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THE JAPANESE REVOLUTIONARIES
THE ARCHITECTS OF THE MEIJI RESTORATION, 1860-1868

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Abstract. Scholars have offered many conflicting interpretations of the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868, but few have put forth a comprehensive analysis as to the nature of the protagonists and the motivation of those who initiated this revolutionary movement. Although historical interpretations of the Restoration and its heroes have ranged from a romantic and generalized theory of economic struggle to focused studies of individuals whose motivations were singular, the true character of the *samurai* revolutionaries behind the Restoration is the issue here. Of those *samurai* who, acquired knowledge of Western civilization and technology, took part in the Restoration, and witnessed the death knell of feudalism, the Restoration revolutionaries stood apart from their *samurai* brethren and acted to lay the groundwork for a modern political system to replace it.

On January 3, 1868, Keiki (Yoshinobu), the fifteenth shogun of the Tokugawa *bakufu* (shogunate) surrendered sovereignty to the fifteen-year-old Meiji emperor, Mutsuhito, who had just succeeded his father, the Emperor Komei when he died early in 1867. This event marked not only the end of the longest shogunate in Japan, which lasted for over two hundred sixty years, but the beginning of a new, democratic Japan modeled after the European constitutional monarchies. This smooth political transformation, achieved without much bloodshed, known as the Meiji Restoration, has attracted the close attention of both Japanese historians and Western scholars. One of the most intriguing questions is what is the nature of those Japanese who instigated this revolution? Furthermore, what is the social, political, economic, and intellectual background of the Japanese who carried it out? This paper will attempt at reinterpretation on the nature of these Restoration leaders, who played leading roles in the

transformation of Japan from the feudal age to the modern era. It will first analyze and evaluate systematically the various, and often conflicting, interpretations that have been advanced since the successful completion of the Meiji Restoration. The paper will then suggest a new, fresh interpretation on the subject.

In 1940, E. Herbert Norman published his Japan's Emergence as a Modern State¹ and advanced a convincing interpretation on the Japanese revolutionaries. Drawing upon the works of Japanese economic scholars of the 1920's and 1930's, Norman argues that the Restoration was the work of "lower *samurai*" with full cooperation of the *chonin* (merchants) of Osaka and Kyoto. Norman's analysis of the partnership that formed among these lower *samurai*, the merchants, and eventually the "outside" *tozama daimyo* (lords) begins with the economic challenges facing the "lower *samurai*" that spurred them to rebellion in the first place. As members of the lowest class of *samurai*, Norman points out, these leaders of the Restoration had endured the brunt of excessive feudal taxation and the subsequent manipulation of their livelihood by their *daimyo*. Without any means to escape this destitution, "the more restless spirits among them" fled their *han* (domain) to become *ronin* (wandering men). These *ronin* settled in the major cities including Edo (Tokyo), where, together with their lower *samurai* counterparts, trained in Western languages and science, becoming the intellectual forerunners in foreign knowledge and "the most ardent champions of Restoration."²

It was against this backdrop, Norman argues, that a "political struggle" developed, triggering the lower *samurai* to "turn against the rigid clan system which thwarted their

¹E. Herbert Norman, *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State: Political and Economic Problems of the Meiji Period* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940).

²Ibid., 17

ambitions and jeopardized their social security.” The “corrosive of economic uncertainty” in Tokugawa Japan “destroyed the fabric of feudal loyalties” and forced the lower *samurai* to “search for some higher, more universal symbol worthy of devotion and sacrifice.”³ The *bakufu*’s continuous policy of keeping the emperor isolated in Kyoto “was such as to evoke the most passionate feelings of loyalty” among the lower *samurai* and *ronin* with respect to the theory that the emperor was the real “source of all power.”⁴ Hence, “the breakdown of feudalism in Japan released latent social forces” into “the hands of the lower *samurai*, who gradually superseded the upper ranks of *samurai* and feudal lords as the political spokesmen of the day.”⁵ Their revolutionary political philosophy, which included the facilitation of cooperation between the privileged and lower classes, and their assumption of political leadership, would, concludes Norman, serve the lower *samurai* well when it actually came time for them to instigate a movement to remove the shogunate from power and restore the emperor to hegemony.

Norman describes the typical “lower *samurai*” as earning one-third of the annual rice stipend of the “middle *samurai*.” He further compares this typical “*samurai*” income as equivalent to that earned by an average “peasant.”⁶ Those typical “lower *samurai*,” who earned only what an average peasant earned and had little opportunity to increase their earnings under the feudal system, were clearly distinguishable from the middle-ranking *samurai* in rank and in income.

The meager wages earned by the “lower *samurai*,” however, were a reflection of the financial difficulty faced by the *daimyo* during the Tokugawa period. The average

³Ibid., 25.

⁴Ibid., 27.

⁵Ibid., 31, 49.

⁶Ibid., 17, note 12

stipend of the “lower *samurai*” had decreased precipitously because his *daimyo* had “borrowed” a portion of his stipend to comply with *bakufu* laws. Rather than wallow in poverty, many of the lower *samurai* set off to the major cities, often without the permission of their *daimyo*, becoming sometimes *ronin*, to congregate with other lower *samurai* and *ronin*, “who, thanks to their freedom from clan interference and duties,” were able to study the sciences and ideas of the West.”⁷

This is the reason why the *ronin* and their lower *samurai* counterparts became “the spear-point in the attack upon the *Bakufu*,” Norman suggests, and were able to “rouse Japan to consciousness.”⁸ These revolutionaries, acting in the interests of all the Japanese lower classes, struck a chord concerning their plight under the Tokugawa feudal system. The *daimyo* were unable to lead the Restoration movement, insists Norman, because they were preoccupied with other matters. Norman admits that the feudal lords did contribute significantly to the Restoration, to be sure, but the Restoration might have been delayed or even ended in failure without the leadership of the lower *samurai*. Norman suggests that the lower *samurai* were the only ones who could have coordinated and, ultimately, carried out a successful Restoration movement. Their forward-looking vision to a new system of government was, indeed, motivated by their deep desire to upend the inequities of the feudal system.⁹

Norman points out that the *chonin* also played an important role in the Restoration. Since inception of the seclusion policy in the late 1630’s, the *chonin* had been unable to find new markets to increase their capital. The *chonin*, whose livelihood was regulated by the laws of the *shogun*, who regarded them as “immoral and usurious,” had nonetheless,

⁷Ibid., 29

⁸Ibid., 25.

⁹Ibid., 62.

managed to accumulate a surplus of cash and specie which were in turn loaned to the feudal clans in exchange for a domain's main staple commodity, rice. Although the *chonin* were virtually powerless to effect economic reform in the feudal society on their own,¹⁰ they were often able to manipulate rates of exchange or monopolize commodity markets, eliciting "the ill-concealed animosity of the bakufu." Many *chonin*, therefore, were willing to support the lower *samurai* and the *daimyo* in their pursuit of defeating the Tokugawa government.¹¹

The *chonin*, members of the lowest class, were willing to finance the hard-pressed *daimyo* and, in many cases, the lower *samurai* in their plot to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate because of their desire to throw off the shackles of the oppressive Tokugawa *bakufu*. As this alliance began forming, many *chonin* were able, either through the purchase of the *samurai* status or the adoption of *samurai* as their sons, to become members of the *samurai* class.¹² This served the needs of both classes, because the *chonin* needed protection from the *samurai* and, conversely, some *samurai* needed valuable financial backing for their revolutionary activities. Norman emphatically asserts that the "lower *samurai* – often *chonin* in the position of *samurai* – were the most conscious leaders in the movement to overthrow the *Bakufu*."¹³ This alliance of lower *samurai* and *chonin*, while "slipping through the meshes of the feudal system," was mainly the result of the alienation of the *chonin* class by the Tokugawa *bakufu*.¹⁴

The *chonin* of Osaka, the major marketing clearinghouse of the *bakufu*, where seventy-percent of Japan's wealth was concentrated, became the major financiers of the

¹⁰Ibid., 17, 18.

¹¹Ibid., 20.

¹²Ibid., 19.

¹³Ibid., 62

¹⁴Ibid., 19, 20.

Meiji Restoration. Though the coalition between the *chonin* and “lower *samurai* and *ronin*” was significant, they could not have overthrown the *Bakufu* only “by the sharpness of their swords or the daring of their resolve.”¹⁵ The major southwestern *tozama daimyo* of Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen, Norman argues, were involved in forming such a trust with the *chonin*. Not only were the *bakufu*’s oppressive regulations aimed at the *chonin* but, by virtue of their position as *tozama* (outside lords), the *daimyo* often were the target of restrictive laws, like the *sankin-kotai* (alternate attendance) system, aimed at weakening their will and finances, requiring them to spend alternate years in Edo and upon their departure to leave their wives and family behind as hostages. The southwestern *daimyo*, still in control of their *han*, despite the hardships perpetrated on them by the *bakufu*, actively sought out the financial services of the major Osaka *chonin* in an effort to relieve their financial stress. The lower *samurai* and their *daimyo*, Norman asserts, were willing to provide the military muscle to overthrow the *bakufu* but expected the *chonin* “to finance the *political* movement against the *bakufu*,”¹⁶ which preceded the Restoration Civil War.¹⁷

Thus Norman considers the *daimyo* another crucial agent of the Restoration. The *daimyo*, finding their domains crumbling financially under the strain of Tokugawa high-handed policies had no choice but to borrow heavily from merchants, which forced them to become deeply indebted to the rich *chonin*. The *chonin*, however, Norman argues, could not afford to press the *daimyo* for timely repayment of these debts, as the *chonin* might need the *daimyo*’s favor in the future. More to the point, “the interests of the feudal ruling class and the big merchants became so closely intertwined that whatever

¹⁵Ibid., 49.

¹⁶Ibid., 52.

¹⁷Ibid., 50.

hurt one necessarily injured the other.”¹⁸ This relationship between the top class *daimyo* and the bottom class *chonin* had been formed well before the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate.

When the Tokugawa Ieyasu set up a military dictatorship over Japan after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, he rewarded those *daimyo* who had declared their allegiance to him prior to the battle (*fudai daimyo*). Ieyasu also remembered those southwestern *daimyo* who opposed him, such as Shimazu of Satsuma, Mori of Choshu, and others (*tozama daimyo*). Some of these *tozama daimyo* continued to wage a losing battle to fight off the tyranny of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. The *bakufu*, through such policies as the *sankin-kotai* system, the passport system of traveling between domains, the spy networks to enforce compliance, and the arbitrarily imposed public works projects,¹⁹ imposed heavy financial burdens on the *tozama daimyo*, not easily relieved, sending them into the hands of the *chonin* to form the mutual alliance between them.

At the time Commodore Perry kicked the Japanese door open, the Tokugawa *shogun*, which had been the dominant *samurai* overlord for over two and one half centuries, began to lose its governing strength, as the spirits of the *tozama daimyo*, their retainers, and the lower *samurai* were boosted. This hegemonic decline was also a signal of the decline of the entire feudal system. Scrambling to adapt to the changing times, the lower *samurai*, newly educated in the Western forms of government and philosophy, and *chonin* methods of finance, returned to their domains and became “the actual leaders in clan affairs.”²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., 50.

¹⁹Ibid., 14.

²⁰Ibid., 50.

In the great anti-*bakufu* domains, Norman insists, these *samurai* performed a vital function, by working in concert with those of others, taking virtual control over the domains and guiding ultimately the eventual success of the Restoration.²¹ These lower *samurai*, who were once considered a “parasitic” feudal institution in the late Tokugawa period, recovered their martial spirit to lead the movement to overthrow the Tokugawa *shogun*, to restore the emperor as the actual head of the state,²² and eventually to democratize Japan as their future goal as they assume the leadership in the domains.

The lower *samurai*, whose ability to forge a coalition of disparate classes of people and feudal institutions, were able to “draw their superiors along with them” to the eventual overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate, thus changing the matrix of leadership in the feudal domains.²³ It was these lower *samurai*, concludes Norman, who became the “vanguard of modernization, in the establishment of a modern state in Japan,” by successfully organizing an unlikely coalition.²⁴

Norman’s book, translated into Japanese, was widely read as a standard work on the subject in both Japan and the West. Beginning in the mid 1950’s, however, scholars began to challenge Norman’s basic thesis. Some argue that Norman’s Marxist or economic class-interest theory is too broad, while others find his definition of the “lower *samurai*” not sufficient enough. Still others have suggested that before the Meiji Restoration there was no single vision of a new polity, much less a blueprint among the

²¹Ibid., 80.

²²Ibid., 16.

²³Ibid., 34.

²⁴Ibid., 102.

leaders outlining what a post-Restoration Japan was supposed to look like.²⁵

Nevertheless, Norman's work did stimulate the interests of scholars to conduct more exhaustive research and to produce more comprehensive studies on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries and the causes of the Meiji Restoration.

Sidney Brown was one of the first historians who challenged Norman's thesis by concentrating on the life of Kido Takayoshi, who was born the son of a physician but was adopted by a "substantial samurai" family, attaining eventually higher rank within the feudal structure of Choshu.²⁶ Far from being stuck as a "lower *samurai*" in the pre-Restoration feudal system, Kido's rise attests to not only the interchangeability within the class structure, at least as applied in Choshu, but the flexibility within the composition of *samurai* rank. In addition, different domains developed their own *samurai* schools, which had been established, to educate *samurai* youths, especially for philosophical and military training. Kido, Brown points out, attended a Choshu private school that was considered "the cradle of the Revolution of 1868."²⁷ Kido, then, was able to elevate his social status through his adoption to a *samurai* family and attendance at this domain school. Kido, who later emerged as one of the leading revolutionaries, was not one of these typical lower *samurai* whom Norman considers as the molders of the Meiji Restoration. Moreover, as Marius Jansen argues in his Sakamoto Ryoma and the Meiji Restoration (1961), that it is problematical to generalize a local revolutionary phenomenon in one domain to be a nation-wide trend.²⁸ Not only were the domains

²⁵Albert M. Craig, *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 65.

²⁶Sidney Brown, "Kido Takayoshi (1833-1877): Meiji Japan's Cautious Revolutionary," Pacific Historical Review, 25 (May, 1956): 152.

²⁷Ito Hirobumi quoted in Brown, "Kido Takayoshi," 152.

²⁸Marius B. Jansen, *Sakamoto Ryoma and the Meiji Restoration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 268, 269.

unique in their outlook but the individuals who comprised the nucleus of the Restoration movement had different motivations and goals concerning the future of Japan even within one domain.

Brown further argues that Kido after the Restoration became a “spokesman for agrarian and feudal classes,” while other revolutionaries sought to dismantle the feudal state in favor of “a state-patronized industrialization program.”²⁹ The Meiji revolutionaries, however, Brown admits, were not in full agreement as to how Japan should move forward after the Restoration. The movement of the revolutionaries to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate and restore the emperor, he maintains, may have been the only immediate and short-term agreement during the pre-Restoration movement. Many of the revolutionaries after the Restoration agreed to legislate changes that tended to benefit Japan as a whole rather than benefit their respective domain. Thus, a *samurai* need not necessarily travel to the large cities to find an education and to find like-minded *samurai* from other domains.

In Choshu, for example, a battle for leadership of the domain between the conservatives, who wanted to preserve *bakufu* hegemony, and the radicals led by Kido, who supported restoration of the emperor, had concluded with the radicals winning the Choshu Civil War. Brown points out that Kido ended up “serving as chief minister of the clan,” leading it to eventual victory over the shogunate on the field of battle.³⁰ Norman’s naming of Kido as an example of the kind of “lower *samurai*,” upon whose leadership the

²⁹Brown, “Kido Takayoshi,” 151.

³⁰Ibid., 153.

Meiji Restoration was dependent,³¹ is inconsistent with Brown's more specific account of Kido's life, his *samurai* rank, and his actual contribution to the Meiji Restoration.

Later in the same year, Yoshio Sakata and John Hall also challenged the interpretation advanced by Norman. They believe that like Norman "Marxist historians who have based their analysis on the deterministic theories of economic change and class struggle" have too often relied upon "overly general concepts or upon a single cause to the exclusion of others."³² For a more systematic analysis of the Restoration, they demand that a historian must "utilize multiple 'levels of conceptualization.'"³³ Outlining all of the historical methods that had been attempted to analyze the Meiji Restoration (narrative, economic, comparative, and general), Sakata and Hall suggest that "a more systematic approach" is necessary to comprehend such an historical event by attempting a middle ground or a synthesis combining many attributes of narrative and general history.³⁴

Utilizing this systematic approach, Sakata and Hall try to identify "the participating agents in the political process" of the Meiji Restoration.³⁵ They argue that the impoverishment of the lower strata of *samurai* and peasants, for example, was a result of the restrictions placed on the feudal lords by the Tokugawa shogunate, not the policy of the feudal lords to arbitrarily tax the lower *samurai* and peasants at higher rates or that they wanted to take their land; the feudal lords had no other option. In short, Sakata and

³¹Norman, *Japan's Emergence*, 70.

³²Yoshio Sakata and John Hall, "The Motivation of Political Leadership in the Meiji Restoration," *Journal of Asian Studies* 16 (Nov., 1956): 32.

³³*Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 32.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 34.

Hall criticize historians such as Norman for not having fully investigated all of the preceding causes of specific events to ascertain their effects accurately.

Disputing the specific argument put forward by Norman that it was the “lower samurai class” who engineered the Meiji Restoration, Sakata and Hall point out the need to examine “the degree of social heterogeneity” among the revolutionary *samurai* as a whole. They argue that many of the *samurai* who led the Restoration movement had the “ability to manipulate the political and military forces” within their own domains.³⁶ *Samurai* like Kido, they insist, were already in positions of authority in the lead up to the Restoration. So how could they be classified as “lower *samurai*?”

The *ronin*, those *samurai* who had detached from their *daimyo* for economic reasons and then traveled to the cities in search of economic opportunity, were actually, Sakata and Hall emphasize, *shishi* (men of high purpose) who, through their political conviction of anti-foreignism, detached themselves from their *daimyo* in order to agitate for this objective. In other words, the *ronin* Sakata and Hall are highlighting already possessed a political agenda and did not leave their domain for economic reasons. Thus, these formerly loyal *samurai* were already “*shishi* who had become *ronin*, not *ronin* who became *shishi*.”³⁷ In their investigation of the nature of the revolutionaries, Sakata and Hall admit that court nobles like Sanjo Sanetomi and upper *samurai* domain councilors like Goto Shojiro all had a hand in the success of the Meiji Restoration. They also give special credit to Katsu Rintaro, a *bakufu* naval bureaucrat, who convinced the *shogun*, Keiki, to resign his post to avoid a civil war.³⁸ A systematic approach to history,

³⁶Ibid., 33.

³⁷Ibid., 44.

³⁸Ibid., 49.

covering as many individuals as possible, and investigating the causes of each event, the authors insist, will give any historian the ammunition they need to explain its effects.

Kee-Il Choi argues that it was the Tokugawa *bakufu* itself that made a major contribution to the success of *samurai* and *daimyo* plans and strategies in the Meiji Restoration. A “built-in mechanism,” Choi insists, like the *sankin-kotai* system instituted by the *bakufu*, was designed to force the *daimyo* to be under strict control of the *bakufu*. Choi points out that when the *daimyo* were performing their *sankin-kotai* duties traveling to the *bakufu* capitol of Edo every other year, it unwittingly produced many unexpected chain reactions, political, economic, and social, and turned out to be a most important factor in undermining the Tokugawa equilibrium.³⁹

The policy of keeping the *daimyo* weak so the *bakufu* could maintain its hegemony was upended when the *daimyo* and their *samurai* entourages began observing the weaknesses in the Tokugawa system as a whole. Still not strong enough to threaten the *bakufu* militarily, the *daimyo* waited with vigilant hostility for an opportunity to present itself.⁴⁰ The opportunity came with the *sankin-kotai* system itself, which had brought hundreds of thousands of *samurai* to Edo, comprising half of the population of this largest city in the world, and Osaka,⁴¹ where they gathered every other year to criticize the *bakufu* and talk about the possibility of revolution.⁴²

The communication and travel network set-up as a result of *sankin-kotai*, insists Choi, made it easier for Western ideas of technology and philosophy to flow back and forth from the *samurai* in Edo to his *daimyo* back in his domain. After Perry’s Western

³⁹Kee-Il Choi, “Tokugawa Feudalism and the Emergence of the New Leaders of Early Modern Japan,” *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* 9 (1956): 73.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 72.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 75.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 74.

“invasion” in 1853, many *samurai*, at first very anti-foreign in their ideas, began to appreciate this technology of the West. More importantly, the military advantage that the Western nations held over the Tokugawa *bakufu*, presented an opening to its overthrow that the *daimyo* and *samurai* needed.

The *bakufu*, attempting to adapt to this show of force from the West, began sponsoring diplomatic travel to the West to learn its ways. National schools were established in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, to encourage men of ability, no matter their rank or class, from everywhere in Japan, to come study the ways of the world, stimulating the competition between the individual domains and the *bakufu*.

Choi points out that the *daimyo* initiated a search for talent among their *samurai* retainers to exploit the weaknesses of the *bakufu*, while simultaneously encouraging them to learn entrepreneurial business and military ideas from the West. A new young breed of educated lower *samurai* would employ Western ideas to successfully compete with the *bakufu*.⁴³ It was at this time, that more domain schools were built than in any previous time.⁴⁴

The prevailing *samurai* principle of absolute loyalty to the *daimyo*, aided by their worldly knowledge gained in these schools, helped cement the tie between the *samurai* and the *daimyo*,⁴⁵ and they joined in their mission to modernize and, ultimately, out-progress the *bakufu*.⁴⁶ The lower rank *samurai*, Choi argues, were the harbinger of a fledgling industrial program in Japan. By their demonstrated talent in Western learning

⁴³Ibid., 83.

⁴⁴Ibid., 77.

⁴⁵Ibid., 72

⁴⁶Ibid., 80.

gained in the domain school system, the *samurai* gradually became part of their new domain leadership.

The built-in mechanism of the *sankin-kotai* system, which unintentionally spawned a new entrepreneurialism, Choi reminds us, was the forerunner of a Japan that sought to progress to the ways of the West by means of industry. In order to train these up and coming industrialists, the *daimyo* had built schools, or sent their *samurai* to the cities to be trained. These newly educated and enlightened men, far from remaining static in their lower *samurai* rank, rose to become domain leaders, eventually to help carry through the overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate.

Choi explains that with all of the military and financial pressure the *bakufu* applied to the *daimyo*, their answer was to seize an opportunity presented by the Western nations in their threat to the hegemony of the *bakufu*. By building schools, the *daimyo* encouraged young minds to explore and exploit the knowledge of the West. Choi admits, that as a result of the *bakufu* and *daimyo* talent searches, a new leader, the *samurai* of lower rank, came to light.⁴⁷

The built-in mechanism was not necessarily the *sankin-kotai* system itself, nor was it the reaction by the *daimyo* and their *samurai* retainers to the trade invasion of the West, an invasion that weakened the *bakufu* and gave strength to its enemies. This mechanism that ultimately gave strength and initiative to the *daimyo* and the intelligent young *samurai* that soon emerged was Tokugawa feudalism, a hegemonic political system that educated its indigenous population, but could not adapt militarily and ideologically to the ways of the West. The kind of entrepreneurial initiative that could adapt to a changing Japan was that taken up by the domains. It was the Tokugawa feudal

⁴⁷Ibid., 84.

system, Choi summarizes, that unwittingly unleashed an ideological environment in Japan from which it never recovered and from which its entrepreneurial *daimyo* and *samurai* leaders could emerge.⁴⁸

Choi points out that among the generation of *samurai* who sought the overthrow of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, the restoration of the emperor, and the setting up of the Meiji government, it was the older and more experienced revolutionaries born before 1833, like Kido, Okubo Toshimichi, and Saigo Takamori, who led these movements. The next generation of *samurai* revolutionaries born between the years 1834-1841, like Okuma Shigenobu and Ito Hirobumi, “were path breakers in various fields in the modernization of Japan” after the Restoration. The cohort of *samurai* born after 1841 eventually became the national leaders in business and cultural pursuits⁴⁹ as much as a decade after the Restoration. Though there is some overlap in the age brackets, it would be difficult, Choi admits, to assign the same motivations or even the same ranks to every *samurai* who played a part in the multi-faceted revolution during the Meiji Era. Thus, labeling the Meiji leaders “lower *samurai*,” as if they were all motivated to fight for the same purpose is to ignore their specific individual roles, contributions, and achievements during the many stages of the Meiji Era.

Three years later, Roger Hackett tries to present an alternative view on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries. His brief biography of Nishi Amane, a young *samurai* who became a Tokugawa bureaucrat, discusses how Nishi, a gifted student in his domain school, was assigned by the *bakufu* government to learn the secrets of a foreign

⁴⁸Ibid., 84.

⁴⁹Ibid., 82.

civilization.⁵⁰ Not only were the domains sponsoring schools of learning but the *bakufu* was beginning to recruit bright young *samurai* of talent from all over Japan. The *bakufu's* search for talent bore fruit as they began to travel to the shogunal capitol to enhance their education. Nishi, born the son of a court physician in Tsuwano domain, was selected to be educated at his domain's school, a privilege generally accorded only to the sons of *samurai*. He was soon recognized for his ability in the literary and military arts, and as a result, he was sent to Edo to further his studies.⁵¹ While in Edo, Nishi learned the Dutch and English languages so quickly that he was further tasked by the *bakufu* to attend the Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books, which taught such subjects as statistics, law, economics, political science, and foreign diplomatic relations.⁵²

Hackett points out that Nishi recognized the valuable contribution of foreign learning to the *bakufu*. The Tokugawa shogunate's internal enemies, the *tozama daimyo*, their *samurai* vassals, and the *ronin*, had come to discover the *bakufu's* reluctance to defend Japan from foreigners, as evident when Tokugawa was forced to open trade to the United States in 1854. When some of the domains hostile to the *bakufu* began applying pressure on the *bakufu* to expel the foreigners, the *bakufu*, too weak militarily to compete with the West, began trying to find ways to learn of the strengths and weaknesses of the Western nations.⁵³

For this endeavor, the *bakufu* recruited bright young men, even from hostile domains, to study Western politics, philosophy, and military techniques. In order to

⁵⁰Roger F. Hackett, "Nishi Amane – A Tokugawa Bureaucrat," *Journal of Asian Studies* 18 (Feb. 1959): 213.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 213.

⁵²Cited in Okubo Toshiaki, "Bakufu no Oranda gakusei" ["Bakufu Students of the Dutch Learning"], *Nihon rekishi* 7 (July, 1953): 3.

⁵³Hackett, "Nishi Amane," 214.

maintain its hegemony over Japan, the *bakufu* would be willing to do anything, even the promotion of Western learning. The *bakufu*'s motive to finance programs for Western learning, Hackett argues, may have been to eventually rid Japan of Westerners. The bright young *samurai*, who were eager to learn about the politics, diplomacy, and philosophy of the West, on the other hand, did become inspired to apply their newly acquired knowledge in the Japanese political arena. Nishi, however, chose to pursue his personal goals of the modernization of the Japanese nation by working for the *bakufu*.

The Tokugawa shogunate needed to implement new military techniques to resist the West, and that is where Nishi's training in languages proved most effective. Sent to Europe in 1862 to translate Dutch naval strategy and to purchase ships to build up its navy, the Tokugawa *bakufu* discovered upon his return in 1865 that Nishi had acquired proficiency in military defense techniques and strategy. Pressured to teach at the new military academy in Edo, Nishi set about hiring faculty, setting up curricula, and recruiting cadets from all over Japan. Emphasizing the military and liberal arts, this model was adopted by the domain military schools that soon sprang up,⁵⁴ teaching *samurai* of all backgrounds about Western military techniques.⁵⁵

For many *samurai* seeking to learn about the West, these schools became commonplace in the Japanese countryside, and they provided the intellectual setting for the revolutionaries to adapt Japanese techniques to Western methods. Hackett points out, however, that for many revolutionary *samurai* wishing to excel in these Western techniques, there were peaceful and intelligent *samurai* like Nishi who imparted this knowledge to these revolutionaries, who used it as a means to eventually challenge the

⁵⁴Ibid., 216.

⁵⁵Ibid., 213.

Tokugawa *bakufu*. This up and coming Japanese intelligentsia, Hackett argues, as advocates of Westernization years before a movement to overthrow the Tokugawa *bakufu* even gained momentum, were important “agents of change” both before and after the Meiji Restoration. “Transformers” like Nishi,⁵⁶ were the *samurai* forebears of the revolution that gave impetus to the revolutionaries in their drive to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate.

Contributing to the scholarship on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries in the same year as Hackett, Joyce Lebra focuses on another *samurai* trained by the Tokugawa, Okuma Shigenobu, who, just like Nishi, became an intellectual revolutionary while studying and working for the *bakufu*. Naomasa Nabeshima, the *tozama daimyo* of Hizen, was, like Nishi’s *daimyo*, hostile to the *bakufu*. Born in a family of “middle” *samurai* rank, Okuma studied the Dutch and English languages in schools founded by the Tokugawa shogunate.⁵⁷ And it was from this Western learning that Okuma would later develop his political philosophy of imperial restoration while a member of a radical, pro-imperial Hizen domain society, the Gisai domei.⁵⁸ A post-Restoration proponent of political parties, public speeches, and British style parliamentary government, Okuma is best remembered in Japan as the man most responsible for promoting the idea of convening Japan’s first Diet⁵⁹ and for founding Waseda University in Tokyo in 1882.

Norman has emphatically argued that the leadership of the revolutionaries consisted of “lower *samurai*,” and he included in that assessment, Okuma Shigenobu.⁶⁰

⁵⁶Ibid., 213.

⁵⁷W.G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990), 58.

⁵⁸H.D. Harootunian, *Toward Restoration: The Growth of Political Consciousness in Tokugawa Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 280.

⁵⁹Joyce C. Lebra, “Okuma Shigenobu and the 1881 Political Crisis,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 18:4 (Aug., 1959): 487.

⁶⁰Norman, *Japan’s Emergence*, 70.

Jansen agrees ever so little with Norman's opinion, pointing out that Okuma did fall out of favor with his own domain's high officials for his pro-imperial stance. To become alienated from the other *samurai* in ones domain might give one pause to reflect on the values and goals of the leadership within the domain. In turn, this might drive a young *samurai* to reject the privileges once conferred upon him by his domain and become a *ronin*. Okuma, however, rejected the *ronin* lifestyle and would later become involved with high domain officials like Goto Shojiro, councilor to Yamanouchi Yodo, the *daimyo* of Tosa.⁶¹ The inter-domain coalition formed among the *samurai* of all ranks and in some cases their *daimyo* are more representative of the ideal Japanese revolutionary than those who Norman believes remained relatively static in their lower *samurai* class and idealism. To relegate these revolutionaries to a faceless "lower *samurai*" class, as has Norman, ignores the individual contributions of "middle *samurai*," like Okuma who, as Jansen points out, quietly organized coalitions of *samurai* from all backgrounds to fulfill their collective desire to implement a more revolutionary Japanese polity.

Albert Craig also disputes Norman's proposition about the characterization of the Meiji revolutionaries coming from the "lower" *samurai* class and maintains that Norman's reference to them as "lower *samurai*" is absurd.⁶² When categorizing *samurai* in Choshu, Craig questions Norman's postulate; he does not clearly define the term or how it applied to individual *samurai* revolutionaries. One must first distinguish between the forty different ranks that comprise the term "*samurai*."⁶³ There were "upper" *shi samurai* like Kido Takayoshi and "lower" *sotsu samurai* like Ito Hirobumi, which by

⁶¹Jansen, *Sakamoto Ryoma*, 276.

⁶²Albert Craig, "Japan in Transition: The Restoration Movement in Choshu," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 18:2 (Feb., 1959): 188.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 189.

itself has twenty-three grades of rank. Some *samurai*, even those considered “upper” *shi samurai* in Choshu, received stipends comparable to “lower *samurai*” in other domains.⁶⁴ Craig suggests that it would be a distortion to use the term that connotes a single class “united by common economic and political frustrations and bent upon turning the tradition in their domains and the nation upside down,”⁶⁵ because the many *samurai* who did contribute to the Meiji Restoration came from many different backgrounds. Craig’s bottom line is that the Meiji Restoration was not led only by “lower *samurai*.”⁶⁶

That is not to say that there were no “lower *samurai*” who were key contributors to the Meiji Restoration. They were not necessarily the leaders of the Meiji Restoration but leaders of local militias who supported their more senior military leaders like Kido. Ito Hirobumi, for example, ascended from plebeian origin to the *samurai* rank in Choshu,⁶⁷ clearly demonstrating the fluidity of the rank structure in feudal Japan, not the permanent station of a lower class of *samurai* as Norman states. As a soldier or lower class *sotsu samurai*, Ito led a militia unit during the 1864 Civil War that sought to replace the “conservative,” pro-*bakufu* leadership in Choshu.⁶⁸ Ito demonstrated his ability to lead military detachments by recruiting commoners and other men of ability (not men of traditional rank), a revolutionary concept in Japanese military warfare, to fight in this civil war. These militia units were essential to Choshu’s decisive contribution to the Meiji Restoration. It was only after the Restoration that Ito would rise within the newly implemented Choshu and national political rank structure, contributing significantly to the modernization and democratization of Japan.

⁶⁴Ibid., 190.

⁶⁵Ibid., 191.

⁶⁶Ibid., 187.

⁶⁷Norman, *Japan’s Emergence*,” 56.

⁶⁸Craig, *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji*, 36.

Far from being stuck as a plebeian in the feudal rank structure, Ito was selected for his ability, an ability that was recognized by his *samurai* superiors. By being recognized for his potential as a revolutionary supporter of the Meiji Restoration, Ito did not supersede his *samurai* superiors outside the domain rank structure, but he was rewarded by his superiors for his exceptional ability within the guidelines of traditional domain politics.

Norman also advocates the alienated *ronin*, who sought political change outside of the traditional domain political structure, became educated, and returned to their domains as leaders of the Restoration movement. Jansen, in his Sakamoto Ryoma (1961), describes such a *samurai*, who closely fits the profile of this type of revolutionary. Born into a family of *goshi* (farmer) *samurai*,⁶⁹ Sakamoto's radical anti-foreign politics, attracting the attention of his *daimyo*, forced him to flee for his life from Tosa to become what Norman would describe as the prototypical *ronin*. He would eventually become a leading proponent of radical assassination plots against Tosa and *bakufu* officials,⁷⁰ until he had a life-changing experience.

Sakamoto was in the act of assassinating a *bakufu* official, who in turn persuaded him to change his mind. Sakamoto became ashamed of his zealous actions and eventually asked Katsu Rintaro, a high-placed *bakufu* naval commander, to become his mentor.⁷¹ Katsu guided Sakamoto to become a constructive member of the Restoration movement by working with other *ronin*, and even loyal *samurai* and *daimyo* from other domains, to take heed of the advanced military technology of the foreigners. Schooled in Tosa as a young *samurai*, Sakamoto left to continue his education in Edo where he

⁶⁹Jansen, *Sakamoto Ryoma*, 78.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 119.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 164.

learned of Perry's trade mission and developed his anti-foreign stance.⁷² Through Katsu's pro-Western urging and advice, Sakamoto would eventually develop and run a private shipping company sponsored by Satsuma domain,⁷³ which funneled arms to Choshu in its defense from a *bakufu* punitive expedition.

A typical lower-class *ronin* highlighted by Norman, Sakamoto had managed to bring to the negotiating table the hostile *tozama daimyo* of Satsuma and Choshu, brokering an alliance between the two that was the anchor of the successful multi-domain military force that eventually overthrew the *bakufu* and restored the emperor.⁷⁴ Pardoned by his domain for his forward-looking diplomatic accomplishments, Sakamoto became a trendsetter among *samurai* of all ranks, and one of the most influential lower *samurai* leaders of the Restoration movement.

Sakamoto's about-face from reactionary to intellectual leader illustrates that under the guidance of a *bakufu* mentor, he changed his opinions mid-stream to become an intellectual guiding force for the Restoration. Sakamoto might never have had the opportunity to lead the Restoration movement, unless Tosa's social mobility policy allowed lower class clan members to acquire *samurai* rank.⁷⁵ Credited with drafting a pre-Restoration document, the Eight-Point Plan, proposing an outline for a peaceful solution to avoid the upcoming Restoration Civil War, lenience towards the *bakufu*, and democratic political reforms,⁷⁶ Sakamoto, once a fervent anti-foreign and anti-*bakufu* zealot, became an intellectual and inclusive revolutionary, emerging as the moderate exception to the single-minded and anti-*bakufu* "lower *samurai*" example championed by

⁷²Ibid., 83.

⁷³Ibid., 216.

⁷⁴Ibid., 218-221.

⁷⁵Ibid., 78.

⁷⁶Ibid., 295-299.

Norman. Sakamoto's attempts to change the Tokugawa political system by alienating himself from the feudal structure, along with the cheap intimidation of officials, proved a failure as he was relegated to the role of a meaningless and ineffective fanatic. Only by seeking alliances with the more influential *samurai*, *daimyo*, and even *bakufu* officials, was Sakamoto able to affect meaningful leadership and substantive change into a new Japanese polity.

The expositions of the alleged inconsistencies, in the works discussed above, seem to have closed the book on Norman's grand and generalized theory, as the debate went silent for the two or three decades following the publication of Jansen's Sakamoto Ryoma (1961), but the issue has not been resolved as a new interpretation is important for a full understanding of the Meiji Restoration and its leaders.

To what extent could Norman's thesis withstand the challenges and criticisms of later historians? To state succinctly, Norman's argument is that the overthrow of the Tokugawa *bakufu* was achieved through the combined anti-Tokugawa forces, led by lower *samurai* and *ronin*, particularly of the powerful southwestern domains, Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen, with full cooperation of the imperial court nobles (*kuge*) in Kyoto and supported by the rich merchants of Osaka and Kyoto. Among these groups, all of which played integral, essential parts, it was the lower *samurai* who assumed the leadership during this revolutionary change.

As we have seen, subsequent scholars, concentrating on specific events and the individual careers and motivations of major leaders of all types and examining them in depth, have come up with different conclusions. Focusing on limited, narrow topics but

altogether working on a wider sampling and more diverse leaders, they have revealed that the Meiji leaders were not primarily lower class *samurai* nor were they necessarily class motivated.

By so doing, most of these scholars have shifted the focus from the earlier Restoration leaders to the later Meiji leaders, who occupied important positions in the new government, and from the lower class to the middle class *samurai*. As Brown points out, Norman's thesis does not explain how *samurai*, like Kido, rose within his domain's feudal power structure to ultimately guide its contribution to a successful conclusion to the Meiji Restoration. Hackett's study on Nishi and Lebra's work on Okuma, as well as Brown's Kido, all argue that these revolutionaries were not really considered "lower *samurai*." Especially convincing is Craig's study on Choshu, maintaining that major Restoration leaders came not only from the "lower *samurai*" class but from many different backgrounds. Upward social mobility was commonplace in the domains as the *daimyo* sought talented and intelligent men of ability to help compete with and ultimately defeat the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Sakata and Hall further argue that the degree of social heterogeneity among the revolutionary *samurai* as a whole demonstrates how they were not relegated to a permanent underclass, thus, undercutting Norman's premise that the motivation for the mass movement of these revolutionaries was economic.

Moreover, many of those who were lower *samurai* during the Restoration like Ito and Okuma, some historians argue, did make valuable contributions to the success of the movement, but they did not lead it, due largely to their young age. These inconspicuous lower *samurai* followed the example of their feudal superiors, the *daimyo* and *shishi*, who

were by far more influential than the former. It was only after the Restoration that these lower *samurai* gained importance and began to agitate for further modernization.

These lower *samurai*, however, were not the main subject of Norman's study. What Norman is talking about are young "lower *samurai*" who played a significant role in the Restoration itself. As if to advance Norman's theory, Choi proposes his generational approach to distinguish the two generations of the "lower *samurai*:" the older and more experienced revolutionaries born before 1833 and the new generation of *samurai* born between 1834 and 1841. Norman's "lower *samurai*" certainly belong to Choi's first generation of *samurai*. The most prominent of these revolutionaries were Kido, Sakamoto, Nakaoka Shintaro, Saigo, Okubo, and all of the heirs of Yoshida Shoin, a loyalist teacher specializing in military instruction in the Choshu domain.

As Norman abundantly demonstrates, these lower *samurai* worked effectively with the rich *chonin*, their *daimyo*, their counterparts in other domains, the *bakufu*, and the court nobles in Kyoto, especially Iwakura Tomomi. Many important agreements were made between domains through their endeavors. Perhaps the most crucial agreement was made in 1866 between Satsuma and Choshu (traditionally enemy domains) by the efforts of Sakamoto and Nakaoka of Tosa. In the same year, Kido of Choshu and Saigo of Satsuma agreed that Satsuma would provide its help in mediating for Choshu at court and that both domains would work together for "the glory of the Imperial country." It was also Saigo, who forced Edo, defended by the *bakufu* official Katsu Rintaro (Kaishu), to surrender in the spring of 1868.

Norman's work on the revolutionaries, which was published some seventy years ago, continues to be vital, despite various attacks from all sides. His key concept of the

“lower *samurai*,” however, needs to be more fully refined. Norman’s lack of specificity regarding the identities of the Restoration *samurai* calls into question the thoroughness of his work, inducing recent scholars to misunderstand his work. He does not, for example, seem to imply, as later historians insist he does, that his “lower *samurai*,” a large number of nameless people in many domains, were the ones who, led by class or economic motivation, had instigated the revolution as a class struggle. Such misinterpretations are prevalent among many recent historians. Even Jansen in his book on Sakamoto Ryoma goes so far as to point out that “it is problematic to generalize a local revolutionary phenomenon in one domain to be a nation-wide trend.” Norman, however, does not appear to have intended to conduct such a comprehensive study. His objective is to affirm a group of specific lower class *samurai* from a small number of particular domains.

His “lower *samurai*,” therefore, were not representative of the lower *samurai* in the late Tokugawa feudal society. They were, instead, an incredibly small number of *samurai*, drawn from a few, influential domains, such as Satsuma, Choshu, and Tosa. Norman should also have emphasized the fact that these men were not only small in number but exceptionally gifted and well versed in Western civilization as a result of their training in the “Dutch Learning” programs in Nagasaki, Osaka, Edo, and their own domains, which had established private schools.

Norman should, furthermore, have asserted more strongly the fact that these “lower *samurai*” were remarkably young men, ranging from twenty-seven to forty-one, and the significance of their “lower *samurai*” status. Coming from relatively poor backgrounds, these *samurai*, in fact, grew up in the atmosphere of a rigid, regimented, hierarchical feudal society and witnessed, from their early childhood on, the suffering and

hardship their fathers (lower *samurai*) had to go through. They developed little emotional feeling and sentiment for the feudal system and came naturally to regard feudalism not only as detrimental to individuals and society but as “their fathers’ mortal enemy” and became determined to eradicate it. Through clever manipulation, persuasion, and steadfastness, these exceptionally talented men with strong self-assurance took the opportunity to establish for themselves, their domains, and their country a new society, where all the constraints of feudal rules and structure would be eliminated.

All the weaknesses, notwithstanding, Norman’s study still remains fundamentally sound. Although the *samurai* who contributed to the Meiji Restoration did come from many different backgrounds, it is Norman who singles out a group of leaders from the lower *samurai* class who instigated the Restoration and played a crucial role in it.

Eventually, the generational change forced the Restoration leaders, such as Kido, Okubo, Saigo, and Sakamoto, to be swept away, like the outdated *bakufu* had been, and the younger more progressive generation, who did not even participate in the Restoration, like Nishi and Okuma, or played only minor roles in it, like Ito, assumed the mantle of leadership and began to control the new government. But the generational shift was not the only force preventing them from participating in the Meiji government. To occupy important positions in the new government was not the major concern of these revolutionaries. By then, they must have realized that their mission had already been fully accomplished.

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This bibliography consists only of secondary materials in the usual sense. None of the information culled from these works, however, has been used to reconstruct the past. Instead, these monographs, books and articles, have been examined to ascertain the specific interpretations of the authors. For the purpose of my essay, which has purported to present an original, new interpretation, all the works listed below have, therefore, been treated as primary materials, not as secondary works.

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