Ideology & MANIPULATION

A Comparative Study into What Seperated Saigo Takamori and Yamagata Aritomo in the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877

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Introduction

After the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868, the immediate necessity of the time was to institute a government that could adapt to the turbulence of imperialism, the indoctrination of western systems, and the development of a national consensus.[2] The young, determined, and progressive men who arose to lead this government had a daunting road ahead of them. Among these leaders were Saigo Takamori and Yamagata Aritomo, each of whom embodied his own unique characteristics.

Saigo was a man of "sincerity, integrity, simplicity, and selflessness."[3] He heralded from the southern province of Satsuma[3] and rose to prominence during the Meiji restoration. He has become one of the most romanticized figures in Japanese history, with many regarding him as a "brilliant thinker" and "military genius." [4] However, Saigo was simply a sincere and gentle man of uncomplicated tastes caught in a complex chapter in Japanese history.

The character of Yamagata is not nearly as diluted as Saigo's, since he was not as romanticized. Such differences are found in the characteristics he embodied while alive, acting as a pragmatic, rational, and logical leader. While he has been ranked higher than Saigo on almost every scale of importance in Meiji history, he is not nearly as celebrated.[5] Yamagata was born into a low-ranking samurai family in the province of Choshu and like Saigo rose through the samurai ranks in the Meiji Restoration to become a key figure in the creation of the new Meiji government.

Mutually, Yamagata and Saigo were given the task of creating a modern army that could one day withstand western threats. They endeavored not to dismiss western technology and tactics as before but to embrace them, believing that if they could adapt to the conventions that defeated Japan during the *sonno-joi*[6] from then it could have the wherewithal to become an international power.

Along the way, however, specific events and people would gradually pull the two men apart. Spiraling to the fall of 1877 when these two former colleagues would find themselves opposite one another as generals in the Satsuma Rebellion. Arguments have been made to suggest that ideology stood as the separating factor between them; however, the following pages will demonstrate that what separated Saigo and Yamagata in the Satsuma Rebellion was not their ideology but an intricate web of deceit woven by upper echelon samurai who manipulated Saigo's ideology to advocate resistance against Meiji reforms.

I. Analogous Ideology

Saigo and Yamagata largely held similar beliefs. They both wanted a modern army with the intentions of developing into a nation strong enough to resist the increasing threat of western powers. The common notion that Yamagata wanted solely a conscript army, while Saigo desired the samurai class to remain a focal part of the modern military, is too subject to myth to be a plausible estimation of the two men's comparative ideology. Saigo and Yamagata largely held the same ideology of military modernization.

Mutually, Saigo and Yamagata recognized that Japan needed a strong military establishment loyal only to the emperor and the state. They agreed that the "best way to provide such a force" would be "through conscription and universal military service."[7] They were determined to push Meiji reforms through to success in order to finish the revolution begun in 1868. Saigo and Yamagata both realized first hand how antiquated Japanese military systems were and they clearly wanted to bring Japan to a position of equality with the West.

It is universally agreed that Yamagata advocated a conscription army; however, there is some division when it comes to Saigo. Most scholars subscribe to the view that he opposed any measures that would weaken the samurai.8 However, Saigo was not the "single-minded champion of the samurai that many have made him out to be."[9] Contrary to popular belief, he supported the implementation of conscription. While he was not outspoken on the issue, his quiet support and lack of clear defiance were key factors in its successful adoption.[10] In 1871, he articulated to his brother, Saigo Tsugumichi, then the assistant vice-minister to Yamagata, that he encouraged the idea and expressed doubt regarding the efficiency of an all samurai modern military.11 It is important to note, however, that while Saigo quietly supported conscription a select group of Satsuma samurai were vocally opposing the new measure. Among them were Kirino Toshiaki, Shinohara Kunimoto, and Murata Shinpachi.[12] These men would play a key role in Saigo's involvement in the Satsuma Rebellion later on.

The Korean Crisis of 1873 is one of the principle bases of illustrating their similar ideology. The incident steamed from Korea's refusal to recognize Japan's new government. It caused a decisive debate over the question of whether or not Japan should invade or pursue diplomatic solutions to resolve the matter. Saigo and Yamagata both opposed any premature action, which might cripple the growth of the new army. However, Saigo has been interpreted to have advocated the opposite. Common views describe him as a fiery aggressor out to re-establish samurai worth through glorious adventures in Korea. But, his writings suggest benevolent and cautious intentions. His writings imply that he did not want to see Japanese military action. He wanted it to come only after every effort had been made diplomatically. As he wrote,

> It would not be good at all to send troops. If doing so should lead to war, it would be contrary to our true intentions, and so the proper thing to do at this point is to send an emissary...We must try to realize our original aim, to establish a firm friendship with Korea."[13]

This quote and his collective documents suggest that he advocated that Japan build a cooperative relationship with Korea before a malevolent one. It is certainly provocative to think Saigo wanted war with Korea to re-establish samurai worth in Meiji society but the fact remains that there is little to base this theory on except the romanticized myth that follows him today. Some historians equate this moment as the beginning of the spilt between Yamagata and Saigo; however, they were not splitting apart, the public's perception of them was.[14] As will be argued later, the popular conception that Saigo wanted to invade Korea to reassert samurai worth was more the work of others utilizing his status to manipulate public opinion than his actual opinion.

Most see Saigo's resignation from the Meiji Government in 1873 as a direct result of his disgust with the Meiji leaders following the Korean Crisis.[15] Some go as far as to say that the way the Meiji leaders handled the Korean Crisis triggered bitterness within Saigo that motivated him to incite and lead the Satsuma Rebellion. However, it is more than likely true that he simply wanted to retire from public life. In 1873, he was approaching the age of 50 and the constant illness and physical ailments associated with his size were beginning to wear on him.[16] But more importantly Saigo had reached a point in his life that he believed that he had fulfilled his duty to Japan. He wrote several poems that expressed his, "satisfaction" saying "he had done all he could to get the government off to the right start, and that posterity would remember him kindly."[17] The actions and writings following his resignation further establish that his aim was to retire into private seclusion, not to organize and lead a rebellion against the Meiji central authority.

The impression gained from Saigo's actions and words are of a man content with what he had achieved and who now desired to live out the remainder of his life in seclusion and simplicity. Upon returning to Satsuma, he almost immediately headed into the tranquil mountains of his childhood straying from turbulent Kagoshima[18] and remaining out of the public eye. Day after day he basked in the hot springs and enjoyed the company of his dogs.[19] He corresponded with friends discussing his contentment simply farming, hunting, fishing, and relaxing.[20] Little exists that would lead one to conclude that Saigo was an embittered samurai out to plan and incite a rebellion. He displayed the characteristics of a man at ease with himself, enjoying retirement amidst Satsuma's serene and pleasurable mountains.

Saigo has been misunderstood on three fundamental fronts, his opinion on universal conscription, his opinion on the Korea Crisis, and the reasons for his resignation from the government. Those three misunderstandings have been the traditional delineators of difference between the ideology of Saigo and Yamagata, that in turn lead directly what separated the two men in the Satsuma Rebellion. However, as demonstrated above, they agreed on conscription, they agreed on pursuing diplomatic solutions in Korea, and Saigo did not resign out of anger with the Meiji government (including Yamagata) but out of reasons of health and satisfied ambitions. Therefore, the question remains, if it was not ideology that separated them then what was it?

II. The Intricate Web of Deceit

What separated Yamagata and Saigo was an intricate web of deceit woven by Satsuma's upper echelon samurai who manipulated Saigo's ideology to advocate resistance against Meiji reforms. Men like Kirino Toshiaki, Shinohara Kunimoto and Murata Shinpachi purposely idealized and construed Saigo's image in the hearts and minds of the Satsuma samurai to incite rebellion. Saigo was, in effect, a victim of a misunderstanding between who the public had been manipulated to think he was and who he actually was. He was turned into a mythic figure who advocated decisive action against centralized reforms despite the fact that he helped initiate many of the reforms the samurai were protesting.

Most of this logic behind the belief that Saigo planned and incited the Satsuma Rebellion derives from the fact that when Saigo returned to Satsuma following the Korean Crisis he helped establish several private samurai schools (shigakko).[19] It is believed he helped create the shigakko academies in order to raise a private army with the aim of rebelling against the corrupt centralized power. However, Saigo's connection was indistinct when one considers that he spent most of his time away from the academies in the seclusion of the mountains. A more founded assertion would be that his subordinates namely, Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata, who oversaw the operations of the *Shigakko*, were the principle planners and inciters of the rebellion. These men were left to lead and determine what the academies stood for.[20] They directed and utilized the *shigakko* academies in order to propagate their aims not Saigo's. They rallied the *shigakko* samurai behind the banner of resistance and defense of their ancient birthright.

One of the key components of the *shigakko* academies that were utilized by Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata were Saigo's edicts that littered the campuses. Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata manipulated these indistinct philosophical statements to call for decisive action against Meiji centralized authority. One of his edicts in particular that was used stated, "even if one is a wise man who disciplines the body and rectifies the self, if one cannot act, one is the same as a wooden puppet."[21] Saigo's quote is manipulated by Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata to signify the decisiveness that is called for in resisting centralized reforms. Saigo's edicts advocated no specific action against the Meiji government but they came to associate Saigo with the opposition movement. It was precisely at that level of vague association that Saigo came to be identified and looked toward as the guiding figure for the opposition movement.

Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata also manipulated Saigo's views through their portrayal of his actions in the Korean Crisis. They argued that he wanted decisive action against Korea but that the insincere Meiji Cabinet denied the proposal. Kirino stated:

> Saigo and I were totally committed to our cause...Saigo, myself, and others wanted to dispatch an army abroad...[but] the little princesses of the Cabinet expressed fears...while they secretly conspired to deceive with a trick strategy.[22]

Kirino's mocking references to the centralized leaders as "princesses" and his honorable view of Saigo working for the rights of the samurai leads one to believe that he was in favor of rebellion. However, he was very much the opposite but Kirino

in this quote leads the *shigakko* samurai to believe that Saigo wanted to invade Korea in order to re-establish samurai worth and end the corrupt and deceiving central government.

Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata used Saigo and his puritan existence to characterize the Meiji Leaders in Tokyo as lavish, decadent, and self-serving.[23] They distinguished Saigo from the Meiji establishment to manipulate a logic that connected centralization and modernization as being an evil. However, while Saigo did live a Spartan existence and he did disagree with the lifestyles of Okubo and other Meiji leaders, the linkage of those views to his advocacy of rebellion is more the work of Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata.[24] The distinction made by them was utilized more to portray Saigo as anti-modernization than what it meant to Saigo as being a faithful follower of Confucianism.

Saigo's absence from the public eye amidst all of the propagating by Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata was also a crucial aspect of their manipulation because it enabled them and the public to magnify the aura that already surrounded him. Because most samurai had never actually been in contact with Saigo, they did not know the kind of man he was; and since almost all of his writings were personal letters only a select few actually had the opportunity to understand Saigo's beliefs first hand. Most knew him only through intermediaries like Kirino, Shinohara, and Murata who misconstrued his rhetoric. Consequently, his relative seclusion from 1873 to 1877 allowed his mythic character grew until he was almost a deity. Everything anti-Meiji became Saigo. Those on the outside of Saigo's inner circle had no reliable way of gaining a true understanding of his beliefs. "Kirino Shinohara, Murata, and a dozen or so others in upper echelons of the shigakko utilized the banner of 'Saigo the Great'" in, order to incite the rebellion.[25]

When the rebellion broke out Yamagata found it hard to believe that Saigo joined in the first place. He was surprised, having known Saigo personally without the misconstrued image created by the *shigakko* leadership. Yamagata recognized that Saigo's involvement in the rebellion was more the doing of others than his own. In Yamagata's final letter to Saigo amidst the closing days of the Satsuma Rebellion he wrote to his colleague, "it is unwillingly that I come against a master and friend. But loyalty to the Son of Heaven requires. I believe it is your students who have forced your hand. You will understand me."[26] Yamagata knew that they shared the same ideology of military modernization but he also recognized that while ideology was what caused the rebellion it was not what separated them. Yamagata and Saigo were separated by an intricate web of deceit and woven by Satsuma samurai who manipulated Saigo's ideology to initiate resistance to centralized reforms. But if Saigo didn't want to lead a rebellion and if he helped initiate the measures the samurai were opposing then why did he join the rebellion?

III.Saigo's burden

The single factor that most historians identify as the event that ultimately lead to Saigo's direct involvement in the rebellion was an apparent assassination attempt ordered by Okubo Toshimichi. A group of Tokyo police confessed that childhood friend of Saigo and high-ranking Meiji leader, Okubo Toshimichi had sent them to

assassinate Saigo and restore order in the province. Accurate or not this confession convinced Saigo to join the rebellion.[27] When he committed to leading the insurrection all of the misperceptions surrounding his name were heightened. His decision to join the rebellion validated the public's manipulated and glorified view of him. The vision of him coming down from the mountain to lead the righteous samurai against the corrupt and decadent centralized leaders played into all of the *shigakko* samurai glorified precepts of Saigo.

The reason Saigo lead the rebellion beyond specific actions was an overriding sense of obligation within him to Satsuma. He didn't have a grave distain for the centralized authority; he simply had a higher calling to his home region. His decision was similar to that of Robert E. Lee in the American Civil War. Saigo and Lee didn't necessarily agree with their side's ideological aims but they felt a higher duty to their state or province then to their country. Much of his obligation derived from promises he had made to the Satsuma samurai when he went to serve in Tokyo alongside Yamagata.[28] He had vowed to uphold the samurai way, and while he didn't necessarily do this in Tokyo, the people of Satsuma still expected him to be their leader. He fought for the samurai out of obligation not out of belief in the cause.

Conclusion

On September 24, 1877 nearly seven months after the rebellions outbreak, Saigo, lying huddled along side many of the men who months and years before had manipulated his ideology and incited the rebellion gazed out into the dew covered mountains of Satsuma and sent final word to his troops saying that "they were about to go into battle for the last time...he urged them all to resolve to die bravely, so that shame would not tarnish their memories later." That morning he and his men made there final charge into Yamagata's conscript soldiers. It must have been a bittersweet moment for Saigo, being able to witness the confirmation of the army he helped create but that would now be responsible for his death. Nevertheless, Saigo's life from that day would go from samurai and statesmen to cultural icon. He would become shrouded by generations of embellishment. Behind all of that, however, there was a relatively simple man who in all actuality was quite similar to Yamagata in ideology. He was not the fiery pro-feudal Satsuma samurai that history has ignorantly decided to remember him as.[27] He was a sincere statesman who was caught between who he was and whom people had come to think he was. Yamagata on the other hand, who lived a life of clear intentions and left nothing to doubt. He was a man of single principle. Whether it be Saigo's engaging personality or Yamagata's vision above all else they will be remembered for their guidance in creating the framework for a nation that underwent one of the most drastic transformations socially, economically, spiritually, and internationally in the history of mankind.

The Meiji Era was a dynamic time, a time that saw two diametrically opposed armies square off against one another, one fought to preserve its birthright and one fought to prove its worth, but let it not be forgotten that the opposing commanders that battled one another for those seven months were men that fundamentally agreed with one another's views and who both enjoyed a piece of victory that fall afternoon

in 1877. For Yamagata as well as Saigo saw the confirmation of the framework they had helped establish for a modern conscript army.

Endnotes

[1] Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, interviewed by Greer Illingworth, 18 November 2002, Springfield.

[2] Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, (London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 334.

[3] Charles L. Yates, *Saigo Takamori: The Man Behind the Myth*, (New York, Kegan Paul International, 1995), 185.

[3] Geographically isolated province on the southern tip of Japan known at the time for its fierce independence and military superiority.

[4] Charles L. Yates, "Saigo Takamori in the Emergence of Meiji Japan", Modern Asian Studies 28, no. 3 (1994), 468-469.

[5] Richard T. Chang, *Historian's and Meiji Statesmen*, (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1970), 45.

[6] Rallying anti-Tokugawa slogan that dominated national life between the late 1850's and early 1860's meaning, "Respect the emperor, out with the barbarians."

[7] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 137.

[8] Among others, Merion and Susie Harris, Soldiers of the Sun, (New York, Random House, 1991), 28-29 articulates this common view.

[9] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 131.

[10] Roger F. Hackett, Yamagata in the Rise of Modern Japan, 1838-1922, (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1971), 63.

[11] Ibid, 63.

[12] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 143.

[13] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 148.

[14] Hackett, 70.

[15] Ivan Morris, The Nobility of Failure, (New York, The Noonday Press, 1975), 257.

[16] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 131.

[17] Yates, Man Behind the Myth, 157.

[18] Capital city of Satsuma, location of frequent anti-Meiji protests by disgruntled samurai.

[19] Saigo Takamori: The Man Behind the Myth, 12, 131, 158 & 162.

[20] Saigo Takamori: The Man Behind the Myth, 158.

[19] Morris, 259.

[20] Derek Wolf, "Life With(out) Saigo: Ideological Formation in the Kagoshima Shigakko" [unpublished manuscript], 9-10.

[21] Wolf, 17.

[22] Ibid, 17.

[23] Wolf, 22-23.

[24] Wolf, 16.

[25] Saigo Takamori: The Man Behind the Myth, 168.

[26] Josef Washington hall, Eminent Asians: Six Personalities of the New East, (New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1929), 183.

[27] Yates, Man Behind Myth, 165-166.

[28] Yates, Man Behind Myth, 135.

[27] Yates, Emergence, 473.