Soon after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan dramatically expanded green tea production—especially of high-quality sencha—to meet demand from the United States, then a green tea consuming nation. This presentation will explain how that production helped to ease social tensions following the conflicts and reforms of the 1860s and how the tea trade played an important role in Japan’s overall foreign trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It will also detail the ways in which a change in American tastes—the embrace in the 1920s of black teas produced in South Asia—brought a decline in Japanese tea exports to the United States. Facing a glut, Japanese tea merchants aggressively marketed sencha at home for the first time, emphasizing its health benefits. As a result, more Japanese came to consume sencha on a daily basis, helping to make it Japan’s definitive daily beverage.