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1

Introduction

There would hardly seem to be any necessity to write a new history of the Meiji Restoration given the sheer volume of research that already exists on the era in question. My justification for attempting to write a new history is the conviction that there is a need for a critical revision of certain preconceptions that remain deeply entrenched in the current historiography. This is not to denigrate the work done to date—the primary aim is to reassert the significance of particular aspects of Japan's political history that have, for a variety of reasons, come to fall outside the purview of mainstream commentary.

Certainly the characterization of the Restoration has undergone a number of subtle revisions and changes over the last 30 years. A great deal of the impetus for this revision has been drawn from persistent dissatisfaction with the use of the term given that it does not convey the essence of the original Japanese, *Ishin*, constructed as it is out of the two Chinese characters for “continuity” and “renewal” (維新). Nevertheless the term “Restoration” has been the long-standing staple by virtue of the fact that, if nothing else, the events that unfolded from that date onward were ostensibly undertaken within the political framework of a restored monarchy.

Even so, many have chaffed at the term pointing out, with considerable justification, that the reforms that followed the Restoration were so radical and transformational that “Restoration” simply does not do the event justice. The other aspect that has made it difficult to label it has been the rather perplexing phenomenon of a society-wide reform carried out—ostensibly at least—by the former ruling class elite, the *samurai*. The changes brought about were indeed “revolutionary” but not in a form that has a parallel in the Western European experience of revolutions.

2 *The Meiji Restoration*

Consequently, there has been a considerable amount of controversy surrounding how one ought to term the “revolution” that occurred in the wake of the January-the-third coup d’état of 1868. The adoption of the term “transformation” in place of *Ishin* or Restoration in the excellent collection of essays edited by Jansen and Rozman¹ was possibly one of the better instances of a thorough attempt to accommodate those concerns. On another tack, some have rejected “Restoration” for the term Revolution, preferring to emphasize the drastic changes wrought upon Japanese society and the hitherto unprecedented degree of popular agitation. In this connection, Huber’s book on the revolutionary origins of the Restoration is a prime example, and Wilson’s discussion of popular developments, including the “Ee ja nai ka” fad of spontaneous festivals immediately preceding the fall of the Bakufu, merit special attention².

Along side the milestone publication of Jansen and Rozman in 1986, which still remains one of the best general introductions to the Meiji period to date, there is another important collection of essays produced at around the same time by Nagai Michio and Miguel Urrutia, *Meiji Ishin: Restoration and Revolution*, which contains the contributions of a veritable “who’s who” of Meiji history specialists from both Japan and the US.³ The essays of the individual contributors are unfortunately brief but content-wise they offer alternative perspectives on key themes. More recently, there has been the excellent overview of the Edo and Meiji periods by Andrew Gordon, which provides one of the more carefully nuanced accounts of Japan’s modern political development.⁴

Together, these works constitute a thorough overview of the various facets of the period in question, and those wishing to have a standard text should refer to these works in the first instance—indeed the aim of this book is very much to provide a complementary viewpoint rather than produce an entire replacement. Even so, it should be remarked that some of the key texts remain collections of the work of disparate authors and therefore do not always hold together as seamlessly integrated narratives. Others are reworked versions of earlier books that are now somewhat out of date.⁵

One more recent attempt to break with the conventional historiography and explore alternative interpretations has been undertaken by Richard Sims in *Japanese Political History Since the Meiji Renovation*⁶ which rejects the nomenclature of the “Restoration”, opting instead for a wholly new term, “renovation”. Sims’ aim of filling “the gap between general histories of Japan and the monographic literature” is laudable but, as will be argued in this work, the term Restoration is not to be lightly rejected. Moreover, in the end the work is arguably more

conventional in its narrative than the title suggests and has the added drawback of commencing from 1868, the year of the Restoration, rather than providing adequate coverage of the period of political development beforehand. Demarcating historical studies on the basis of the beginning of Emperor Meiji's rule is a common enough tendency (possibly stemming from the influence of Japanese scholarship which tends to compartmentalize historiography into *kinsei* and *kindai* periods); this is very consciously avoided in this volume.

A work that has clearly done a better job of filling the "gaps" that Sims so aptly emphasized is Carol Gluck's *Japan's Modern Myths*⁷, although it remains unclear why the focus was on the latter Meiji period when so much of the groundwork for the development of national ideology was established in the second decade following the Restoration. It is also debatable whether the term "myth" ought to have been reiterated in relation to Meiji Japan when, as most scholars of nationalism will acknowledge, all modern nation states indulge in the practice of national-myth construction and Japan is perhaps merely a more overt example.

Consequently, there remains something of an unresolved contradiction at the heart of the Meiji Restoration that cannot be easily resolved by juxtaposing the conservative and retrospective drive of the Restoration with the innovative and iconoclastic aspects of the social transformation. Even contemporary commentators such as Tokutomi Sohō who was, initially at least, a fervent advocate of the Restoration as a revolutionary and in many ways counter-traditional process, remained acutely aware of this contradiction, employing the rather telling figure of a two-headed snake⁸. There were clearly contradictory forces at work in those early stages but there was also something that was holding it together, at least long enough until the disparate forces found some new equilibrium and social institutions acquired some greater degree of stability.

In order to resolve that sense of contradiction, I would argue that an essential first step is to more directly challenge the perception of 1868 as a turning point where the great leap from traditionalism to modernity took place. For the newcomer to comprehensive histories of early modern Japan, it is easy to come away with the impression that following the Restoration, feudalism was replaced by industrialism, superstition gave way to reason and science, and that, as seems implicit in many commentaries, authoritarianism commenced a slow retreat in the face of the inexorable drive of the democratic and liberal impulses of "the people".

The sheer scope and scale of Japan's transformation following the Restoration of Imperial Rule in 1868 makes it tempting to overemphasize the political novelty of the developments following the event, especially given that they seem to usher in something of a "miracle". Certainly, the achievement was extraordinary; however, the transformation is capable of explanation in terms that are less hyperbolic. The essence of the wonder at the scale of the transformation also possibly stems from the fact that it did not follow a Western pattern, or at least did not occur in the wake of similar kinds of social transformation witnessed in the Western precedents. Even so, there have been persistent attempts to trawl through the Western experience for familiar lines of narrative to apply to the Japanese case. For example, given that certain kinds of leaders and certain types of ideas have mattered a great deal over the last 200 years in Western history, the tendency has been to look for parallels to explain the Japanese case. Consequently, the leaders behind the Restoration have variously been characterized as highly cosmopolitan "modernizers" who have undertaken a program of national refurbishment according to the Western pattern.

The attempt to make sense of the Restoration in such terms has tended to obscure the very strong persistence of pre-Meiji conceptions of status, duty and morality that continued to characterize the political culture at the time of the Restoration and further on throughout the ensuing period. It has also invited assumptions that the Meiji strategy for fixing national policy amounted to more or less thumbing through the catalogue of Western institutions, whether it is in relation to military organization or to the matter of the Constitution, and then selecting the "model" to suit. As an ironic corollary, the cause of the experiment's failure has in some cases been attributed to a lack of understanding of Western models either among the leadership or alternately among the populace at large.

In any event, the magnitude of the transformation was such that it could not have been forced through in such a short time following the Restoration purely by dint of the wisdom and foresight of a few enlightened zealots or of the superiority of their knowledge of "more advanced" Western alternatives. Indeed, we cannot assume that emulation of the West in all aspects was ever on the agenda in the first place.

The other most notable instances of attempting to interpret Japan's political development through Western experience have been evidenced by a preoccupation in post-war historiography with two social movements: the "Enlightenment Movement" (*Keimō Undō*, 啓蒙運動) of the early 1870s and the "Freedom and Popular Rights Movement" which

sprang up with particular vigor following the end of the Seinan War in 1877. Both these movements, while obviously significant, have been reified within the overall narrative of the early Meiji period, a point that is made particularly clear by the fact that both the terms, *Keimō* and *Jiyū Minken*, were not actually current in the parlance of those participating in events at that time.

Both these movements will be addressed in more detail in later chapters (*Keimō Undō* in Chapter 4 and the *Jiyū Minken Undō* in Chapter 5); suffice it to say that, for the most part, there are no major works produced in the first 20 years of the Meiji period that employ the word *Keimō* in the sense above. Moreover, there are no works that include the phrase *Jiyū Minken*; the closest is Ueki Emori's *Minken Jiyūron* of 1879, but it is an exception. The terms most commonly employed were *Jiyū* as in *Jiyūshugi* (自由主義) for Liberalism and *Minken* as in *Minkenron* (民権論), the general sobriquet for debates on popular sovereignty and representative government.

The first major commitment to *Jiyū-Minken* appears with the two volumes dedicated to “Liberal-Democratic Thought” in the *Meiji Bunka Zenshū*, a collection of original publications edited and compiled by a committee of leading scholars headed by Yoshino Sakuzō in the 1920s.⁹ This was certainly a strong endorsement of a “Freedom and Popular Rights” nomenclature but it is interesting that even after World War II, we can find examples of how the transition in terminology was still evolving, as is indicated in one of the early editions of the *Iwanami Kōza* history of Japan where Gotō Yasushi makes the point of referring to *Jiyū* and *Minken* separately (自由と民権の思想).¹⁰ Overall, both *Keimō Undō* and *jiyūminken undō* are phrases coined by later generations with rather particular predilections of interpretation and we would do well to at least remove them from view to examine what else can be surveyed.

Consequently, this book is deliberately reoriented away from such preoccupations and aims to reappraise political developments in terms that are closer to the intent and objectives of contemporary actors themselves. The aim is, to use Collingwood's phrase, an intellectual “re-enactment”, which means avoiding the temptation to assume that the terminology employed by the Japanese intelligentsia, especially terms such as “liberalism” and “popular rights”, always signified an understanding of those terms in common with their Western counterparts.¹¹ Needless to say, the re-enactment presented in this book will not be altogether perfect, but there would seem to be considerable merit in exploring an alternative narrative that fits more closely with the broad political conditions of the time and the aspirations of those living in it.

As early as 50 years before the Restoration, Japan was arguably already developing traits associated with proto-industrialization: a national network of transport and commerce, a sophisticated exchange economy, and the first signs of urban centers being able to draw and support large numbers of people from the agricultural sector.¹² All this was proceeding at a pace not all that removed from contemporary Europe. Of more significance, however, is the fact that the transformation was not following in the footsteps of European Humanism or Positivism.

It is the configuration of Japanese society and its ideology prior to the Restoration that must be our starting point—that and the immensely catalytic effect of the West's encroachment on Japan from the early nineteenth century onward. We must try, as much as is reasonably possible, to approach Japan's epoch of change from the Japanese perspective.

Restoration and national salvation

While accepting the various caveats on using the term as outlined in the foregoing, a key premise of this book is that "Restoration" of imperial rule remains pivotal to an understanding of Japanese national development from the 1840s onward. As is well-rehearsed in general histories, the Restoration was foreshadowed by the emergence of *Kokugaku* (国学) and *Kōkogaku* (考古学) scholarship in the late eighteenth century and, with the encroachment of the Western powers, it quickly became a core element in the ideological reformulation of that period. It has been typical to regard this outlook as revisionist and backward looking, yet it was nonetheless also part of a broader attempt to clarify the rationale for a new form of political configuration and it was already well under way prior to the Restoration proper. An added complication was the fact that the threat from across the seas gave the political situation an urgency that was quite distinct from the experience of Europe and the New World, producing a particularly emphatic agitation for the restoration of imperial rule in tandem with the drive to repel all foreign incursions by force, culminating in the *Sonnō Jōi* movement (尊皇攘夷運動).¹³

Restoration was therefore based on a long-term current of thought which had been nurtured within Japanese political discourse that did not emerge in the late 1860s. Moreover, it did not find resolution simply by virtue of the cessation of hostilities in the Boshin War (1868–9). Under the rubric of such terms as *Saisei Itchi* (祭政一致, literally, "the unification of ceremonial and political authority"), and *Ōsei Fukko* (王政復古, "the restoration to monarchical rule") the Imperial Household was to remain an important political icon in the hands of

the new Meiji leaders during the ensuing decade, often being relied upon to quell popular disquiet and silence critics. This very tendency was itself also to prove as a source of the leadership's undoing as both the Emperor himself and the broad array of Imperial Household-aligned officials and grassroots activists invoked the Imperial throne to sanction actions that were increasingly opposed to the policy of the nation's new political executive.

Moreover, as the term *Saisei Itchi* makes particularly clear, the Restoration was not simply a political event, it entailed a most profound rearranging of the relation between religious institutions (what the contemporary Victorian thinker Herbert Spencer rather aptly termed "ceremonial institutions") and political institutions. In this regard (and only this regard, of course), it was a kind of "reformation". As already noted, considerable attention has been given to the *Ee ja nai ka* festivals that occurred on the eve of the Restoration and these do reflect some profound upheaval in the realm of popular religious and moral sentiment. However, they are perhaps less significant in themselves than as indicators of a temporary abeyance of an earlier order as another religio-political order swung into its place. In the case of the Emperor himself, he was to be propelled to the seat of political administration, albeit as a complete figurehead in the initial stages. This after centuries of being swaddled within the remote confines of the palace only emerging to view the ordinary citizenry during seasonal festivals where, among other things, the visitors would scoop up gravel from the surrounding grounds to sprinkle on their gardens to ward off pests. Through the Restoration, however, the Emperor traversed in popular significance from being the equivalent of the supreme shrine festival spectacle at particular times of the year to being the sovereign of the empire and direct descendant of the native deities all at once.¹⁴

Even so, this was not the only reorientation that occurred in the popular consciousness. For the first time, the people were introduced, more suddenly and forcefully than can be easily appreciated, to the kind of open, homogenized public political space that fealty to a central government rather than a local domain lord made possible. In a sense, it was liberating and it was the awareness of this that made the faddism of *Bunmei Kaika* ("civilization and progress") so infectious. After all, *Bunmei Kaika* was a cultural change endorsed by the government and even the Emperor himself now wore Western clothes, rode a horse and took shooting lessons. This transformation signified a reconfiguration of hierarchy away from geographically localized structures to an increasingly homogenized political space bound by the borders of the nation

state, a space where more immediately negotiated relations with the power centre became possible through the development of nationally articulated modes of mass communication. Nonetheless, in Meiji Japan, this was a public space founded on Imperial sovereignty, a political fact that would be reasserted, both through the policies of certain factions within the leadership as well as through popular expressions of monarchist sentiment that found an outlet in the new nationally circulated mass media. More importantly, the capacity of the government to control what would be the political coinage of this new space would not remain unchallenged and the arrival of the agitations for popular representation along with the later agitations for more direct expressions of Imperial Rule were indicative of how precarious the government's hold on that space would become.

By the end of the 1880s we see that the realization of a more full-blooded Restoration, in political fact and deed, was precisely the direction being taken within the polity. Yet it would not be in the form of a reincarnated Ancient Court, but as relatively autonomous configuration within the national polity which would increasingly compete with the "Western-style" executive. It was an influence which spanned all levels of the national administration and almost all ministries of state, although it should be emphasized that, apart from the obvious instance of the Imperial Household Ministry, there was particularly focused support from within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Education Ministry and the Ministry of the Army. It also created a division that reached right to the heart of the Satsuma and Chōshū-dominated cabinets from the 1870s onward.

The Imperial Household, as both a political institution and a cultural totem, was increasingly integral to the dynamic of political contest in the two decades following the formal Restoration of 1868. Yet its significance, or rather the significance of those who aimed to employ it to reactionary or traditionalist ends, has been misunderstood to some extent.

If we take preconceptions regarding democratization and liberalism out of the equation, the general picture that unfolds is one which differs considerably from more conventional interpretations: the Restoration of 1868 was part of a protracted series of political convulsions that, if anything, intensified in the ensuing two decades. The pivotal event of 1868 was in fact a coup d'état, initially a highly localized one that nonetheless projected the nation into an unprecedented and unpredictable direction. Consequently, the Meiji leaders were not altogether the helmsmen of state that they might have wanted to appear. They were in fact constantly besieged; by disaffected *samurai* in one quarter, a truculent urban public

chaffing at the persistence of the “unequal treaty” arrangements and the economic dislocation that was being caused by the influx of foreign goods in another. Meanwhile, the Emperor and those aligned to him aimed to undermine and circumvent the influence of the imperially appointed ministers of state from within the upper reaches of government. The fact that the reforming faction within the ruling oligarchy suffered two assassinations—Ōkubo Toshimichi in 1878 and Mori Arinori in 1889—along with the nearly fatal attack on Ōkuma Shigenobu in 1889 testifies to how much they were literally in the “firing line”. Moreover, they were all attacked by disaffected *samurai* who were zealots for imperial rule more than advocates of Western forms of representative government.

The Meiji government was not secure or immune from virulent political reprisals, and it doubtlessly required enormous determination to steer Japan through the series of international and domestic crises that the country faced. They were dedicated reformers, yet they were not Westernizers or advocates of Radical Liberalism. They were those very modern political creatures, conservatives, albeit conservatives of a variety of hues.

Conservatism

In earlier works I have discussed the political developments of the early Meiji period in relation to political conservatism. This connection was not introduced simply for the sake of adding a new motif within an already cluttered arena of scholarly terminology dealing with this period. Given that the Meiji Restoration was not a liberal democratic event, was not directly inspired by Western traditions of Radicalism or the Enlightenment and, more to the point, did not entail the abandonment of the traditional order or the means of maintaining it but rather sought its reconfiguration, there would seem to be an eminent need to include conservatism as a central paradigm for discussing the political culture of the country and the intent of the contemporary government’s policies.

As has often been remarked in the literature on political theory, however, conservatism is difficult to discuss systematically in that it seems to take on a multitude of expressions depending on the particular conditions of each society. Even so, arguably the best theorist of conservatism remains the pioneer of the sociology of knowledge: Karl Mannheim, whose great contribution was to clarify modern conservatism from traditionalism or reactionary politics. To quote:

Traditionalist action is almost purely reactive behaviour. Conservative action is action oriented to ... a complex of meanings which contains

different objective contents in different epochs, in different historical phases, and which is always changing.¹⁵

Though conservatism is invariably bound to exist in some sort of relationship with the traditionalist and reactionary forces, the essence of Mannheim's insight lies in his perception that political conservatism is always socially and historically contextualized while maintaining a core concern to accommodate the fluidity of social conditions generated by industrialization. As Mannheim so astutely observed, conservatism is a particularly *modern* intellectual counter-movement to the highly disruptive social forces inherent in industrialization, a fluid and somewhat reactive political outlook that becomes necessary because unreflective and unqualified tradition in its pre-modern sense is no longer completely tenable.

The point here is that regardless of the intentions of reactionaries to re-erect a pristine "ancient" tradition, the prospect of its survival beyond industrialization is tenuous at best, especially since pre-industrial traditions are contingent on the preservation of pre-industrial social relations. Maintaining traditions "authentically" requires the retention of the matrix of their production more or less intact, something that is quite impossible when the culture of the village artisan and the relatively self-referencing folklore of the rural community gives way to mass migration of the populace to urban centers which form the focus of developments in mass communication and the centralized coordination of a standardized national education system. Some degree of survival is witnessed in some of the fine arts and performing arts (e.g., *Kabuki* or *Noh* theatre), yet these are particular exceptions that if anything exemplify the limits of how far traditional cultures can be preserved despite the thoroughness with which all other aspects of communal life have been transformed.

Having made this point it should be remembered, of course, that the flux of social relations engendered by industrialization does not extinguish the aspiration of the former ruling class to remain in a dominant position in society. Their survival depends on the extent to which they manage to adapt to the new social conditions: if they adapt well, then they retain status and considerable political influence (as in the case of, for example, the landed gentry in Britain); if they fail to adapt and simply strive to shore up the traditional order at all costs, then they can be obliterated (as in the case of, for example, the aristocracy of eighteenth-century France). However, even when the old order is obliterated, it is rare that the former traditional elements do not reassert

themselves in some way or that a new cohort of elites emulates the old structure, albeit in some hybrid sense, to replicate the characteristics of the traditional political culture. Again, France provides us with a perfect example in the figure of Napoleon following the French revolution and we can even extrapolate along similar lines to gain an understanding of the persistence of “great leader-oriented authoritarianism” in modern China and Russia.¹⁶

In the Japanese context, the ruling elite, the *samurai*, produced a cohort of conservative reformists who were able to adapt to the contemporary policy challenges with extraordinary vigor. The degree of determination with which they pursued these reforms creates the semblance of Radicalism that may seem inimical to conservative aims. Yet they were most definitely and self-consciously aiming to establish a new form of social order from the midst of the contemporary flux that Japanese society was being forced to undergo. And they did this not so much by simply obliterating the existing order but by attempting to refurbish it on the basis of a more ancient one resurrected from within. Of course, it cannot be assumed that the leaders of the Restoration all had a common vision of what the new political settlement should look like, nor did they perhaps even have a definite vision even as individuals. The one thing that kept them solidly together was a collective anxiety regarding the possibility of social collapse (i.e., the complete loss of social order) and the inevitable subjugation of Japan to Western colonialist powers as had been witnessed in other parts of Asia if they failed.

Consequently, I would reiterate that conservatism is a meaningful category of political discourse when examining Meiji Japan; indeed it has long seemed strange that while there is voluminous historical political analysis of conservatism in Europe and the US, there seems to have been little conception of its relevance to Japan beyond being a vague prelude to ultra-nationalism. Given that it was arguably the conservative camp that won out in the intellectual struggle between advocates of Western Enlightenment ideals and “Nativists”, there is even more reason to devote considerable attention to its rationale and organizational dynamic within the broader Japanese social context.

There are, nonetheless, shades of distinction in the Japanese case that warrant clarification. Firstly, there is the high degree of diversity in the political bloc that we might characterize as “conservative” and there was not, for the greater part of the era being examined, the practice of political figures self-consciously styling themselves as such, let alone forming a distinct “conservative” political party (there being no parliament during that period). Yet through an examination of the writings

and practice of certain figures in government and in the politically active urban intelligentsia, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish the core of a political outlook that was essentially conservative in the modern sense that Mannheim gives it.

Secondly, traditionalism and conservatism were more thoroughly mixed and intertwined both on the interpersonal level and the intellectual level. This was mainly due to the fact that the move from traditionalism and reactionary politics to a more dynamic mode of intellectually mediating the transformation of Japanese society was being forced through so very quickly. The oligarchy at the vanguard of the Restoration were arguably the quickest to appreciate the institutional and intellectual requirements of conservatives in an industrialized society and unitary government, the remainder were in various stages of adaptation and/or confusion. Early attempts to reconstruct pre-modern traditions, such as the ham-fisted promotion of Shintō as the National Religion in the earliest stages of reform, highlighted the ultimate infeasibility of the traditionalist approach in an industrializing society, although it did not entirely discourage the ambition to realize the ideal one way or another.¹⁷

Thirdly, as the new government was consolidated and the details of the national policy were clarified, there emerged a significant difference in approach within the conservative camp: two highly divergent strategies for the refurbishment of the national order were becoming increasingly apparent. The first strategy, that of the majority of the leaders among the Meiji oligarchy, was to prioritize industrialization and bureaucratic rationalization while nonetheless aiming to imbue it with a distinctive native character. It was a dynamic strategy that optimized Japan's capacity to reorganize and consolidate, and as such it was very much what Japan needed to do in order to hold its own in the international arena, but it left its proponents open to accusations of blind Westernization or even political radicalism.

The other strategy was to establish a new form of monolithic social order centered on the Imperial Household. It had enormous allure given that it had a clear proclivity with the pre-Restoration conception of social stasis inherent to the orthodoxy of *Chu Hsi* Neo-Confucianism (termed *Shushigaku* in Japan) and that it placed primacy on a native institution, the Imperial Household, rather than on an imported Western system of representative government.

I have characterized the former outlook as *progressive* conservatism; however, it might also be better amended to *dynamic* conservatism reflecting as it does the fluid conception of the social order and the more elastic treatment of tradition within the reform process. The latter

outlook I have previously characterized as *formalistic* conservatism but in its place I would propose *static* conservatism, which perhaps reflects more closely the kind of social stasis idealized by such political actors.¹⁸

Even so, the common thread that holds them within the same political orbit is that both outlooks are not mere traditionalism but essentially modern *hybrid* adaptations that lend themselves to mass-society and mass political communication. They also both have a distinctly ideological dimension, by which I mean that they embody modes of popular discourse that provide the mental shorthand necessary for such mass political mobilization. Without ideology in this sense, the “imagined community” that is the modern nation state is untenable. Ultimately, their distinguishing trait (vis-à-vis other political movements) is to promote a stable new political order that relies on the perception—if not at times the substance—of a national political tradition and its cultural continuity.

As will be made apparent in the course of this work, the members of the progressive (or “dynamic”) clique were definitely neither blind worshippers of the West nor particularly inclined to emulate Western democracy per se, yet they worked at a constant disadvantage to convince the domestic political audience otherwise. These figures would ultimately have to share the domain of governmental control with other more reactionary statesmen and officials who did not share the relative flexibility and dynamism of their view of the Japanese polity.

The latter move from political conservatism to statism was not sudden or unilinear, yet formalistic conservatism is useful for tracing the emergence of an intermediary form of political practice that ultimately fed into the successive move away from a dynamic and negotiable polity toward something more static and non-negotiable. These terms, which may seem relatively insignificant in their differences, are not employed simply to split conceptual hairs; they are employed in order to be able to discuss two similar yet ultimately inimical political approaches to national reconstruction that coexisted and ultimately competed with each other for survival in the first half of the Meiji period. This book, in that sense, is intended as an examination of the rather tragic fate of the former and a critique of the latter in that it encouraged the state to be employed in an increasingly coercive manner to compensate for the lack of compliance between the people and the “tradition” they were supposed to be embodying. More overt forms of indoctrination and repression become routine and the possibility of any citizen attempting to define the national identity on private or independent terms

becomes tantamount to treason. Here, we have a picture of the early mechanism leading to full-blown Fascism which emerged in the early twentieth century.

The genesis of Meiji conservatism

The question that I have not addressed directly yet is of course as to who come within the framework of political conservatism in nineteenth-century Japan. To do that requires some consideration of the long-term trends from the late-Edo period to the Meiji period proper. The social and intellectual antecedents of conservatism run deeply through the late Edo period (and these will be given considerable attention in the ensuing chapter), but the matter is complicated to some extent by the fact that prior to the 1860s, we are looking more at the emergence of “proto-conservatism” rather than fully developed conservatism as defined according to Mannheim earlier.

The key figures in the emergence of proto-conservatism are Yoshida Shōin (1830–59), Sakuma Shōzan (1811–64) and Yokoi Shōnan (1809–69). The significance of their respective activities lies in the manner in which they severally revised the orthodoxy of the Tokugawa social order and the Neo-Confucian scholarship (*shushigaku*). Sakuma and Yokoi can be described as developing two competing conceptions of the *Wakon Yōsai* (“Japanese Spirit, Western Learning”) motif and, although their personal involvement in the events leading up to the Restoration was relatively peripheral, their intellectual legacy was to be carried on and reworked by their successors. Yokoi’s academy in Kumamoto was to provide a training ground for figures who emerged later in the Meiji period within the new administration. In particular, Motoda Eifu, tutor to the Emperor attached to the Imperial Household, and Inoue Kowashi, an indispensable legal specialist and amanuensis of the new government, emerge as noteworthy examples of that latent continuity. Sakuma Shōzan was also to have a slightly less direct connection to the formation of the Meiji elite through one of his “star pupils”, Yoshida Shōin.¹⁹

Yoshida is noteworthy for the degree to which he was prepared to distance himself from the Bakufu regime and the genuine radicalism of his doctrines. His academy, the *Shōkason Juku*, which was based in the domain of the Chōshū clan which would later be a key player in the Restoration included a remarkable number of figures who were prominent in the new government from 1868 onward: Kido Takayoshi, Takasugi Shinsaku, Inoue Kaoru and Itō Hirobumi being perhaps the best known. Yoshida was alone in conceiving a new social order that

entailed abolishing the traditional four castes in favor of one nation of citizens under one sovereign, the Emperor. At first sight, this might appear to be an endorsement of a democratic impulse; however, we should note that the “equality” implied by the dissolution of castes was countered by the conception of equal obligation to serve an omnipotent ruler.

Neither Sakuma’s nor Yokoi’s position were as radical as they might at first seem, yet they found themselves in enormous strife as a result of their views and ultimately paid for their roles in history with their lives through the assassin’s sword. Sakuma was cut down by anti-foreigner radicals near Sanjō Bridge in Kyōto, his crime being to advocate the promotion of interaction with the West, albeit for the purpose of strengthening Japan militarily. Yokoi was dispatched in the vicinity of the Imperial Palace in Kyōto, primarily for daring to voice ambivalence regarding the utility of the Imperial Household in political reform prior to the Restoration.

Yoshida, as much an activist as a teacher, had been imprisoned in as punishment for sneaking aboard a foreign vessel without *Bakufu* approval in 1854 and he was finally arrested and executed for his association with a plot to assassinate a government official in 1859. Yet Yoshida’s legacy was secure and his fame reached even beyond Japan, with no less a personage than Robert Louis Stevenson making a point of including Yoshida among a group of seven illustrious persons in world history.²⁰

As political thought goes, Yoshida did not come anywhere near articulating the detail requisite to outline a concrete blueprint of a centralized nation state; indeed, if there is one element that ultimately binds Sakuma, Yokoi and Yoshida together, it is quite simply that they had an essentially moralistic conception of government that was inclined to give relatively scant attention to the minutiae of administrative procedure.

In the new realm of intellectual exploration that these proto-conservatives opened up, there was no guarantee that knowledge as previously enshrined would remain intact.

This is where conservatism proper comes into clear view. The various disciples of these charismatic leaders had a broader experience and were better placed to grasp the necessity to abandon the traditionalist perspective in favor of one that was politically more sophisticated. Of particular note are the students of Yoshida Shōin who went on to dominate the early Meiji government. At the same time, there were also many among the Bakufu’s corps of students sent overseas to study,

particularly Nishi Amane and Tsuda Mamichi, along with translators and other persons in support such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nakamura Masanao, who were to revise the Edo intellectual legacy just as profoundly. The legacy of this later group of former Bakufu-aligned scholars will be given particular attention in the chapter dealing with *Bunmei Kaika* wherein the clarification of an essentially conservative response to modernism will be more fully clarified in relation to their contributions to the *Meiroku Journal*.

The content of many of the contributions of these scholars indicates that despite the radical reworking of the body of knowledge regarded as necessary for the development of the Japanese nation, there was, nonetheless, no immediate necessity to abandon certain aspects of the traditional moral outlook. This tendency is more pronounced in some figures than others, but it is made apparent, particularly in the case of Katō Hiroyuki, that the traditional moral outlook could in fact be retained intact, to a point, and remain oblivious to any new practical discoveries that might emerge.²¹ By the 1870s, there emerged a clearly bipolarized focus in the act of intellectual exploration; knowledge of the West would lay open realms of knowledge of the material world while metaphysically there would be an abiding dedication to retaining the moral order as it had always been conceived. Indeed, the marked secularity of the traditional moral order of the late Edo period meant that, for example, it would have far less significance to a Japanese to consider the implications of evolutionary theory than to a contemporary Christian.²²

In connection with the foregoing, one persistent internal trait of Japanese society that needs to be highlighted as being significant throughout the period in question is the continuing prominence of the *samurai* class as the academic and bureaucratic elite, something that the maintenance of the distinction between *shizoku* (*samurai* class) and *Heimin* (commoners) beyond the Restoration attests to. Although the *shizoku* lose the greater part of their ceremonial and financial privileges following the Seinan War in 1877, they remain the de facto leaders in the world of letters and administration, at least for the next generation until a more homogenized and generically educated population comes to the fore. This has particular relevance for our understanding of the persistent divide within the so-called “freedom and peoples’ rights” movement which in reality was separated into a “high” reformist movement (led in various guises and forms by the likes of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Tokutomi Sohō, Ōkuma Shigenobu and Itagaki Taisuke), contrasted with “lower” populist movements

that incorporated dispossessed *samurai*, rural non-*samurai* literates and the more radical advocates of political representation and liberalism.²³ In tandem with the foregoing, there is also the persistent divide between the city and the countryside, the core of political power and the periphery, which is not profoundly altered in any substantial sense until the end of World War II.

Consequently, the moralizing tendency of the early proto-conservatives did not fade away altogether but remained a persistent inclination within the Japanese intelligentsia beyond the initial stages of the Restoration. Ultimately, it would re-emerge toward the end of the 1880s (albeit in a substantially different institutional context) as an increasingly dominant mode of discourse for discussing the nature of Imperial sovereignty and the requisites of sound educational policy. This mode of moralistic discourse found increasingly vociferous support from disenchanted advocates of the “Freedom and Popular Rights” movement in tandem with a solid core of *shushigaku*-trained Confucianists who never lost their sense of dismay and moral outrage throughout the early stages of the Restoration, even though at the time they were seemingly “yesterday’s people”.

By the 1890s, this constituted a disparate bloc of agitators; some being relative outsiders from the politically disinherited clans, others being disaffected *shizoku*, along with still others who were rehabilitated former Bakufu administrators and scholars. The figures given particular attention in this volume are tutors to the Emperor such as Motoda Eifu and Nishimura Shigeki, along with the clique of disaffected military heads who initiated the practice of resigning to protest against the actions of the executive, Torio Koyata and Tani Tateki being the most prominent examples. To these, we could add the civilian agitators who argued vehemently against Western-style parliamentary politics, especially the *Chūsei-ha* and their affiliates. And there was the increasing body of government officers who had come through the process of undertaking training overseas or making inspection tours of the West but returned as anything but advocates of increased imitation of Western customs and institutional practices, for example, Komuro Jutarō, a graduate of Harvard Law School who went on to agitate against the Inoue proposals for treaty revision. There were also the likes of Yamagata Aritomo, whose visit to Austria to listen to the lectures of Lorenz von Stein had similar consequences.²⁴

One group that also requires considerable attention in connection to the foregoing but does not fit neatly into the camp of either the “progressive conservatives” or the “formalistic ones” is the generation of young journalists who became active in the promotion of “national

essentialism" or *kokusuishugi* (国粹主義). Predominantly graduates of the new national education system, they became increasingly disenchanted with the Itō cabinet's policy of cultural appeasement toward the West in order to win concessions in treaty terms. *Nihonjin*, the journal of the *Seikyōsha*, which included Miyake Setsurei and Shiga Shigetaka, and *Nihon*, the journal presided over by Kuga Katsunan, worked together to promote a re-nativization of public discourse away from the slavish imitation of Western concepts and theories, but they were distinguished from the foregoing group by their more exclusive dedication to journalistic rather than party-political activism.²⁵

Overall, there would be genuine disparity in the social status and policy aims of all these groups but they shared a common interest in agitating against the Satsuma and Chōshū oligarchy which effectively had taken hold of the key positions of day-to-day administration. The persistent proclivity toward the moralizing of the state in the person of the Emperor became the ideological basis for drawing together the non-Satsuma and Chōshū interests into a broad social movement that was to lay open the way for wresting the business of administration from trained specialists (especially, for example, in the spheres of military and educational policy) and giving it over to the hands of nationalist ideologues.

Beginnings: A prelude to re-enactment

As will be apparent from the outset of the next chapter, considerable attention has been given to a reappraisal of the international context in the late Edo period. This is quite simply because it is necessary to grasp the social and historical premises of the Restoration that in turn conditioned the emergence of a distinct political culture. Most histories highlight the arrival of the Black Ships under US Commodore Matthew Perry as being the decisive turning point in Japan's international relations and, in turn, Japan's domestic approach to reform. However, there was a much broader series of incursions by the Western powers being undertaken in East Asia, particularly from the 1840s onward, and these were fully recognized by those members of the Bakufu administration who dealt with areas of foreign trade and Dutch Studies. Indeed, emphasis needs to be redirected toward the moral outrage and panic that began to grip the section of the intelligentsia that knew enough to be concerned well before 1853, an aspect that enables us to grasp more accurately the spur behind the Restoration Movement.

The event that substantially hastened the demise of the Tokugawa system was from across the seas. Britain's full-scale hostilities with China

over the opium trade from the 1840s through the 1850s were to have the profoundest repercussions on the Japanese archipelago. When the British eroded China's military superiority, they did not evoke merely a sense of China's martial failure; they were precipitating the demise of the all that was "good". It was, in a sense, a "triumph of evil". Failure to grasp this point is to miss the spring behind the fanatical hatred of Western incursions into Japan up until the Restoration and even beyond. The sense of moral revulsion did not cease to operate even as the country was being "opened up" and ostensibly "Westernized". The initial phase of exploration of Western metaphysics and moral philosophy in the wake of the Restoration was just that, an exploration—tentative, at times fearful and ultimately alienating. Grasping this aspect of Japanese intellectual life enables us to more adequately account for the essential transience Western Radicalism and the eventual return to full-blown hatred of the West in the era of ultra-nationalism.

Overall, the addition of external pressures and interference to the process of national development was to have a profound effect on the development of conservatism in Japan. Indeed, it was the issue of the "unequal treaties" first imposed on Japan in the late 1850s that was to plague the conservative bloc in the government and prevent it from being able to fully present itself to the general population as the guardians of the national interest. The advocates of responsible, gradualist policies were forced to come to terms with the increasingly rankling intransigence of the Western powers to make any substantial compromises on tariff control and extra-territoriality provisions.

We will never know just how this configuration of finely balanced conflicts of interest would have resolved themselves in the long term if left more to their own devices. It is plausible that the continuing internal economic crisis in conjunction with the increasingly self-evident impotence of the government would have forced, at a relatively sedate pace, a rearrangement of the personnel and a trade-off of status for efficiency that would have resolved the conflicts to some degree while catering to the former ruling elites' need to maintain dignity. It is perhaps equally possible that the national order might have collapsed completely and that Japan would have re-entered a phase of relative decentralization and sporadic local conflicts somewhat reminiscent of the pre-Tokugawa period. In any event, the option of letting things take their own course was no longer there.

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