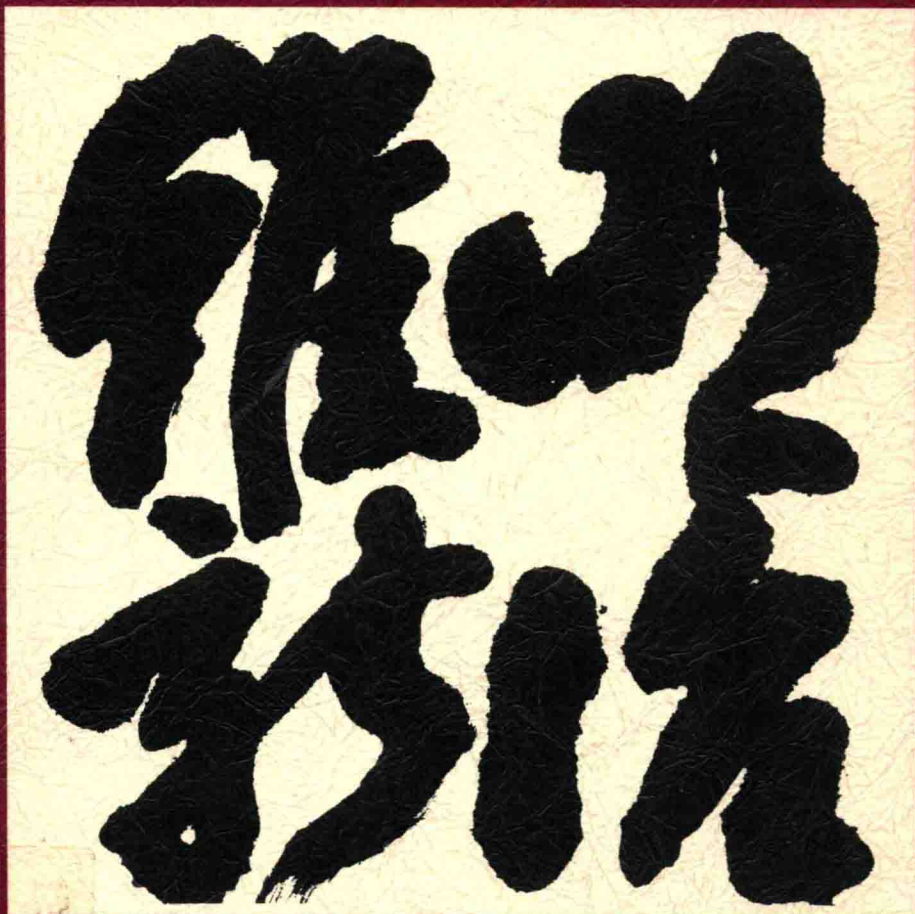# MEIJI ISHIN:
RESTORATION AND REVOLUTION

Edited by Nagai Michio and Miguel Urrutia

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MEIJI ISHIN:
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UNU Series on Social Transformation: 1

Major social transformations took place in non-European societies, such as those of Japan, China, Russia, and Mexico, during the last century. The UNU Project on Comparative Studies of Social Transformation looks into the interactions between different social, economic, political, cultural, and international environmental factors at work in these transformations and attempts to generate a new and synthetic conceptualization of such interrelationships. *Meiji Ishin*, the outcome of an international conference, is an examination of an important event in Japanese history from different theoretical standpoints by specialists from Japan, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The second volume of the Series on Social Transformation, now under preparation, will deal with the Mexican Revolution.

INTRODUCTION

Revolution, Restoration, Renewal

In 1868, with the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, nearly three centuries of feudal rule and national isolation came to an end, and Japan began taking the first steps towards becoming an independent, modern, sovereign state open to the rest of the world. This great social transformation is generally called the Meiji Ishin.

A literal translation of *ishin* might be "renewal," "evolution," or "innovation," but at least two other English expressions have been widely used. One is "restoration," reflecting the fact that an important dimension of the social upheaval of the times was the restoration of sovereignty to the emperor. From the twelfth to the nineteenth century real political and military power rested in the hands of the leaders of the warrior class, whose headquarters were based first in Kamakura, then in Muromachi (Kyoto), and, during the Tokugawa period, in Edo. The emperor and the court aristocracy that clustered around him became no more than the ritual and formalistic symbol of the nation. With the changes that occurred in the early years of the Meiji period, a modern centralized state came into being and the emperor once again became the actual centre of political power. In that sense, the Meiji Ishin was the *restoration* of monarchical rule.

Another translation of *Meiji ishin* adopted from early on is "Meiji Revolution." In 1982, in an English-language work published in New York and entitled *Education in Japan*, Mori Arinori, Japan's first official representative to the United States, called what was going on in Japan a "revolution" and declared that he and his fellows were partners in that

revolution. Still, the term Meiji Revolution has rarely been used either in Japan or abroad since that time.

Among the participants in the United Nations University conference on the Meiji Ishin, Professor Kuwabara Takeo, Professor Emeritus at Kyoto University, and Mr. Frank Gibney, who has served for many years on the board of editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* both use the word "revolution." They describe the Meiji Ishin as a cultural revolution, maintaining that revolutionary changes occurred in the realm of culture. Mori Arinori, too, who was one of the leading figures in the fields of education and culture in the early Meiji period, apparently meant "revolution" in terms of education and culture.

Other scholars, not content with any of the English renderings of the term, have simply refrained from translating it, relying on the romanization of the Japanese words. In this book, it should be noted that, in deference to common practice, the translation of *Meiji ishin* into English for the Japanese and Chinese papers is "Meiji Restoration" unless otherwise indicated by the author; "Meiji Revolution" has been used only as a translation of the Japanese *Meiji kakumei.* But the problem is not simply a battle of words. Historically speaking, the Meiji Ishin was indeed a restoration in political terms, but culturally it could be called a revolution. It was, in short, a time of epochal social change in which all these threads were intricately and inextricably intertwined.

Dialogue between Different Schools of Thought

Perhaps more complex than the differing ways of describing the Meiji Ishin is the problem of the differing views of history itself. A prolonged debate between Marxian economists of the Rōnō and the Kōza schools was waged in Japan over the nature of the Meiji Ishin. Adherents of the former school of thought view the Ishin as a bourgeois revolution, while the latter see it as an era of absolutism that resulted from a compromise between the feudal rulers and the bourgeoisie — both interpretations derived from the Marxian view of history. There are also many Japanese researchers who adhere to neither of these views, emphasizing facts based on empirical research. But the differences in ways of understanding history are not confined to Japan; behind the divergence in thinking is the global confrontation between nations of the socialist world and those of the Western world. Interpretation of the Meiji Ishin is different depending on these two standpoints.

The United Nations University is in no position to judge which view is right or wrong. Dr. Miguel Urrutia, Vice-Rector of the UNU at the time of this conference, and myself believed, rather, that the University could provide a forum for the free exchange of scholarly dialogue between specialists from different countries. We therefore invited not only Japanese scholars with differing views but specialists from the Soviet Union, China, and the United States to co-operate in this project. Their response was enthusiastic and enriching, and is eloquently reflected in the articles presented in this book. The conference was held at the headquarters of the UNU from 18 to 22 October 1983.

The Meiji Ishin occurred in the nineteenth century, and with the turn of the twentieth century, many important social upheavals took place around the world, including the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917, the Chinese nationalist revolution in 1911, the same nation's socialist revolution in 1949, and the Mexican revolution of 1911–1917. Even today, major social transformations are occurring throughout the world. If they are to achieve truly successful change, it is vital that we have an objective appreciation of the major social transformations of the past, and of the historical processes, involving both failure and success, through which they evolved.

In March 1985 an international conference on the Mexican Revolution, jointly sponsored by the UNU and El Colegio de Mexico, was held in Mexico City. The results of that meeting will also be published in book form.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the participants from various countries, and to the staff of the UNU, for their co-operation in making the conference on the Meiji Ishin possible. We are also very grateful to the staff of the Center for Social Science Communication for supervising the translation and editing, and for the translations of individual papers by Frank Baldwin, Andrew E. Barshay, Susan Murata, Patricia Murray, Lynne E. Riggs, and Takechi Manabu.

Nagai Michio
Senior Adviser to the Rector
The United Nations University
27 May 1985

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1. THE MEIJI ISHIN IN PERSPECTIVE

MEIJI ISHIN: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

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The Meiji Restoration stands as a turning-point in Japanese history.
Although the actual events of 1868 constituted little more than a shift of
power within the old ruling class, the larger process referred to as the
Meiji Restoration brought an end to the ascendancy of the warrior class
and replaced the decentralized structure of early modern feudalism
with a central state under the aegis of the traditional sovereign, now
transformed into a modern monarch. The Restoration leaders undertook
a series of vigorous steps to build national strength and rapidly propelled
their country along the road to regional and world power. The
Restoration constituted a major event for Japanese, East Asian, and
world history.

These pages are designed to provide a general overview of the
Restoration process. Limitations of space make it impossible to do justice
to chronology or to problems of interpretation, but the discussions that
follow in other articles provide an opportunity for such considerations.

Setting

Japan's political crisis of the 1860s was preceded by serious internal
difficulties and foreign danger. Once the ports were opened there was no
mistaking the complementary vibration between internal and external
problems, and it is clear that the almost total isolation of Japan prior to
its "opening" by the West served to magnify the consequences of foreign
impact in the public imagination.

The internal difficulties of the old regime came into striking focus during
the Tempō period (1830–1844), when Japan was devastated by famines

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that took a high toll in central and northern Japan. These combined with administrative inefficiency and unresponsiveness to encourage popular resistance. The most spectacular of the revolts of the period was one led by a model Confucian samurai official in Osaka, Ōshio Heihachirō, whose emotional appeal to insurrection made him a hero for later historians who sometimes dated loyalist revolt from the manifesto he issued. Yet his was only one of many risings of that period. Peasant insurrections and urban riots had tended to grow in size with the development of Japan's increasingly close-knit economy, and the Tempō insurrections often moved rapidly along routes of communication. An added phenomenon of the period was the increase of millenarian enthusiasm in the form of "renewal" (*yonaoshi*) uprisings whose leaders were regarded as martyrs. Ōshio came to take on such an appearance in popular thought.

The insurrections of the period, however, proposed no real alternatives to the social and economic system that produced them. Manifestos and petitions usually focused upon specific violations of what had come to seem as acceptable, though admittedly burdensome, government demands. Communication routes were natural conductors for such protest, since villages along the right of way were expected to provide the portage service that moved travellers and transport on human and animal backs. Need for such services was to increase sharply in late Tokugawa times.

The government's response to these troubles took the form of the Tempō Reforms launched by the *rōjū* Mizuno Tadakuni in 1841. The reforms included edicts against luxury and against migration from the countryside to the cities, provided relief for bakufu retainers' debts, abolished merchant guilds, and attempted to rationalize and concentrate bakufu land holdings within a 10-*ri* radius of Edo and Osaka. They struck at the vested interests of townsmen and bakufu vassals, and ended in failure with Mizuno's resignation after two and a half years. Simultaneous reforms in some of the larger domains, notably Satsuma and Chōshū, were more successful. The bakufu's failure to raise its revenues augured ill for the crisis that lay ahead, for the government that had to deal with these problems was a less flexible instrument than it had once been. The language of the 1840s and 1850s increasingly stressed the "obligations of the past" in a rigid adherence to tradition. Central authority had not grown; if anything the shift from strong to weak shoguns had resulted in bureaucratic immobility. Mizuno's efforts to reclaim vassals' holdings in an arc around the two largest cities roused a storm of complaints, although his efforts anticipated the measures that would be found

necessary by future reformers in the final crisis. The bakufu remained pre-modern; senior councillors (*rōjū*) served on cycles of monthly rotation, and the adoption of regular responsibilities and abolition of the rotation system came only on the eve of the Tokugawa fall in 1867. The government was also limited by an inadequate share of the nation's product. The precedents set in the past, through established and deeply routinized patterns of administration and taxation, made it difficult to make radical changes. The bakufu had access to only part of the national income, as the largest among its feudal peers. The cost of maintaining traditional arms and purchasing modern arms was soon to become prohibitive.

This hampered an effective response to a crisis in foreign affairs that had been developing for decades. The growing consciousness of danger from abroad was one of the unsettling elements in the nineteenth-century climate of opinion among informed intellectuals, and the defeat of China in the Opium War of 1838–1842 brought this consciousness home to a large public.

The response to this perceived danger was conditioned by several movements in Japanese thought. Knowledge about the West, and informed awareness of its approach, was available through the rise of Western learning, a development that had begun in earnest in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and one that had resulted in a flood of translations of books brought into the country by the Dutch. The government did its best to channel and appropriate the products of such learning, but restless minds occasionally carried it beyond the bounds of the permissible. Works in Chinese, brought to Nagasaki by Chinese traders, were more easily accessible to educated Japanese, and also underscored the danger from abroad. Such information intersected with an increasingly nationalistic emphasis on ethnicity that had begun as National Learning (*Kokugaku*) in eighteenth-century thought. Much of this came together to focus on the imperial institution as the centre of the national tradition. The Restoration slogan of "Revere the emperor! Drive out the barbarians!" (*sonnō-jōi*) was to wed loyalism to anti-foreignism in a powerful appeal to ethnicity.

Loyalist thought had additional support in Tokugawa Confucian scholarship. By the early nineteenth century the throne had become the centre of morality and value for many. A group of scholars in the Mito domain provided compelling formulations for Restoration activists. Aizawa Seishisai's *Shinron* (1825) combined warnings about the nature of

the Western threat with insistence upon the sacred nature of the imperial polity, and it became particularly influential in the 1850s at a time when the Mito daimyo became active in criticism of the shogunate's policies.

Opening the Ports and Wider Political Participation

The Tokugawa bakufu was so structured that decisions on matters of national importance were restricted to the direct vassals who served on the central councils. Lords of the largest domains, and even heads of collateral houses like Mito, were excluded from participation and therefore without a voice. So too with the sovereign and court nobles; tradition and policy limited their contact with the heads of military houses and isolated them from the political process. The crisis produced by the demands brought by Commodore Perry in 1853, however, made it seem advisable to seek a broader consensus for decisions in foreign affairs. The opportunity thus presented was quickly seized by some who sought a say in national affairs. In the decade that followed, opinion became polarized within as well as outside the bakufu. In the process, Tokugawa vassals, and their vassals, became politicized as ripples of excitement and indignation spread outward from the original decision centre.

Perry's request was received by a regime headed by Abe Masahiro (1819–1857), who sent it to the court for information and to Tokugawa vassals with requests for advice. In response he received opinions that revealed a wide range of views that agreed only in their desire to avoid immediate conflict. Some urged preparation for conflict, and even the court issued an order to melt down temple bells for guns. In the next few years the bakufu's desire for daimyo support in difficult decisions found it referring dilemmas to them, and the court itself developed the tactic of suggesting that daimyo, or at least leading houses, be consulted again.

Perry's agreement provided for the coming of Townsend Harris as consul, and his Commercial Treaty of 1858 marked the real opening of Japan to trade and residence. Harris drew his most effective arguments from the disasters that China had met in its attempt to resist such arrangements; the bakufu's fear of experiencing similar difficulties led it to accept treaties almost identical to those that had been forced on China.

It proved more difficult to procure the court's approval of the Harris treaty, however, and in Kyoto that approval became mixed up with the

issue of shogunal succession. That was not an area in which Tokugawa traditionalists were prepared to accept interference, and in response to this internal danger a bakufu administration headed by Ii Naosuke signed Harris's treaty on its own and settled the succession issue in favour of the future Iemochi. In so doing Ii passed over the candidacy of the son of the Mito daimyo. Next, he moved to punish the daimyo who had lobbied for a different outcome at court. His purge extended to the agents through whom the daimyo had worked in Kyoto. A number of great lords were forced into retirement, and at lower levels over a hundred men were sentenced, eight to execution, six of them beheaded like ordinary criminals. Among those executed was the Chōshū scholar−teacher Yoshida Shōin, who was to become posthumously exalted as a model of patriotism and loyalty.

The Ansei Purge added a political confrontation to the foreign crisis. In March 1860, Ii Naosuke was assassinated by a group of Mito and Satsuma swordsmen whose manifesto emphasized that his crime had been that of indifference to the imperial will. This inaugurated the terrorist activism of the Restoration decade.

The foreign crisis did not, of course, subside, for the agreements the bakufu made with Western powers functioned like one-way ratchets. The presence of Westerners in Japan served to provoke terrorism, and the trade they sought and brought helped to worsen an inflation that struck salaried retainers at a time their lords were asking them to surrender income in order to accumulate the resources for military preparedness. The new treaties, with their schedules for the opening of additional ports, guaranteed a stormy decade for bakufu administrators. They found themselves under domestic pressure to grant the foreigners less, and under foreign pressure to restrain anti-foreign terrorism. They could do neither.

Terrorism produced indignant demands from the Powers for retribution and indemnification, with the result that the regime was forced to give more at the same time that it was promising to give less. Missions sent abroad, the first in 1860, to ratify the Harris treaty in the United States, brought word of foreign strength to a government that was promising to work out a schedule for the exclusion of foreigners. Small wonder that responsibility for foreign affairs, in a setting in which sustained policy was impossible, brought many bureaucratic careers to an early end. The new position of *gaikoku bugyō* was set up in 1858, and 74 men had served by 1867. Ambassadors sent to the United States in 1860 disappeared into

obscurity, and the career patterns of most late Tokugawa officials
document similar political hazards. Lower-level specialists, like Fukuzawa
Yukichi, remained to travel again and grow in influence, but even they
were often in danger as "pro-Western."

Loyalist Activists

The assassination of Ii Naosuke in 1860 inaugurated a period of violence
that transformed the setting of late Tokugawa politics. The actors in this
were loyalist activists known to history as *shishi*, or "men of high
purpose." The *shishi* tended to be of modest rank, status, and income.
They lived in a world that was less structured by formal duty than that of
their superiors, and they also had more opportunity for communication
with men from other domains. They were at the outer circumference of
the ruling class, and their frustration with lives of limited opportunity
made them critical of their more cautious superiors. Many *shishi* had
been educated in private academies by teachers who had instilled in them
visions of loyalism and idealism. Most of them had little knowledge about
or patience for the context of diplomatic and political issues. They had
been awakened to participation by the calls to military preparedness that
accompanied the opening of the ports and, in many cases, the punishment
of their lords in the Ansei Purge. They were inclined to simplistic
solutions of direct action.

Lower samurai frustrations could also mesh with the discontents of local,
non-samurai notables. The responsibilities of practical administration in
the countryside had produced an educated class of village leaders. In
Tosa, for instance, a league of village headmen circulated secret
documents in which they styled themselves the true representatives of
imperial rule, superior to the urban samurai of the castle town whose
loyalty was to the daimyo. Thus social and political frustrations combined
with national crisis to produce a growing community of young men who
judged themselves and their superiors by absolute standards of "loyalty"
to the "highest duty," rather than by conventional dictates of status
subordination. This led many to remonstrate with their superiors, at times
to strike them down, and to leave their lord's jurisdiction to work as
rōnin in the more exciting political atmosphere of the national centres.

The *shishi* represented the farthest ripple of political activation that had
been inaugurated by the shogunate at the centre. Their reckless bravery
and intensity transformed late Tokugawa politics, and provided the

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heroes for later loyalist history. Their determination to influence their domain superiors added a volatile element to the pattern of clique and faction competition that characterized most major domains. They fought among themselves as well as with their superiors; the Satsuma lord used one group to restrain another, and in Mito ideological and factional hostilities led to a civil war that virtually destroyed the influence of the domain. In Chōshū the loyalists found receptive allies among their superiors, and when that co-operation ended they succeeded in overturning domain policy completely. In Tosa politics the assassination of a leading minister was followed by a period of loyalist ascendancy, only to see the gains erased, and then reversed, by the return of the former lord with a programme of trials in which he reasserted his control over domain policy.

At the national centres, and particularly at the imperial capital of Kyoto, refugee loyalists, become *rōnin*, often found shelter and employment in the establishments of court nobles or in the protection of friendly domains. Shogunal ministers and foreign representatives had reason to fear the two-sworded men. No sure count can be given, nor need it; for personal violence, in politics long dormant, was as striking as the appearance of foreigners on shores long closed. Kyoto temple cemeteries contain the graves of several hundred men who died in plot and counterplot, of which the Chōshū assault on the palace itself in 1864 was the largest.

Regional Rivalry

Two-sworded individuals could unsettle matters, but change of substance required the efforts of major domains that were the political units making up the Tokugawa polity. A very small number of domains combined to lessen, and then to remove, the Tokugawa primacy, and their willingness to shelter and sponsor activist urges gave structure to the politics of the 1860s. The men who implemented those policies went on to become the leaders of the Meiji government.

The domains that counted were capable of independent action. Satsuma was second, Chōshū ninth, Mito eleventh, and Tosa nineteenth in size among the Tokugawa domains. They had disproportionately large numbers of samurai. They were integrated units with distinct natural boundaries, a proud history of regional consciousness, and the resources that made it possible to build military strength. The entire samurai class