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Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration



BY MARIUS B. JANSEN



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Sakamoto Ryōma
and the
Meiji Restoration



for Jean

PREFACE TO THE MORNINGSIDE EDITION

IT IS gratifying to know that there is enough interest in Sakamoto Ryōma to justify this printing, now thirty-three years after the book first appeared. For the historian of Japan's modern history, this provides some evidence of changes in Japan and of the way Japanese view their past.

When I began work on Sakamoto in the 1950s he was not very high in the consciousness of most Japanese. They were keenly aware of the changes that war and occupation had brought to their country, but frequently inclined to see the Meiji Restoration as prelude to the ruinous rounds of militarism and war that had dominated their lives and destroyed their cities. The participants and leaders in the upheaval that led to the Meiji Restoration were at best shadowy figures; prewar education had measured their merit by their contribution to imperial modernization, and among them representatives of minor domains like Tosa took second place to the stalwarts of the Satsuma and Chōshū who had dominated the modern governments and armed services.

Shiba Ryōtarō, whose best-selling historical novel about Sakamoto did much to change these attitudes toward Sakamoto, recently wrote that from the standpoint of the Meiji imperial state Sakamoto was more likely to seem a troublemaker, or even rebel, than hero. He violated filial piety by deserting his ancestral home and family, and he violated canons of loyalty by walking out on his feudal lord and his domain. His proposals could be linked to the movement for freedom and democratic rights. And he was not from Satsuma or Chōshū, the domains that provided the leaders of the Meiji state. Official textbooks moved smoothly from Sakamoto's contemporaries Saigō, Kido, and Ōkubo to the Meiji emperor's senior statesmen, Itō and Yamagata. To be sure, Sakamoto and Nakaoka were given imperial rank posthumously in 1891, but that hardly compared with the praises heaped on their counterparts from Satsuma and Chōshū. Nobody needed a rōnin from Tosa.

Moreover, even when Sakamoto did make the textbooks by appearing to the Meiji Express on the eve of the Battle of

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Tsushima Straits in the Russo-Japanese War, the story had some curious elements. As it is described in this book, the empress must have been worrying about the outcome of the battle, for she dreamed that someone appeared and told her that he was "a person who had played some part in late Tokugawa times, Sakamoto Ryōma from Tosa," and that she need not be concerned about the battle at hand.

Now the interesting thing about this is that the empress had clearly never heard of Sakamoto. When she asked who the figure in her dream might have been, the court official Tanaka Kōken, who was from Tosa, had to assure her that there had indeed been someone by that name. Mr. Shiba concludes that since conversations like that seldom got outside the palace, it is reasonable to think that the Tosa people in the palace saw to it that it did become known. At any rate, although the story quickly qualified Ryōma for the pantheon in the Japanese empire of armies and navies it remained a rather trite fable, and it gave little indication of what Sakamoto's real contribution might have been.

The fact is that outside of Tosa, where he was part of local lore, Sakamoto was relatively little spoken of; his image was that of a swashbuckler and a stormy petrel whose early death prevented him from exercising much influence on the modern state. In the 1950s it often seemed to me that my research topic, when disclosed, tended to draw the kind of compassionate and bemused response that bright graduate students at Harvard or Columbia might have given an earnest young Japanese who said that he was working on the political thought of Davy Crockett.

Today things are very different, for Sakamoto is one of the most popular heroes of the Restoration times. What produced this change? First of all, the end of imperial Japan and its replacement by a democratic and peaceful order has made for new interest in people who were nonconformists in the old society. The generals and admirals of the old textbooks have had to make way for other forerunners of the new Japan.

Second, the scholarly base for reassessment has grown prodigiously thanks to the labor of a devoted group of local historians in Tosa. Hirao Michio, whose name appears frequently

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in this volume and a scholar to whom I remain deeply indebted, continued to write until his death in 1979, sharpening and refining his knowledge of Tosa history in a bibliography of notes, articles, and books that numbers close to 2,500 items. His earlier biography of Sakamoto was reissued several times, and in 1966 his *Ryōma no subete* (All about Ryōma) added to that coverage. Mr. Hirao and Hamada Kamekichi also collaborated in a translation of this book that has gone through many printings from Jiji Press. Hirao's collaborator Miyaji Saichirō continued his work by completing a massive *Sakamoto Ryōma zenshū* (Complete Writings of Sakamoto Ryōma) that appeared in 1988; it now becomes the standard documentary source. Mr. Miyaji went on to do the same for Nakaoka Shintarō in *Nakaoka Shintarō zenshū*, which appeared in 1991. The widest swath, however, was surely that cut by Shiba Ryōtarō's *Ryōma ga yuku* (1966), a brilliant historical novel that brought Sakamoto fully into the public domain. Since then a flood of illustrated books, magazines, and articles for all age levels has continued to be published.

The diffusion of this image was further speeded by the technology of our information society. The Sakamoto boom began during the great age of Japanese cinema. The director Itō Daisuke's *Bakumatsu* (End Tokugawa, 1970) portrayed Sakamoto as a revolutionary, full of admiration for Western technology and imbued with democracy. Had he made the film before the war, Itō said, he would not have been able to show how critical of his society Sakamoto really was. Gosho Heinosuke, director of *Firefly Light* (Hotarubi, 1958) focused on the events of the incident at the Teradaya, in which Sakamoto, by taking up with Oryō, implied equality between classes and between the sexes. In Shinoda Masahiro's *Assassination* (Ansatsu, 1964), Sakamoto enters as the friend of the assassin of the Tairō, Ii Naosuke, in 1860. Perhaps most famously, Kuroki Kazuo's *Assassination of Ryōma* (Ryōma no ansatsu, 1974), focused on the futility of individual effort in a time of revolutionary betrayal.¹ These film writers uti-

¹See Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan Through Its Cinema* (N.Y., Pantheon Books, 1976), pp. 61-77.

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lized Sakamoto to make of him a proponent of their own progressive and often revolutionary ideology, but they were able to do this because he had become an attractive and progressive historical figure.

Television did the rest. As Japan recovered confidence and wealth its media returned to the events of Meiji to seek a starting point, and a series of highly successful historical runs made household figures of Sakamoto Ryōma and other heroes of the Meiji Restoration.

The “new” Sakamoto stood out for his youth and courage; he was optimistic and quick to accept new ideas. A pistol was better than a sword, and commerce better than war. Councils would be better than rule by a hereditary elite, and democracy more viable than daimyo.

As a result Sakamoto emerged as an attractive and believable personality for postwar Japanese, especially young Japanese. For some years the curator of the Kyoto Ryōzen Historical Museum, which is rich in materials relating to the Meiji Restoration, was receiving, and answering, letters from young people who wrote to “Sakamoto Ryōma” to ask advice for personal problems. Sometimes people even telephoned the museum and asked to speak to “Mr. Sakamoto”. As a *Yomiuri* reporter explained it, “a generation that has grown up knowing Sakamoto in the era of film, television, and novels, seems to be able to think of him as a direct contemporary.” What Ryōma might have thought of some of the advice, as when a lonely youngster would be told to “try joining some clubs” is another matter.

More substantial is the surge of private and public effort to memorialize the man and his significance. In Kōchi a splendid new public museum chronicles the events of the Movement for Freedom and People’s Rights of the 1880s; near the Kōchi airport a small private museum records the stages of Sakamoto’s life with tableaux whose English explanations are taken from this book. Most recently, on the Katsurahama beach, close to the great statue of Sakamoto that was erected by private subscription of young men’s organizations in the 1920s, Kōchi Prefecture dedicated a Sakamoto Ryōma Memorial Hall in 1991. A striking glass structure pointing to the

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ocean beyond, it stands as witness to the image of a Japan open to the world, its trade and ideas. That image has come to be the legacy of Sakamoto Ryōma for contemporary Japan.

Marius B. Jansen

Princeton, August 1994

INTRODUCTION

IN ASIA, as in the Western world, the middle decades of the nineteenth century were filled with unrest and violence. Movements were in progress whose end result was fully as momentous as were the ending of slavery in America and serfdom in Russia. But the differences were equally important, for the Asian developments were speeded and affected in varying degree by the intervention of the West. Even where, as in Japan, the West impinged on traditional society with no thought of conquest, its evidence of the vitality of progress, constitutionalism, and industrialization provided new formulations which attracted or repulsed men who wanted change. In India the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-1859 brought on the full measure of English control. In China the great Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864 utilized a bizarre version of Christian doctrine to try to drive out the Manchu rulers and erect a new theocratic and communist state. The Taipings failed to win the support of the Chinese elite, but their military successes produced a setting in which foreign technology first became acceptable, because it was essential, to Chinese leaders.

At mid-century Japan too faced the Western threat. Japan's crisis came after those of India and China, and foreign conquest was never as real a danger as Japanese leaders thought. The decade between the negotiation of a commercial treaty with Townsend Harris in 1858 and the fall of the military government of the Tokugawa shogun in 1867 saw animosities and tensions that had long been present burst into flame, however, and the intellectual and political ferment of those years produced the Meiji Restoration.

The Restoration led to a unified national state which struggled to achieve international equality and leadership in Asia. The successes of the Japanese leaders had an effect on neighboring Asian societies as stimulating as was that of revolutionary France on Europe. Sun Yat-sen, K'ang Yu-wei, Kim Ok-kiun, Emilio Aguinaldo, Subhas Chandra Bose, and many others dreamed of creating in their own countries something of the drive and unity that had first established in Japan the equality of Asian with European strength and ability. Many of these men credited the Japanese achievements to the colorful and dedicated nationalists who had led the Restoration movement, and as a result the Restoration

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activists became heroes for Asians who aspired to approximate their deeds. Within Japan the Meiji Restoration leaders also served as examples of a new and ideal type in politics: that of the idealistic, individualistic, and courageous patriot who gave his all for the Imperial cause—the *shishi*. In the days before World War II in Japan the young officers of the armed services laid claim to this tradition as they flouted conventional standards of morality and discipline in their efforts to carry out a twentieth century “Shōwa Restoration.”

In view of the importance and the interest of the Japanese revolution, it is astonishing that Western scholarship has given it so little attention. In recent years Western writers, following the lead of social scientists in Japan, have concerned themselves more with the “motive forces” and with the significance of the Restoration than with the changes themselves and the men who helped bring them about. These are certainly vital concerns, but they ought properly to come after, and not before, descriptions of the events themselves.

In this book I have chosen to tell the Restoration story by examining the career and thought of Sakamoto Ryōma and, to a lesser extent, Nakaoka Shintarō. Both men were from Tosa, one of the fiefs that played an important role in Restoration politics. Both were of relatively low rank, and neither was at all at home in the circles of Japan’s “Western experts.” Tosa, their home, contributed to, but did not lead the Restoration process, so that regional power politics and ambition were at first less involved in their education in world affairs than was the case with their counterparts in more powerful fiefs. Sakamoto and Nakaoka were murdered shortly after the shogun’s resignation in 1867, and our view of their Restoration activities is not colored by their subsequent eminence or failure. Nevertheless they had important and exciting roles in the Restoration drama. Sakamoto’s colorful career, in fact, has drawn to it the talents of so many Japanese authors and playwrights that romance has to some degree come to overshadow fact. The foreign scholar, however, is less affected by this; published sources, which retain enough flavor of personality to explain the man’s attraction for biographers and authors, provide abundant opportunity to sift fiction from fact.

I first became interested in the *shishi*, these “men of high pur-

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pose," in research on the Chinese revolution. In later Meiji days the "China *rōnin*," as the Japanese adventurers called themselves, and their Chinese friends like Sun Yat-sen compared themselves to the Restoration heroes. Further investigation in the democratic movement of nineteenth century Japan, a movement dominated by men from Tosa, led me to the Tosa scene in Restoration days. It is an area of tremendous interest and opportunity, and one which has hardly been touched. So few historians have concerned themselves with this, one of the great themes of recent world history, that my subject, Sakamoto Ryōma, has hitherto been scarcely mentioned in the Western literature on Japan. In telling his story I have necessarily had to concern myself with the way in which the Restoration came about, instead of discussing, in the terms common in Japan today, why it had to come. No doubt some light on those reasons has nonetheless emerged; the idealism, dedication, and courage of the *shishi* was usually combined with a practicality and desire for self-attainment that made for something of a pattern of response to the challenge that was brought by the West. The influences and opportunities of the day had first to work on individuals, however, and it has seemed to me that the late Tokugawa scene had in it enough variety and contrast in motivation and belief to make it unlikely that it could be summed up in any single theory of causation.

Much of the material on which this study is based was gathered in Japan during 1955 and 1956 during a stay made possible by a Ford Foundation fellowship. While in Tosa I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Mr. Michio Hirao, an authority on local history to whom all Japanese and many foreign historians are indebted. Through the assistance of the Asia Foundation it became possible for Mr. Hirao to spend the summer of 1958 at the University of Washington, where he quickly became the center for a seminar which dealt with the history of Tosa in Tokugawa days. Out of this has developed a documentary record of social and economic developments in Tosa, still in preparation, on which I have been engaged with the assistance of my colleague Noburu Hiraga under the auspices of the research program of the Far Eastern and Russian Institute of the University of Washington. My debt to Mr. Hirao is suggested by the frequency with which citations in this study note his numerous publications. For help with the

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map I am indebted to Hiroe Kiyoshi, who is preparing a historical atlas for Tosa under the auspices of the Kōchi City Public Library, and I am grateful to Yoshimura Shokuho of Kōchi and (Judge) Inoue Kazuo, presently of Tamashima City, Okayama Prefecture, for their help in photographing and lending copies of the pictures which appear in the book. A grant from the Princeton University Research Fund has helped make publication possible.

I have thought it best to use the contemporary Tosa reading of numerous names, trusting that cross-references in the index will prevent confusion for readers accustomed to Yamanouchi instead of Yamauchi. All dates have been converted to the Western calendar, since specialists who read further will have no difficulty in re-converting to the Japanese original. Names, however, are given in the Japanese order with surname first. Macrons have been retained to indicate long vowels in all but the most common geographical names.

I must acknowledge also the help and encouragement of my colleagues in the Japan Seminar at the University of Washington, where an earlier draft of this work was taken up during the year 1958-1959. My obligations to them, as to specialists and librarians in this country and in Japan, are too numerous to itemize. More specific is my gratitude to Miss Grace Brewer and Mrs. Ann Yaney for their assistance in preparing the manuscript. I remain, of course, solely responsible for all errors of fact and interpretation and for all translations not otherwise acknowledged.

Marius B. Jansen
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