

Sakamoto Ryoma – How Imperial Loyalist Samurai decided to overthrow the Tokugawa Order

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Abstract: This essay is aimed to explore what influenced or contributed to Sakamoto's (and others) decision to overthrow the Tokugawa Order. The essay is divided into two parts according to Ryoma's life experience, first describing the influence of the Sonno Joi movement, then moving to discuss the impact of western ideology, following a chronological sequence.

Keywords: Sakamoto Ryoma, Bakumatsu era, ideology

1. Introduction

It was Keio 2, a normal day in Kyoto, Nakaoka Shintaro is on his way to meet a friend who just arrived from Nagasaki. The paper door was drawn open, and inside sat Sakamoto Ryoma, the leader of the Kaientai and its group of well-trained western-style sailors. Sakamoto held a scroll of paper to his friend. Nakaoka started reading first with doubt, but within a few minutes was he entirely shocked by the content. Later known as the <Eight Point Proposal>, this text contains eight core reform actions Sakamoto summarized from his entire life as a patriot samurai. From a historical reader's view, it seems hard to imagine that for the Sakamoto Ryoma ten years earlier, the text would probably be so unacceptable that he would immediately plan an assassination of the author to express his anger. Being a radical anti-western samurai for about half of his life, the shift happens in such a fast and thorough way that in his final years even people labeled as pro-Western could hardly catch his position at supporting western culture and ideology. Now the question comes to our mind: Why did Sakamoto Ryoma change his position?

As scholar Marius B. Janson once wrote, the final years of Tokugawa Japan is an era of crisis, and chaos, but also sparks a future of reform. With the prosperous Edo period coming to its end, every observant person will find his nation surrounded by a great many crises. First starting with the Rice riots spreading in the magnificent city of Osaka. Then comes the "Barbaric" Western powers, having an overwhelming victory against the great power of the Qing dynasty during the Opium War, now turning their canons toward the Japanese isles. And at last, all the worrying comes true as commodore Perry and his mighty fleet forced the Bakufu to remove its traditioned national isolationism Sakoku policy. The disgrace of signing the treaty damaged the believed blessedness of the Japanese isles by traditional intellectuals along with the dependable figure of the Bakufu among the Japanese citizens.

As time passed, the Bakufu was, repeatedly, proved unreliable facing foreign threats. This forced groups of patriots from all social classes to seek a solution on their own. A vast number of historical events prove the importance of lower-class samurais participating in anti-Western movements

throughout the Bakumatsu era. Sakamoto is one of them. He was born in 1836, as the second son of a lower-ranking samurai family in Tosa Han. The family owned a family-run sake business that started generations ago. The wealth acquired from the business allowed the family to purchase a samurai title in accordance with local law. When the Perry Exhibition incident broke out, like many other samurai aged same as him, Sakamoto rushed to attend political groups and assassination missions, trying to receive honor and carry his own beliefs[1]. Patriot samurais like Sakamoto named themselves shishi, meaning the people with spirits. These people actively planned assassinations and participated in radical movements to show their belief in certain political thoughts, mostly an ideal of “revering the emperor and expelling the Barbarians,” known as the Sonno Joi movement.

However, after a relatively abbreviated period of time, before the start of the Boshin War against the Bakufu, most of the remaining shishi samurais who survived the political turmoil more or less accepted the western military technique and industrial technology. A sizable proportion of them even advocated for a constitutional monarchy system that involved a union of the local Daimyos, the Tokugawa Shogunate, and the Imperial government at Kyoto, under the guidance of European nations. Through looking at Sakamoto Ryoma’s legendary life, it seems to be the traditional ideology of Kokugaku and Neo-Confucianism that forms the aim and ideal of these samurais, while the enhancement from the western ideology and military technology along with the joining of strong local officials finally facilitates their decision of choosing the most radical way – To overthrow the old Tokugawa Bakufu.

2. The Influence of The Past

Before childhood Sakamoto Ryoma started his training as a swordsman, he spent a few years as a student at the local school, trying to seek his potential as a scholar. Though he soon dropped out of school, the content taught in these schools was very influential among the samurai class and middle-class commoners. The academic field in the late Tokugawa period was basically dominated by different schools of Neo-Confucianism and also the National Study, Kokugaku. Both later proved to be crucial leading ideologies adopted by the shishi samurai groups.

The Kokugaku is a native Japanese school of thought that branched off from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism. It advocates the uniqueness and benefits of the Japanese native culture and thus, the importance to preserve the ancient Japanese text, which was “blessed with beauty and elegance.[2]” It praises the Imperial family line and the traditional society of the Asuka and Nara periods. Kokugaku scholars also support the introduced idea of the distinction between civilized people and the barbarians, originally named “Hua-Yi” in Chinese texts. It could be said that these nativist thoughts pushed the Kokugaku school into enthusiastic supporters of the Sakoku policy, and also the frequent anti-foreignism actions during international contacts of the late Tokugawa period.

Similarly, we can see the same ideas expressed in the various schools of Neo-Confucianism. The Mitogaku is probably one of the most influential among all in early shishi groups[3]. The school was formed by a group of Neo-Confucianism scholars in the middle 17th century, first focusing on historical texts and Confucianism works. But as the nineteenth daimyo, Tokugawa Nariaki, established the famous Kodokan, the Mitogaku school and established a new and progressive set of ideologies. It reformed the traditional Confucianism set of ideals through receiving thoughts from Kokugaku. This was the famous ideal that would later sweep through Japan with the shishi movement - Sonno Joi, a mixture of imperial supremacy and antiforeignism.

These nativist and isolationist schools of thought actually found it very easy to expand their popularity among Japanese citizens during the late Tokugawa periods. The Sakoku policy brought a decline to the academic exchange between the Continent and Japan, giving opportunities for original Confucianism scholars to focus more on native culture and history. Their achievements could then be transferred to the young generations via the developed schooling system of Edo Japan. The education

structure has its core at the state funded Hangaku for samurai scholars from very high positions and its branches ending with local schools, the Terakoya, that serves children from the region. Most samurais, including those from extremely poor families, will persist to send their children for education in these schools, resulting in many young samurais being exposed to these thoughts at an early age. This would result in Kokugaku and Neo-Confucianism thoughts to continue influencing their actions even leaving school for a long time.

The achievements of mass education among the samurai class received its testing opportunity as Commodore Matthew Perry led his fleet into Edo Bay in 1852. Fearing that the scarce land would be contaminated by the western “barbarians,” thousands of samurais and middle-class commoners spontaneously gathered to find a path of expelling the Western invaders with Kokugaku teachings echoing in their minds. Takechi Zuizan, a swords master of local Tosa was one of the active participants. He was able to travel to Edo under the highly restricted border policy during the preliminary period of the movement thanks to his title as a kenjustsu master. There, he met young samurai from all parts of Japan, all trying to contribute their power to save Japan from danger. Since Takechi received education from the Kokugaku school in his childhood, he easily fit in with these ambitious activists. By the time he returned to Tosa, he was already a dedicated advocate of the Sonno Joi movement. Guided by the Sonno-Joi idea, Takechi gathered a group of his former kenjustsu apprentice, mostly from the lower-class samurai, and formed the Tosa Kinno-to, the Tosa Loyalist Party[4]. Among the first members to join, Sakamoto Ryoma is on the list.

We could now understand how the members saw their mission through the preserved text of <The Oath of the Tosa Loyalist Party >[5]. The Oath is being signed by all members, with blood fingerprints showing their recognition of the content. It could be seen, though, that the young men were deeply influenced by the Kokugaku school and also the popular Mitogaku slogan “Sonno-Joi” from the text. The author started by stating the current situation of Japan as “our magnificent and divine country has been humiliated by the barbarians and that the Spirit of Japan ... is on the point of being extinguished.” They then expressed their patriotist identity by describing their final aim as “to ease the Emperor's mind, ..., and to purge this evil (the Western threat) from our people” and stressing their loyalty to the Emperor's will through using “if the Imperial Flag is once raised” as the prerequisite of all acts. Since the Oath is later sent to the Tosa government to introduce the party, we could also find Takechi's striving to bring legitimacy to this actually illegal party according to Bakufu's order.

But no matter how hard the samurais tried to show their loyalty and purity of motivation, some signs could still question the initial intention of some members. In all respects, the whole samurai class, from the lowest Ashigaru class in the villages to the Haramoto officers in the Bakufu government, suffered financial issues in the late Edo period. Research has shown an increasing contrast between the samurai stipend, being increased seldomly throughout the two centuries of samurai rule, and the flourishing Edo period commercial activity along with the material life[6]. Commodities and entertainment in the late Tokugawa period have a lot of differences from the era when the stipends were set. With a larger variety and higher price, the samurais often felt their quality of life couldn't equal to their honored title, especially when wealthy merchants, who owns much lower rank, could easily have access. It is undeniable that throughout the history financial difficulty is always a crucial factor which finally pushes people to radical actions against their governmental orders, and it is believable that the same conditions happens in Tosa. Among all members who signed the Oath, many are from families that receive lower stipends comparing to other samurais in the domain.

Apart from financial issues, the structure within the samurai class particularly in the Tosa domain increase the discontent in the samurai population. Due to historical reasons, the Tosa samurai class was divided into higher-ranking samurai, the Joshi, and the lower-ranking samurai, the Kashi. Though

both are titled samurai, a Kashi could hardly be treated equally in front of a Joshi, while Joshis have a variety of privileges over the Kashi class. Thus, since the establishment of the system, violent confrontation happened occasionally. This was especially true after the domain government gave permission for wealthy commoners to purchase Kashi titles using properties. As most of the members of the Tosa Loyalist Party are sons of Kashi families, it is reasonable to suspect that some of these people might have the ambition of changing the situation. It is hard to tell if Sakamoto Ryoma participated in the group to stress his discontent toward the higher-ranking Joshi. However, a letter written to his sister while he broke away with Tosa Han showed he detests the Domain, calling it a place where no one could establish anything and stressing his desire for receiving fame and title through his adventure as a shishi samurai[5].

No matter if Sakamoto Ryoma has this distress, Takechi Zuizan definitely holds such emotions. As the then Tosa Daimyo Yamauchi Youdou favored the Modernization project proposed by a high-ranking samurai Yoshida Toyo, the radical anti-Western Sonno-Joi idea could not make its way to the government. Takechi thus processed his attempt to assassinate him in May 1862, killing Yoshida while he was returning home from Kochi castle.

Sakamoto Ryoma was already a ronin who broke away from the Tosa government when the assassination happened. Unluckily, he was suspected of a participant in the event, forcing him to escape to Osaka for protection. However, it is clear that under the influence of the popular Kokugaku school and the Sonno Joi ideal, Ryoma has ensured his ultimate aim as a shishi samurai. Now with little limitations as a ronin, Sakamoto Ryoma was ready to take his thoughts into action.

3. Impact of The Introduction of Western Knowledge

The first plan Sakamoto Ryoma formulated was to plot to assassinate Katsu Kaishu. Katsu was a Haramoto class samurai working as a bureaucrat at the Edo Bakufu. In his early years, Katsu chose to study Dutch and became interested in the Western knowledge introduced into Japan, commonly called Rangaku or Sengaku. After the Perry Expedition, he participated in the first diplomacy mission the Tokugawa Bakufu sent to the Western world in 1860 as the captain of Kanrin-Maru, the first Japanese ship, operated by Japanese sailors, to cross the Pacific Ocean. His trip to the US confirmed his belief that a powerful navy was the only way to secure Japan's safety while facing foreign threats. Thus, Katsu became an enthusiastic Western reformation advocate after returning to Japan. His nearly fearless attitude to showing his identity attracted many radical anti-Western samurais to seek revenge on him, bringing him in many dangerous situations.

However, it is highly possible that Katsu's concerns of using Western technology to protect Japan saved his life from Ryoma's blade. Sakamoto Ryoma's assassination plan did not succeed, rather Ryoma himself was completely convinced that he chose to become Katsu's protege immediately after the meeting. In a letter to his sister, Ryoma wrote about his happiness, calling Katsu "the living legend in current Japan" and he himself was so enjoying being accompanied by Katsu that he "doesn't want to return home until forty years old." [5]

His enthusiasm for Katsu's navy proposal could be proved by his following actions. Ryoma persuaded many of his friends in Tosa domain to join the Kobe navy academy, managed by Katsu, to advance his idea of constructing a powerful sea power. Sakamoto also served as a representative for his mentor to raise money for a new navy academy in Hyogo. The experience of contacting with some of the radical officials in different domains gave him a sight of the forefront political ideals among government intellectuals and their rulers. For the first time, Sakamoto heard about a possible plan of a parliamentary style of government, involving daimyos from all parts of Japan, the Shogun as a senator same as the daimyos, and the whole nation led only by the Emperor. He started to understand that brutal power was not the only way to revere the Emperor and establish a new government[4].

This surely impacted Sakamoto very profoundly, the idea of a constitutional parliamentary government could be found even in his last few pieces of writings.

Along with his political thoughts, the extensive Western knowledge he received during contact with these intellectuals clearly changed Sakamoto's previous plan of expelling the Westerners via brutal force. This is clearly shown in another letter home written in 1863, where he opposed the Choshu shishi samurais bombarding foreign ships and causing the battle of Shimonoseki, blaming them for "provoked war, which is not at all beneficial for Japan" and also directly stressing his own opposition to such act.

Though having many alternations in his observation both in the domestic situation and international affairs, from the same text we can see his ultimate goal unchanged. He blamed the bureaucrats of Edo as "traitors who collude with the Westerners." Having known the Western power more clearly, Sakamoto held his patriot beliefs firmer than ever. His experience of communicating with high-ranked officials and even establishing a good relationship brought Sakamoto confidence and support for him to carry out his own beliefs.

Sakamoto Ryoma kept constant contact with his friends from the Tosa Loyalist Party while staying at the Hyogo navy academy. Although not directly participating in the party's affairs anymore, he still appreciates defining his identity as an imperial loyalist shishi samurai, supporting the honorable "Sonno Joi" movement. However, exposing himself to a broader sight, accepting a variety of political insights and up-to-date information for his enemy – the Western power – the change is clear. Sakamoto started to become a different person from who he was as a Loyalist Party member.

However, as Katsu's navy modernization project proceeded, conservatives started to be concerned about his radical political insight of the parliamentary government might also gain popularity. In 1864, these bureaucrats pushed the Bakufu to dismiss Katsu's duty as a naval commander in the system and ordered the dissolution of the navy academy in Hyouo. Having nowhere to go, Sakamoto Ryoma and his friends were invited to the Satsuma domain as naval operators by Gyomatsu Kyokado, whom Ryoma met during his years in the navy academy.

This became another crucial opportunity in his life as Satsuma was one of the reform centers in all of Japan during the 1860s[5]. Since the beginning years of the shishi samurai's "Sonno Joi" movement, Satsuma and Choshu became the core bases of their operations. However, the hierarch of Satsuma, Shimazu Hisamitsu, persisted in his loyalty to the Bakufu and supported the theory of establishing a united government of the Imperial court and the Shogunate than the rational Sonno-Joi movement, which contained ideals of completely removing the Shogun's privilege. The divergence in opinions finally led to the violent suppression of a group of shishi samurais in Kyoto, known as the Teradaya Jiken. The incident killed the leading Satsuma shishi samurais and brought the end to the union between the two powerful domains.

By the time Sakamoto arrived at Satsuma, the Bakufu has already launched a war on the Choshu domain, known as the first Choshu-Seito, in which Satsuma actively participated. Sakamoto noticed that although the two domains are filled with hatred toward each other, they were probably the only two domains that held enough resources and power to challenge the position of the Shogunate. Reconciliation was thus urgently needed for the fulfillment of Sakamoto's parliamentary government ideal, especially when many influencing officials of Satsuma were supporters of the Imperial parliament theory. Thanks to his former years as a shishi samurai and a protégé of Katsu, Sakamoto met a few times with the leaders of both domains, allowing him to strive for a union between both sides. Finally, in 1866, led by Sakamoto himself, the two rivals signed a treaty to federate in facing the powerful Bakufu army. He also established a commercial company, the Kaientai, meaning the ocean support fleet, with funding from Satsuma. The fleet enabled Sakamoto to support military preparations of the reform enthusiastic domains. Both his action to facilitate the union and his attempt of helping the development of military power resulted in the crushing defeat of the Bakufu during

their second expedition of Choshu domain. Seeing the power of the anti-Shogunate factions, there is no doubt that the pro-emperor thoughts once again received their popularity and also reconsidered their relationship with the west. Sakamoto and his Kaientai also received more opportunities as the Bakufu's failure brought more domains to reconsider joining the reform acts[5]. He was recognized by the Tosa government, which has been trying to arrest him ever since he broke away from the domain. Later, Tosa became one of the regular consumer of his company.

Through his acts in Satsuma, it is obvious that Sakamoto finalized to stabilize his choice of political path. He became much calmer and more intelligent while analyzing issues and, with bravery, strived for the best future he could imagine. He also changed his opinion toward western activity in Japan. Instead of swearing to kill every westerner he met, the Kaientai developed commercial cooperation with English merchants, selling armory to the pro-emperor domains.

4. Conclusion

Sakamoto Ryoma, becoming a famous figure among reform activists, was assassinated as a result by pro-shogunate ronin in Omiya Inn, Kyoto, 1867. He escaped once from assassination, but he did not make it through the second. Six months earlier, Sakamoto finished the text of the <Eight Point Proposal of a New Government>, the Se Tyuu Hassaku during a boat trip to Kyoto. This document could be referred to as the final summary of his political thoughts and ideals. A significant trait represented in the text is that all his former experiences could be easily observed in each line. He expressed his faith and loyalty to the Tenno emperor by suggesting returning the government and its power back to the emperor, guarding Kyoto by troops under the emperor's direct command, and examining and reforming laws derived from the ancient times of emperor rule to form the legal system of the new government. The parliamentary government structure he inquired from Katsu were shown as he advised the government to set up the upper and lower house for elites elected from the aristocrats and the daimyos to attend. His experience managing commerce with the West was reflected in his advocacy to establish a diplomatic relationship with the nations and set a new currency system, modified to an equal value as the West. Sakamoto Ryoma is no anymore a lower-class samurai in Tosa Domain whose sight is limited by the isolationism policy that continued for 2 centuries. The introduction and fast-spreading Western ideas brought a brand-new way for him to stress his former pro-emperor ideal while his successful actions to facilitate the process of reformation clearly brought him more confidence. It could be said that the Sakamoto Ryoma in this phase gradually became the figure that is widely known in modern days, an Ishin Shishi that stood bravely against the Bakufu for his ideal of a reformed, powerful new Japan.

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