HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 14 Issue 1 (2025)

Rethinking Samurai Mobilization in the Meiji Restoration

Mark Wu

Hong King International School

ABSTRACT

The combined forces of Choshu, Tosa, and Satsuma overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate in the late 1868s, dismantling the political order that had existed for over two centuries. Many scholars have come to a consensus that the Meiji Restoration was spearheaded by magnate lords and the aristocratic samurai class. As a result, the Meiji restoration has been characterized as an aristocratic revolution, while contemporary European revolutions and uprisings of the 19th century have been characterized as being the product of popular mass mobilization. However, this article argues that this existing view fails to appreciate the significance of a novel form of political mobilization in late 19th century Japan. Namely, that young samurai of marginal elite status increasingly organised and became involved in national politics. This revised analysis of how the Meiji Restoration was carried out suggests this process of samurai mobilization began before Perry arrived through the Tokugawa 'Promotion of Talent', was accelerated by his arrival, and facilitated the wave of Shishi political violence noted by many historians in the early 1860s. Moreover, far from being inconsequential, this Shishi activism not only badly shook Tokugawa authority, but also enabled the coordination between the different groups which ultimately provided the necessary forces to overthrow the Tokugawa regime.

Introduction

The Meiji Ishin was one of the most consequential events in Japanese history which brought a seachange to Japan's political and social landscape. The Tokugawa Shogunate which existed for more than two centuries was overthrown and the entire political order was dismantled. This sudden political transformation from a feudal monarchy to a Westernized constitutional government is comparable to political revolutions that occurred from the 17th to the 19th century. Interestingly, among Western scholars, it has frequently been characterized as an Aristocratic political movement. For instance, Ellen Kay Trimberger, previously argued that it was a "revolution from above", while Germaine A. Houston and Thomas Smith referred to it as a "bourgeois revolution" and "aristocratic revolution" respectively.

This has been contrasted with Western Revolutions of the 19th century seemingly involving popular mobilization of the peasant and urban working classes. For example, a pervasive narrative is that the French Revolution was a popular uprising of the Third Estate, who were opposed by the clerical and aristocratic privileges of the First and Second Estates respectively. Despite the Meiji Restoration's revolutionary outcomes, Western scholars have often noted the lack of comparable popular mobilization, with Trimberger stating that the Meiji model of 'elite revolution' involved little 'social upheaval' or 'mass uprising', in explicit contrast to the French, Russian and Mexican Revolutions' (Trimberger, 1978).

This article seeks to reevaluate this supposed lack of mass mobilization. Indeed, the final overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate was conducted through the mobilization by the combined domain armies of Satsuma, Choshu, and Tosa during the Boshin War. However, in the prelude to this final confrontation, an unprecedented kind of political mobilization took place, namely that of young samurai organizing on a national rather than purely domain level. Previous scholars, however, have largely under-appreciated the significance of this process. Their focus on these

individuals' samurai status has led them to interpret this movement as a typical form of aristocratic political organization, rather than recognizing it as something new and dynamic.

Hence this article will re-examine the late Bakumatsu period and the longer term factors which enabled this new form of mobilization. Ultimately, it will be argued that this mobilization was broad-based, coordinated, and took place on a national scale and was far from being exclusively aristocratic.

Historiographical background:

As stated, several scholars have previously noted that the Meiji Restoration did not involve mass mobilization of the populace. These scholars share two salient observations: The Meiji Restoration was an elite-driven movement; hence it depended relatively little on peasant mobilization. Firstly, these scholars have broadly characterized the Meiji Restoration as an 'aristocratic revolution' initiated by members of the samurai ruling class, with historian Thomas C. Smith stating that "There was no democratic revolution in Japan because none was necessary: the aristocracy itself was revolutionary" (Smith, 1988). In particular, this view holds that the Restoration was spearheaded by political actors who already held power within the existing political institutions– that it was magnate lords (daimyo) who mobilized samurai armies and brought forth the revolutionary changes that toppled the Tokugawa Shogunate. Some were Tozama daimyo who had long-standing grievances with the Tokugawa regime. Others were angered by the inability of the Tokugawa regime to defend Japan against Western encroachment and became irreconcilable with the Tokugawa regime following the Ansei Purge. This led to a series of political and military maneuvers which culminated with Toba Fushimi and the defeat of the Tokugawa government. Moreover, once in power, these samurai became a "self-abolishing aristocracy" who dismantled the privileges that benefited them (Cohen, 2014).

Secondly, as a result of the samurai-led nature of the Meiji Restoration, it depended relatively little on mass mobilization. According to this narrative, in prior Western revolutions, popular political mobilization was used to garner support from the masses to challenge the state. For instance, the French Revolution mobilized members of the Third Estate and later the Sans-culottes to challenge the nobility and Monarchy. In contrast, however, the overthrow of the Shogunate was accomplished by the mobilization of feudal armies, particularly the forces of Choshu, Satsuma, and Tosa during the Boshin War. Given that each domain had its own military forces, the Restorationist movement did not need popular political action to garner sufficient strength to challenge the Tokugawa Shogunate (Cohen, 2014). This does not imply that large-scale peasant discontent did not exist. For instance, in 1866, tens of thousands of peasants rioted in Fukushima over taxes on silk production (aimed at repairing state finances) and the sudden increases in rice prices. The Shindatsu uprising of 1866 also saw waves of peasant protests due to climatic hardships and the sudden increases in rice prices and interest rates. Rather, such peasant revolts were short-lived, and their motives were not explicitly aimed at confronting the traditional privileges of the Shogun. More importantly, this unrest did not provide the means to overthrow the Shogun, nor did the Restorationist movement explicitly coordinate with various peasant riots (B Moore Jr, 1988).

Clearly, Japan's Meiji Restoration did not depend on the mass mobilization of peasants and urban workers. Nonetheless, prior views dismissing the mass mobilization involved in the Meiji Restoration may be too simplistic (Cohen, 2014). Indeed, the Bakumatsu period did witness a novel kind of large-scale political mobilization unique to Japan's political and social conditions— namely, the independent organization of young samurai on a national scale. The Tokugawa regime had divided Japan into over 300 autonomous domains. As such, while the samurai class had a long precedent of political organization and involvement, this largely took place within their domains, with samurai often filling roles in local domain administration, but playing minimal role in national politics. However, during the Bakumatsu period, for the first time, discontented samurai began to mobilize independently of their local daimyos on a national scale into a loosely coordinated Restorationist movement. Prior historiography has underestimated this scale and breadth of this new form of samurai mobilization, often dismissing it simply as aristocratic political maneuvering. As such, the remainder of this article will explore its salience and impact.

National Samurai Mobilisation

Fundamentally, the political mobilization of young samurai during the Bakumatsu period was the culmination of a long process rooted in the 18th-century Tokugawa "Promotion of Talent", where young samurai from less aristocratic families would be promoted to administrative positions based on their "ability" rather than hereditary status (Cohen, 2014). This defied the strict social stratification that existed for most of the Edo period, where political office was largely restricted to samurai of high hereditary status. In this context, lower-class samurai often sought to use education to prove that they were men of ability and gained higher positions within politics. This in turn led many young samurai to travel across domains, which was prohibited for much of the Edo Period, to pursue further education. This further coincided with many domains across Japan establishing schools to educate samurai who sought to gain administrative office to further this "Promotion of Talent". These schools often involved a 'circle' of young samurai, coalescing around a single influential teacher, which gradually crystallized into cliques and competed for power in local domain politics. As a result, traveling samurai would often come into contact with like-minded samurai from other domains, to exchange ideas and form networks. This has been described as Japan's 'network revolution' by Ikegami (Van, 2015).

Given the above developments, Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853 shocked the national conscience and sparked intense debate amongst the samurai class on how to respond to Western imperialism. During this reaction to Western encroachment, these schools were at the forefront of discussions on how Japan should respond, especially given the Tokugawa's weakness and intransigence. In particular, several schools gained growing prominence. One significant example was Yoshida Shoin who fostered cliques of revolutionary samurai from the Choshu domain (Van, 2015). He developed his theories based on the studies of pragmatist scholars such as Sakuma Shozan, who emphasized the importance of embracing Western technology to repel foreign threats (De Bary; Keene; Tsunoda). In particular, Shoin's teachings revolved around embracing Western military methods while still maintaining Confucian virtues and Japan's nationalist precepts. Another notable example was the Mito school in Eastern Japan, which emerged as another epicenter of Japanese ideological activism. Scholars of the Mito school propounded nationalistic texts and sentiments centering around the concept of national essence (kokutai), which included reverence towards the emperor and the radical rejection of foreign influences. These scholars' ideas were distilled into the slogan 'sonno-joi' (Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians) which originated in Mito, but became ubiquitous with the Imperialist restorationist movement as a whole (Koshmann, 1987). Mitogaku teachings were evident in inspiring the Mito rebellion from 1864-1865. More broadly, they were also taken up by groups of samurai Shishi (men of high purpose), who mobilized independently in small groups and committed acts of violent rebellion throughout the 1860s (Van, 2015).

This dissatisfaction with the Tokugawa Shogunate, coupled with the spread of pro-emperor ideologies further catalyzed cross-domain interaction between young disgruntled samurai. These samurai began to actively connect with other like-minded individuals and eventually mobilized into a nascent Sonno-Joi movement with the Emperor as its figurehead. This mobilisation is strikingly illustrated by the aftermath of the 8/18 1863 palace coup, where troops from pro-shogun domains Aizu and Satsuma domains successfully seized control of the Imperial Palace to exclude pro-restoration elements from the court. Within hours of the coup, a force of several hundred pro-imperial activists convened East of Kyoto and collectively decided to reassemble in Choshu in Mitajiri teahouse called the Shokenkaku. These individuals were from different domains and different walks of life, combining a diverse group of Choshu samurai, members of the Kyoto Kuge nobility, and several hundred Shishi samurai. The Shishi samurai further included notable pro-imperial activists including Maki Izumi of Kurume, Miyabe Teizo of Kunamoto, and Midama Sampei of Satsuma, again illustrating that this nascent movement was widespread and transcended domains. Moreover, the speed at which this diverse coalition assembled evidences the intimate political ties and coordination this nascent political movement had established. Once established, this Shokenkaku school became a rallying point for Shishi activists, who traveled from across the country to join. Yet, this was just one such center of samurai political activism among many others, including schools in Choshu, Mito, and Tosa, among others. Evidently, the growth of samurai schools provided for a novel kind of samurai mobilization, which cut across traditional domain ties and boundaries and formed a nascent national movement (Huber, 1982).

This mobilization would manifest in two important developments, both of which were key to achieving the Meiji Restoration. Firstly, this aforementioned mobilization was intimately connected with the surge in Shishi activism from 1857 to 1868, which committed various acts of violence against Tokugawa supporters and badly undermined Tokugawa rule. Secondly, this independent samurai mobilisation was also instrumental in assembling the coalition which eventually brought down the Tokugawa in 1868. These will be explored in the following section.

Shishi violence and the Satcho Alliance:

During the final years of Tokugawa rule, Japan experienced a wave of political violence against the Tokugawa shogunate and its supporters. Central to this development was the rise of the *Shishi*, or "men of high purpose," groups of disgruntled young samurai who mobilized in the name of the Emperor and the ideology of *Sonno-Joi* ("Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians"). Shishi violence began shortly after the arrival of Commodore Perry, and peaked in the early to mid-1860s, before petering out when the Tokugawa shogunate collapsed in 1868. While some scholars have previously dismissed the Shishi's acts as isolated acts of mindless violence, they were, in fact, greatly impactful, and closely linked to the aforementioned national mobilization of young samurai. (Cohen, 2014)

What is immediately notable is that those who partook in such acts of violence originated from diverse backgrounds, working alongside samurai from other domains. The first notable incident was the assassination of Shimada Sakon, a spy on restorationist activists, carried out by Shishi from the Higo, Satsuma, and Tosa domains. A few months later, the Bakufu's city commissioners in Kyoto were assassinated by twenty-four samurai from Tosa, Choshu, and Satsuma. Most significantly, in 1860, *Tairo* Ii Naosuke—the highest-ranking Tokugawa official—was assassinated at the Sakuradamon Gate by Mito and Satsuma samurai. These assassinations almost always involved young samurai from multiple domains acting independently of their domain leadership. As noted earlier, such cross-domain coordination was unprecedented during the Edo period. Furthermore, these assassinations coincided with the aforementioned rise of samurai schools, and the broader trend of cross-domain mobilization. It is evident, then, that Shishi violence was not a series of isolated acts, but part of this movement that transcended domain boundaries and mobilized young samurai on a national scale (Huber 1982).

The link between the Shishi violence and the national mobilization of young samurai is further evident in the Shishi-led Yamato and Ikuno uprisings. The Yamato uprising took place after the aforementioned 1863 Kyoto palace coup and was aimed at coinciding with Emperor Komei's visit to Yamato to pray at an ancestral shrine. The rebels hoped to raise an imperial army from peasants there and defeat local shogunate forces. The composition of the rebels again shows the aforementioned trend of cross-domain samurai mobilization. Specifically, its principal leaders were Yoshimura Torataro (a Tosa samurai) and Nakayama Tadamitsu (a Kyoto noble.) Moreover, they were joined by other prominent Shishi Fujimoto Tesseki of Bichü and Matsumoto Kensaburö of Mikawa. The force they led further comprised Shishi from Higo, Kurume, and Shimabara (Huber 1982). A similar pattern is illustrated by the Ikuno, which took place just a month later. The principal leaders of this uprising were Hirano Kuniomi, Midama Sampei, and Kawakami Yaichi, who were of the Kukuoka, Satsuma, and Choshu domains respectively. They were further joined by the local samurai of Ikuno and thirty-six other loyalists of various Han and garnered the support of over a thousand local farmers (Yu, 2024). Clearly, given their range of participants, both rebellions illustrate the cross-domain cooperation between young samurai, and how the rise of the Shishi intersected with this phenomenon. Moreover, the fact that over a thousand farmers flocked to their banner illustrates the broader social alliances these young samurai formed, and their ability to mobilise supporters beyond just the samurai class.

The link between these Shishi led rebellions and the national mobilization of young samurai is further evident in their coordination and communication with the broader loyalist movement. In particular, during the Yamato rebellion, the rebels actively communicated with court nobles close to the Emperor in Kyoto including Sanjo Sanetomi and Maki Izumi to solicit support, who in turn sought to dissuade the rebels for fear they would turn public opinion against the imperial cause (Huber 1982). Moreover, the subsequent Ikuno rebellion was explicitly aimed at aiding the Yamato rebels by diverting local Tokugawa forces. The Ikuno rebels also actively communicated with the broader loyalist cause, notably seeking support from the previously discussed Shokenkaku school in Choshu. These actions

demonstrate a 'continuous dialogue' between different groups within the broader loyalist movement. As previously discussed, the spread of samurai schools across Japan enabled many young samurai to come into contact with other like-minded samurai, exchange ideas, and form networks. Consequently, many prominent Shishi were known to one another, and an extensive communication network had taken shape. This network enabled communication and coordination in the Yamato and Ikuno rebellions.

Cumulatively, these actions of the loyalist samurai in the 1860s contributed to Tokugawa's weakness. Various bands of samurai were responsible for several outbreaks of violent uprisings in Japan. These bands of revolutionary samurai mobilized independently and grew in scale as different cliques banded together. With the support of loyalist nobles such as Sanjo Sanetomi, loyalist factions legitimized their acts of terrorism under the Imperial banner.

In addition to its link to Shishi violence, the cross-domain mobilisation of young samurai also played a direct role in creating the coalition which ultimately overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate. After the aforementioned 1863 Kyoto palace coup, the expelled loyalist samurai regrouped at Choshu and reorganized as a rifle militia. This auxiliary militia, formed by Takasugi Shinsaku and led by Sonno Joi intellectuals, was composed of men of varying statuses, including peasants, farmers, and merchants alongside the samurai class. This suggests considerable support for Imperial restoration among the broader populace and the broadening of mobilization efforts (Craig, 1959).

Following the failure of the 1864 Choshu expedition to Kyoto (the Kinmon incident) in 1864, the Tokugawa shogunate launched the First Punitive Expedition against Choshu. Following negotiations, the Choshu government agreed to the disbanding of their loyalist rifle militias, and the execution of those who instigated the Kinmon incident. However, these militias not only refused to disband, but stormed the domain capital Hagi in 1865, and established a new regime (Craig, 1959). .

Once in power, they facilitated rapprochement with the Satsuma domain, which was formalized into the Satcho Alliance, and enabled Choshu to defeat the Shogunate's Second Choshu expedition in 1866. These two domains provided the bulk of the forces at the later Battle of Toba Fushimi, which would catalyze the shogunate's downfall. Crucial to brokering this alliance was that even after Sonno Joi activists began acting as domain officials, they continued to exploit independent networks transgressing domain boundaries formed through their previous studies and activism. In particular, secret negotiations were mediated by Itagaki Taisuke and Sakamoto Ryoma– both Tosa samurai of marginal elite status who were involved in Shishi activism (Jansen, 1961). Ryoma was already a noted figure among Sonno Joi activists for his crucial efforts in shipping Western firearms to Choshu. Evidently, the networks formed by young samurai mobilization and their increased involvement in national politics were critical to assembling the coalition that overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Evaluation

The typical connotation of mass mobilization in the context of revolutions is that of an uprising instigated by the disgruntled working class, where the large majority of the populace rebelled against their political rulers. If mass mobilization is defined narrowly in this sense, then the Meiji Restoration was clearly not facilitated by mass mobilization. However, during the Bakumatsu period, there was undoubtedly a novel, broad-based, and effective mobilization without precedent in Japan. Moreover, this cross-domain samurai mobilization was extremely consequential to both the course and the outcome of the Meiji Restoration.

Since this mobilization primarily took place among the samurai class, various scholars have portrayed this as an aristocratic and elite movement which by definition precludes 'mass mobilisation'. Yet this narrative should be reconsidered, as it is too fixated on the revolutionaries' samurai status as evidence that they were aristocratic. Indeed, the Meiji Restoration shared considerable similarities with Western revolutions used to contrast it. Using the French Revolution of 1789 as a comparison, it is commonly accepted that the French Revolution was spearheaded by members of France's Third Estate. Moreover, since the Third Estate represented the vast majority of the population, in contrast to the First and Second Estates whom they opposed, this is framed as an exercise of mass mobilisation. In reality, however, France's Third Estate was not limited to farmers and industrial workers as commonly believed: it also included

physicians, lawyers, bankers, and industrialists among others. Indeed, it was the privileged section of the Third Estate that was disproportionately represented in the Estates General. It was also this group that overwhelmingly took part in leading the French Revolution during its initial stages (Cohen, 2014).

Despite their very different cultural contexts, remarkable similarities exist between the revolutionaries of the French Revolution and the young samurai discussed in these articles. First, both groups constituted a similar proportion of their respective populations: samurai made up 6–7% of Japan's population, while the French bourgeoisie nobles comprised 8.4% of France's Third Estate. Next, both groups were marginalized within their political regimes. In France, members of the Third Estate and, in Japan, low-ranking samurai occupied administrative roles—venal offices in the case of the Third Estate and domain administrative positions for the samurai. However, both were excluded from higher and more privileged positions of power. This exclusion fostered shared resentment toward their social superiors and those of aristocratic lineage (Cohen, 2014).

Given that few question the French Revolution as an exercise in mass mobilization—despite the relative social privilege of its supporters—it is clear that the young samurai and Shishi who mobilized against the Tokugawa have been oversimplified as merely "aristocratic" and, therefore, incompatible with broad-based social mobilization. Consequently, while mass mobilization may have been more conspicuous during the French Revolution, scholars should not overlook the extent of popular participation in the Meiji Restoration. This movement was, in many ways, more broad-based and revolutionary than has traditionally been acknowledged.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic

References

Zamora, M. D. (1979). Ellen Kay Trimberger. Revolution from Above: Military Bureaucrats and Development in Japan, Turkey, Egypt, and Peru. Pp. viii, 196. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978. $14.95. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *441*(1), 201-202. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627944100119

McClain JL. Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, 1750–1920. By Thomas C. Smith. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. x, 278 pp. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 1989;48(4):877-878. doi:10.2307/2058179

Cohen, Mark (2014). The political process of the revolutionary samurai: a comparative reconsideration of Japan's Meiji Restoration. Theory and Society 43 (2):139-168.

Fletcher, M. (1983). [Review of *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: The Neglected Tradition.*, by T. Najita & J. V. Koschmann]. *Monumenta Nipponica*, *38*(3), 346–349. https://doi.org/10.2307/2384895

Yu, A. C. (2024). The Ikuno Incident - Japanese Wiki Corpus. Retrieved December 1, 2024, from Japanesewiki.com website: https://www.japanesewiki.com/history/The%20Ikuno%20Incident.html

Van. (2015). Illuminating the Meiji Restoration: Nation-state and proto-nationalism in Late Edo Japan. *Studenttheses.uu.nl*. https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/21091
KOSCHMANN, J. V. (1987). *The Mito Ideology: Discourse, Reform, and Insurrection in Late Tokugawa Japan, 1790-1864* (1st ed.). University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2430590

JANSEN, M. B. (1961). *Sakamato Ryoma and the Meiji Restoration*. Princeton University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pjs4

Craig A. The Restoration Movement in Chōshū. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 1959;18(2):187-197. doi:10.2307/2941681