featured the biography of Nikka's founder Taketsuru Masataka (1894–1979) on a daily 15-minute program at 8:00 am that ran every morning except Sundays. Since the early 1960s, the NHK dramas broadcast in the same time slot are considered quintessential national programs and have played a highly integral role in the daily routine of Japanese viewers. As though realizing the dictum "life imitates art," the NHK drama series has helped shape Japan's social perception and national consciousness while provoking a collective nostalgia for the country's historical past. Simultaneously, the drama series has often impacted the socioeconomic trajectory of the ensuing years, profoundly influencing the zeitgeist of contemporary Japanese society.

Given the importance attached to the NHK dramas, it is not an overstatement to claim that the drama *Massan* held pivotal significance for the future of Japanese whisky in the mid-2010s. It was televised when the country was reaching a historical crossroads, gradually recovering from the traumatic post-Bubble Economy years. Simultaneously, Japan has faced the ongoing challenge of reinventing a booster for the post-industrial national economy. At this juncture, the epic narrative of *Massan* transmitted a convivial twofold message—a collective reminiscence of the founding father (and the mother) of Japanese domestic whisky, and a future-bound revitalization of his legacy in the contemporary whisky industry. Shaped into an epic narrative of intercultural marriage, the majority of the drama's episodes comically trace the lives of Taketsuru and his Scottish wife, Rita Cowan, whose transcultural experience in the Far East country baffles her at times. Along with episodes focusing on misunderstandings and resolutions, the drama told an intercultural love story, depicting it as a love of a lifetime that contributed to unparalleled achievements in Japan's history of whisky. In so designing the narrative, what the drama accentuates is Kameyama Masaharu's (the fictional character modeled after Taketsuru Masataka) passion for mastering the production

of Scotch whisky in Japan while overcoming hardship with his wife, Ellie (modeled after Rita Cowan). Furthermore, being shaped into an epic biographical drama, *Massan* extolled the patriarchal virtue through the image of Masaharu's modernist pathfinder. Broadcast by the national public network, *Massan* revisits the genesis of Japanese whisky in the 1920s–30s, and in so doing subtly sets forth a historical revisionist discourse that authenticates Japan's liquor industry as the legitimate successor of Scottish traditions. Such a subtext is somewhat masked by the comic tones of the surface dialogues, vignettes about intercultural marriage, and heroic renditions of the protagonist's striving to overcome all odds. On the other hand, the drama has invited a number of criticisms with its bifurcated representation of essentialized Japanese-ness and use of flimsy clichés about foreignness in the portrayal of the characters (Thelen 6), while catering to the public imagination with actual historical events (Seaton and Beeton 201). The most poignant truth behind the sugarcoated love story lies in Taketsuru Masataka's infidelity committed against Rita from the late 1950s through the end of her life in 1961. Masking this inconvenient reality from viewers, *Massan* dismisses the Scottish wife's emotional desolation and self-sacrifice of her life in geopolitically tumorous Japan in the mid-twentieth century. In addition, the patriarchal narrative of male success obscures Rita's contribution to Taketsuru's business undertakings, which was made possible by her own social networking (Gibb and MacKenzie 147, 150, 156).

Despite the criticisms, *Massan* has borne an important message in national politics. From the epochal vantage point, the mid-2010s was a significant turning point in terms of Japan's economic recovery. The period coincided with the governance of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's (1954–2022) cabinet, after he was elected the 25th president of the Liberal Democratic Party. During his second tenure (2012–20, after the first tenure in 2006–07), Abe's economic policy, known as Abenomics featured reflation, a fiscal stimulus package of governmental expenditures, and structural reforms, thereby achieving the GDP growth higher than the previous two decades after the burst of the Bubble Economy. More than ten years after implementation, although there have been retrospective critiques of the policy (Nakahara), Abe's neoliberal governance meant to rehabilitate the national economy and thereby become a driving force for the Liberal Democratic Party's political reassurance. Consequently, Abe's governance exponentially stimulated Japan's nationalism after two decades of economic stagnation and the failure of the Democratic Party's administration (2009–12). In this political context, it is possible that the national network NHK's program was not an arbitrary choice, but was inextricably linked to the government's purview of the national industry. Two decades after the disastrous collapse of the Bubble Economy, Japan was in a post-manufacturing industrial phase and in search of a new national identity. The dramatization of the genesis of Japanese whisky—a non-basic subsistence that would redirect the trajectory of a national economy already in global ascendance—provided the nation with a perfect motif. Ultimately, the half-year-long drama *Massan* helped shape collective nostalgia for and curiosity about the heyday of Japan's industrial growth and hardship. As indicated by the suddenly increased tourism in Yoichi,

Hokkaido, where Nikka's first distillery is located, *Massan* at least triggered public interest while stimulating the cultural imagination to rewrite an industrial history (Seaton and Beeton 200).

As the drama became a popular national program, *Massan* consciously re-oriented Japan toward authentic methods for Scotch-style whisky production. In the contemporary whisky market, where various countries and regions such as Taiwan, India, Israel, and South Africa compete with new production lines, claiming an authentic, undisputed genealogy belonging to the Scottish legacy ensures Japan's market advantage. Japanese whisky has become another soft power of the nation, akin to popular cultural productions such as anime and manga under the "Cool Japan" promotion initiated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. *Massan* symbolically eulogizes Taketsuru's frontier spirit in the early twentieth century. An implicit "national" endorsement of his biographical drama is not only apparent in NHK's broadcasting but also suggested by the TV drama's opening song, titled "*Mugi no uta*" (The Song of Barley) by Nakajima Miyuki (1952–), who is one of Japan's most respected singer-songwriters, comparable to Adele in Britain. The opening notes of the song are played on Scottish bagpipes, and the lyrics figuratively celebrate the life of the heroine Ellie, whose image is synchronized with the barley traveling from Scotland to Japan. Through the song and the visuals in the form of shadow puppets of the plant, she yearns for her homeland and is yet determines to grow in the soil of the cultural "other" with her beloved partner. The song narrates Japan's acculturation to whisky production, which literally involved the Scottish transmission of knowledge, Japanese acquisition of methods, and the physical and psychological perseverance of both. Composed and sung by the national diva Nakajima and played every morning on the national channel, the uplifting song elevated the collective infatuation with the hitherto little-known history of Japanese whisky. The tone of the lyrics and melody line remind the audience of the significance of whisky for Japan. While invoking the industrial past, the drama implicitly marks Japan's future-bound determination to sustain the excellence of its domestic products. Given these implications, it is worthwhile to revisit the lyrics of the opening theme in their entirety here:

なつかしい人々　なつかしい風景
その総てと離れても　あなたと歩きたい
嵐吹く大地も　嵐吹く時代も
陽射しを見上げるように　あなたを見つめたい
麦に翼はなくても　歌に翼があるのなら
伝えておくれ故郷へ　ここで生きていくと
麦は泣き　麦は咲き　明日へ育ってゆく

大好きな人々　大好きな明け暮れ
新しい「大好き」を　あなたと探したい
私たちは出会い　私たちは惑い
いつか信じる日を経て　一本の麦になる

空よ風よ聞かせてよ　私は誰に似てるだろう
生まれた国　育つ国　愛する人の国
麦は泣き　麦は咲き　明日へ育ってゆく

The people I long for, the scenery I long for
Even if separating from all of them, I want to walk with you
Even when I live on the stormy land, even when I live in a turbulent epoch
As though looking up to the sunshine, I want to look on you
Even if the barley doesn't have wings, if the song has wings
Please pass on the message to my homeland that I am determined to live here
The barley cries, the barley blooms, and it keeps growing to tomorrow

The people I love the most, the dawn and the dusk I love the most
I want to look for the new "foremost love" with you
We meet, we are bewildered
Someday, going through the day, we believe we will become a single barley
Oh, the sky and the wind, please tell me whom I resemble
The country where I was born, the country I am growing in, the country of the person I love
The barley cries, the barley blooms, and it keeps growing to tomorrow
(My translation)

The New Era of Craft Distilleries and Beyond

While the industrial past has been nostalgically commemorated by the drama *Massan*, Japanese whisky has observed the advent of a new era since 2016, conspicuous for the rise of nationwide craft distilleries. Despite the size of the country being slightly smaller than the state of California (Japan: 377,962 km2; California: 423,967 km2) (the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco), as of September 2023, 81 distilleries are in operation and producing whisky across Japan, with the majority being small-scaled craft distilleries. Additionally, including distilleries under construction or preparation, the total number amounts to 86 (Japanese Whisky Dictionary), a doubled figure since the 2010s. In the past few years, new micro-distilleries have opened and launched almost every month, and this trend is expected to continue for at least the next few years. While the profusion of distilleries predicts the growth of the market, bandwagon participation in the industry might lead to oversaturation of the market. On the other hand, since major brand whiskies of Suntory and Nikka such as Hibiki, Yamazaki, and Yoichi have faced a serious shortage of malt in the past several years, the new distilleries might soon fill any gap in market demands for Japanese whisky.

Then, our final inquiry concerns the rationale for the *raison d'être* of Japanese whisky in the contemporary global liquor well as cultural market. As a product originally branching off from Scotch whisky, how can it claim authenticity while sustaining a solid market demand, without being considered a merely affordable substitute for well-established Scotch brands such as Macallan, Glenfiddich, or

Glenmorangie? One of the most salient and original characteristics of Japanese whisky is its common use of *mizunara* oak casks, a type of oak that transmits aromatic flavor of sandalwood or aloeswood to the distilled new pot (Tsuchiya 196). Given that whisky is cultivated mainly through the aging process, the material for the barrels and the ways they are charred lend Japanese whisky the discerning aroma that reverberates in both nostrils and tongue. This aromatic note is noticeably unique to Japanese whisky because *mizunara* oak is not used elsewhere; for aging processes, Scotch mainly uses bourbon or sherry casks, while American bourbon has to use a new cask for aging new pots. Renowned whisky connoisseurs/critic David Broom describes his sensory experience of Japanese whisky as being "aromatic[ally] intens[e]" and oxymoronically "vivid yet delicate" as well as "subtly powerful." The flavors are "ordered, complex and seamless on the tongue," accentuated by "a clarity and precision" (7). Ultimately, he admits that his sensory encounter with Japanese whisky has "obsesse[d]" him for many years (7). These laudatory remarks about Japanese whisky may sound like typical contemporary Orientalist discourse, as it singles out a regional product whose benefits might be universally available. The commentator might be responding to a geographical exoticism deeply rooted in the Western imagination of the Far East. On the other hand, the conditions described by Broom could objectively define the characteristics of Japanese whisky to a degree. Unlike wine, whose *terroir*—local landscapes or climates that determine the character of grapes—is deemed essential, what constitutes the personality of whisky is not necessarily local soil and other factors regarding ingredients, but rather the process of maturation (Koshimizu 46).

However, as though refuting the general assumption that individual characteristics of whisky develop from the maturation process, Broom stresses the significance of locality in determining the quality of whisky. The product is affected not only by ingredients such as water and barley, but also the local climate, landscape, people's palates, and manner of consumption (8). Speculating that what connects these components is the craftmanship of "*shokunin*, master artisans" (8), Broom alludes to Japanese dedication to craft as the foremost factor in the quality of whiskies. This is a radical contrast to today's lamentable reality where, again according to Bloom, "whisky is reduced to little more than tasting notes and statistics about process" (8). Given that the term "craftmanship" could be applicable to any distiller, Broom's dictum still leaves space for mystification and a hint of his personal attachment to Japanese products that escape objective assessment. Even so, while no objectivity might account for sensory factors like palates, a coordination of craftmanship with local ingredients such as water and barley seems a focal point of distinction. Japan's serious participation in the well-established whisky market implicitly acknowledges whisky as a *lingua franca* (or, more precisely, *liquorem franca*) of alcoholic drinks across the globe. This adaptation of a common language without stubbornly clinging to the locally declining tradition of *saké* might revamp Japan's legacy of craftmanship in the liquor industry. In any case, in an age of declining population and post-manufacturing, whisky might catalyze a new trajectory for Japan's economic identity.

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