

Saigō Takamori and the Samurai During the Early Meiji Restoration (1860 - 1877)

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For Saigō Takamori, the end of the shogunate was at hand. For three bloody and frantic days in January, 1868, his imperial army bombarded, pounded, and scattered the forces of Shogun Tokugawa Keiki. Four years of political machination, coup d'état, civil war, and radical thought had culminated at last in sweet triumph. Saigō was understandably elated. His victory meant the end of violence and the return of order to a divided Japan. Keiki's defeat paved the way for a *Meiji Ishin* (lit. "enlightened restoration"), which would install Emperor Mutsuhito, not the shogun, as the nation's head of state. For Saigō, the moment of his army's triumph was a proud one. In writing to his friend Katsura Hisatake, Saigō "boasted that [the imperial army] had routed an enemy five times their size"¹; in another letter, he inflated the shogunal forces to twice that amount² and celebrated the "victory and the stalwartness of his men"³. Indeed, it seemed that as Saigō swelled the ranks of the enemy, his pride in his men swelled correspondingly. Saigō could not have imagined that by 1877 he and thirty thousand other samurai would fight against the Meiji state they helped to create. And in the end, most tragically of all, Saigō would die in a hail of bullets from the imperial army he had so proudly led nine years earlier.

So what happened? Why did Saigō fight? Why did Saigō die? The answer lies in the history of Japan and with the samurai themselves. The samurai embodied the vision of a

¹ Ravina, Mark. *The Last Samurai: the Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004. Print. Pg. 151.

² Ibid. Pg. 151.

³ Ibid. Pg. 153.

traditional Japan, where ideals of principle, loyalty, and honor served as the moral foundation of society. And if these ideals were the foundation of society, the samurai were the pillars that supported it. Custom held that "samurai alone had the courage to serve as warriors and the moral fiber to serve as government officials"⁴. Samurai alone were entitled to carry weapons, impose justice, and serve as attendants to the emperor. Indeed, the word "samurai" itself means "to be in attendance[to, or] to serve"⁵ the nobility of Japan. In the minds of the Japanese people, Saigō was more than a mere war hero. Saigō embodied the essence of what it meant to be a samurai: he was obstinately righteous, determined, calm, faithful to the emperor, honorable, compassionate, and above the common and amoral people. Saigō's death, in other words, represented the death of the very concept of samurai. The Meiji state sought to civilize and enlighten⁶ Japan by dissolving the social polity that had defined the country for centuries. The war between Saigō and the Meiji state represented a struggle between a traditional view of Japan and a modern one. As fate would have it, traditional Japan would perish amid the explosions of "land mines, sea mines, balloonborne mines, and rockets"⁷. But why did Saigō fight against the Meiji state and what difference did it make? For Saigō, it was a matter of honor; but, more than this, it was Saigō's vision of a pure, moral, and traditional Japan, and Saigō's struggle to reconcile his ideals with the untraditional modernity of the Meiji state. Saigō's choice to go to war against the Meiji state was founded on a need to uphold his ideals in a society that no longer valued tradition. The causes that led up to Saigō's decision are what we will now seek to examine.

⁴ Ibid. Pg. 3.

⁵ Harper, Douglas. "Samurai." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper. Web. 29 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=samurai>>.

⁶ Benson, John, and Takao Matsumura. *Japan, 1868-1945: from Isolation to Occupation*. Harlow: Longman, 2001. Print. Pg. 18.

⁷ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 3.

At this point, it is useful to summarily describe the politics of Japan in 1864. The shogunate, headed by Shogun Tokugawa Keiki, served as the defining political entity, dictating Japan's foreign and domestic policy. The shogunate consolidated all the military power of Japan beneath a single person, a fact that gave the shogun considerable martial strength and influence. Technically speaking, Keiki served the emperor and the imperial court as a supreme general, tasked with protecting the realm. In practice, however, Keiki was left to his own devices with little court intervention. Indeed, the imperial court was marred by incompetency, and imperial courtiers were content to ignore state affairs in favor of "poetry composition, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and other refined activities"⁸. Under the shogun's authority, Japan was divided into numerous domains, which the *daimyos* (lit. "great lords"; singular: "daimyo"), in their official capacity, governed in the shogun's name. The daimyos gave their fealty to the shogun in exchange for a considerable degree of autonomy in the administration of their domains. The result was a collection of city-states, which sharply divided the Japanese countryside. Inter-domain conflicts were remarkably common, and the daimyos vied against one another for shogunal favor and resources. Japan, as a whole, scarcely possessed a sense of national unity.

Hisamitsu Shimazu, the daimyo of Satsuma and Saigō's lord, seeking to bring all of Japan beneath a single banner, preached an agenda of *kōbu gattai* (lit. "union of the imperial court and warriors"), which intended to reempower the imperial court and construct a new political polity in Japan. Specifically, *kōbu gattai* described a government, "in which the shogunate would remain a powerful force but would include major daimyo in key decisions"⁹, and in which the imperial court would be a legitimizing entity. This, Hisamitsu hoped, would bring in an era of cooperation between the shogun and daimyos and incite a sense of overarching national identity

⁸ Ravina, Mark. Pgs. 110.

⁹ Ibid. Pgs. 109.

in the Japanese public. Saigō, as it happened, would be entrusted to bring Hisamitsu's vision of a new Japanese polity to fruition.

So it was that on the 14th of March, 1864, the black smoke of one of Japan's few steamboats darkened the skies around Kyoto¹⁰. Onboard was the thirty-six-year-old Saigō Takamori, who had been plucked from exile and obscurity on the island of Okinoerabu to become the leading representative of Satsuma domain¹¹ in the imperial capital¹². Saigō's duty was to advocate Hisamitsu's *kōbu gattai* agenda in the emperor's imperial court. But upon arriving in Kyoto, Saigō was deeply dismayed. The imperial court, unsurprisingly, was bitter and inept, and wielded negligible influence throughout Japan. Tokugawa Keiki, by contrast, dominated the political landscape and acted as the *de facto* ruler, leaving the emperor and the imperial court very much out of the picture.

Under Keiki's governance, Japan had submitted to treaties with the European empires and America,

which reversed the country's centuries-old policy of seclusion[. T]hese new agreements allowed foreigners to settle in Japan, permitted them to be tried in their own consular courts and prevented the Japanese from imposing protective tariffs on goods imported from overseas¹³.

Discontent among samurai and commoners alike over these "unequal treaties"¹⁴ was widespread and growing.

¹⁰ Ravina, Mark. Pgs. 107-109.

¹¹ Feudal Japan was divided into dozens of *han* (lit. "domains"), the most important of which were governed by daimyos. The daimyos were expected to pay homage and swear loyalty to the shogun in the shogunal capital of Edo. Satsuma domain was located in the south-west of Japan, in modern Kagoshima Prefecture.

¹² Yates, Charles L. *Saigō Takamori: the Man behind the Myth*. London: Kegan Paul International, 1995. Print. Pg. 66.

¹³ Benson, John, and Takao Matsumura. Pg. 16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Despite their grievances with the shogunate's poor handling of international relations -- or perhaps because of them -- the Japanese were hopeful of Hisamitsu's *kōbu gattai* government. Keiki, in recognition of his unpopularity, pledged support for a power-sharing government, expecting that such a coalition government would also share the responsibility for the loathed treaties¹⁵. Yet by late 1864, *kōbu gattai* had proved a complete governmental disaster. The daimyos and the shogunate proved themselves completely incapable of "forging extensive alliances across domain lines"¹⁶ and daimyo refusal to share responsibility for the treaties further soured the coalition. Hisamitsu, *kōbu gattai*'s chief architect, and Keiki, its principle supporter, became increasingly divided by their differing visions of what *kōbu gattai* actually meant. On the one hand, Hisamitsu and the daimyo saw the movement as a way to unite Japan beneath a single political banner and simultaneously restore the emperor to actual power in Japan. On the other hand, Keiki saw the movement as a mechanism, through which he could increase his popularity as a ruler. This dispute led Keiki and Hisamitsu to become bitter archrivals, and their relationship slowly poisoned the *kōbu gattai* cause.

Saigō, thinking his daimyo politically betrayed by the shogun, openly questioned the shogun's sense of imperial loyalty in 1864, and by 1868, Saigō explicitly wished for Keiki's death¹⁷. Saigō's advocacy of *kōbu gattai* had necessarily meant the preservation of the shogunate as a political entity, but Keiki's perceived treachery had a peculiar effect on Saigō's ideologies. Instead of preserving the shogunate, Saigō began to consider the possibility of a Japanese government with neither a shogun nor a shogunate. As a samurai, Saigō upheld the morality and virtue of Japan in a traditional context. Yet the traditional institution of the shogunate, for Saigō,

¹⁵ Ravina, Mark. Pgs. 109.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pgs. 110.

¹⁷ Ibid.

had become contrary to his ideals of righteousness and, for that reason, needed to be purged from Japanese politics. This struggle for supremacy between Saigō's concern for morality and his concern for tradition would become an important theme in Saigō's life.

It was in the hostile *kōbu gattai* environment that a unique body politic emerged in Japan that influenced Saigō's maturing world view. The basic tenets of this social and political movement could be concisely expressed by the sentence, *sonnō jōi* (lit. "Revere the Heavenly Sovereign, Expel the Barbarians")¹⁸. The idea that the humiliating treaties suffered by Japan could be remediated by reverence to land and emperor appealed to the samurai sense of honor, loyalty, and redemption. Samurai embraced *sonnō jōi* because they perceived the emperor as a unifying entity, one that could reconcile the daimyos and the shogunate to create a strong central government and a prevailing sense of national unity. Yet in 1864, the emperor's power to unite was more a compelling political fantasy than an actionable pursuit. The emperor's imperial court was simply too divided to enact actual governmental reform. Thus, the *sonnō jōi* movement possessed a mere rhetorical brand of emotional appeal, suggesting that Japanese glory and honor could only be restored through a nebulous notion of radical dedication to Emperor Kōmei.

Saigō found himself sympathetic to the cause of the *sonnō jōi*, but incapable of joining them. The *sonnō jōi* found support in the emotional appeal of its oratory¹⁹, not in the logic of its actions. Reflecting on the late Tokugawa shogunate, Prime Minister Itō Hirobumi remarked that "if one speaks logically of the [*sonnō jōi*, it is] impossible to understand[. B]ut emotionally, it had to be that way"²⁰. The *sonnō jōi* sought to offer solutions to socially ingrained concepts of foreign oppression and inequity, but it did so with an irrational focus on violence and vengeance.

¹⁸ McClain, James L. *Japan, a Modern History*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002. Print. Pg. 140.

¹⁹ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 111.

²⁰ Craig, Albert M. Pg. 198.

For example, Hisamitsu Shimazu, who was increasingly frustrated by the foreign presence in Japan, executed British subject Charles Richardson for crossing the path of his escort as he paraded through the village of Namamugi²¹. In the domain of Chōshū, exasperated cannons attempted to repel the encroaching westerners by firing on their vessels as they passed through Shimonoseki Straits²². On another occasion, the sonnō jōi radicals abducted Ikeuchi Daigaku, a scholar of Confucianism and supporter of the shogunate, and cut off his ears for his "betrayal" of Emperor Kōmei²³. Saigō, though he was also impassioned by the ideas reverence and expulsion, rejected the new movement as a false conception of righteousness. Instead, Saigō reaffirmed his belief in hierarchy, reason, and order with a poem:

The enervation of the imperial house has startled the people
Grieving and angry, one hundred thousand soldiers have offered their lives
Resolute in their loyalty, their spirits are like iron
As cornerstones and pillars, they build an impregnable fortress²⁴

The poem bespeaks both Saigō's fealty to the emperor and also his belief in structure and organization, suggesting that, for Saigō, reverence and expulsion did not necessitate "anarchic violence"²⁵. The last line in particular suggests his opposition to the turbulent and senseless butchery promoted by the sonnō jōi radicals: it implies that only as "cornerstones and pillars" of a structure could the people of Japan become "an impregnable fortress" against foreign invasion. The purpose of "expelling the barbarians," Saigō realized, could be accomplished neither by a compliant and weak shogunate, nor an incompetent imperial court, nor a lawless group of fanatics. The sonnō jōi were correct that Japan had been subjugated by foreign oppression and

²¹ Yates, Charles L. Pg. 64.

²² Beasley, William Gerald. *Select Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy: 1853-1868*. London: Oxford UP, 1955. Print. Pgs. 194-196.

²³ Craig, Albert M. *Choshu in the Meiji Restoration*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961. Print. Pg. 196.

²⁴ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 168.

²⁵ Ibid. Pg. 111.

inept statesmen; yet they unjustifiably relied on anarchy and savagery to redress wrongs. Saigō, the politician in Kyoto, took it upon himself to restore autonomy to Japan by restructuring the government from within.

On 25th of December, 1866, the very foundation of the Japanese political hierarchy shook. Emperor Kōmei had suddenly fallen ill and died. On the 9th of January, 1867, Kōmei's fifteen-year-old son, Mutsuhito ascended to the Chrysanthemum Throne²⁶ and replaced his father as the new emperor. Saigō, although publicly distraught over Kōmei's demise, was privately excited by the opportunity presented by Kōmei's adolescent successor. The youthful inexperience of Mutsuhito meant that he would be open to the suggestion of governmental reform. Writing to fellow Satsuma samurai Ōkubo Toshimichi, Saigō observed that the emperor's death had unsettled the balance of political power in Kyoto, and that "perhaps the time had come to return the [new] emperor to power"²⁷.

For Saigō, the cause of restoring the power of the emperor necessarily meant the destruction of the shogunate. Keiki and the Tokugawa Shogunate had come to represent the compromise of Japanese ideals with coercive, western, immoral pressures. The shogun's "West-conscious programs [were perceived] as a betrayal of the number one Japanese national ideal[:] loyalty to emperor and state"²⁸. In other words, they symbolized exactly the kind of contamination of a culturally pure Japan that the sonnō jōi vehemently embodied. Saigō,

²⁶ The "Chrysanthemum Throne" is the throne of the emperor of Japan. In a metonymic sense, the Chrysanthemum Throne refers to the political power embodied by the emperor. To give a modern analogue, "Chrysanthemum Throne" is similar to how Americans might use the term "Oval Office" to describe the power of the president.

²⁷ Yates, Charles L. Pg. 93.

²⁸ Conroy, Hilary. "Government versus 'Patriot': The Background of Japan's Asiatic Expansion." *Pacific Historical Review* 20.1 (1951): 31-42. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Oct. 2011.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3634474>>.

frustrated by the shogunate's apparent disregard for imperial authority and purity, expressed his displeasure in a poem:

On this autumn day I again cast myself into the fray
 The steamship billows black smoke as it speeds me south to north
 The court wields its authority not, and iniquitous designs hold sway
 Oh, to be an autumn maple leaf and fall by the imperial palace²⁹

The imagery of "billow[ing] black smoke" captures Saigō's seething enmity for the shogun, while "iniquitous designs" describe Keiki's shadowy political intrigues, which deprived the imperial court of its "authority." The poem, in other words, explicitly declares the shogun a traitor to the imperial court and portrays him as the target of Saigō's longing for just retribution.

By October 8th, 1867, all preparations were complete for the destruction of the weak shogunate and the restoration of the emperor as the central political figure. Saigō, in a mere ten months, had maneuvered Satsuma for a political coup that would oust the shogun from his seat of power in Edo. Communicating in secret missives, the usually-inept imperial court managed to command Satsuma "to annihilate the traitor Keiki" and to "punish the crimes [of the shogunate], drive out the wicked schemers, and undertake the great mission of restoring the imperial house to its former state"³⁰. Keiki, correctly sensing the end of his dominion, resigned in his official capacity as shogun on October 14th. Emperor Mutsuhito accepted Keiki's resignation and on the 9th of December issued an edict that formally dissolved the office of the shogun. Saigō, however, was dissatisfied. Resignation was not synonymous with atonement and Saigō could not countenance peace with Keiki: "those who say one should not be fond of war are [the same] as those who say we should not act in accordance with great principles"³¹. Saigō directed Imuta Naohira and Masumitsu Kyūnosuke, two samurai from Satsuma, to engender chaos in the

²⁹ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 133.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 144.

³¹ Ibid. Pg. 146.

shogun's capital by leading an uprising of *rōnin* (lit. "wave men," referring to a masterless or socially adrift samurai)³², and to burn down the shogunal castle. Saigō's command to destroy the shogun's castle presents an intriguing political message: during the height of the shogunate's power, daimyo were expected to pay tribute to the shogun and spend a predetermined number of months in the shogunal castle. By burning it down, Saigō was symbolically destroying the polity that demanded feudal fealty to the shogun. This was an affront to Keiki's pride and honor, and it had the expected effect of provoking the former shogun to open war with Satsuma. Saigō now had the opportunity that his loyalty to the emperor longed for: he would exact justice on the shogun by force.

At this point we return to the time in Saigō's life at which the narrative began. Saigō smashed Keiki in what would be known as the *Boshin Sensō* (lit. "War of the Year of the Dragon"). Yet victory had a peculiar and unforeseen effect on Saigō. The great champion of the imperial army had reached the age of forty, and the sight of battle and death seemed to serve as a *memento mori* for the aging samurai. Indeed, Saigō seemed to recognize his own humanity and fleeting existence. In a letter that contrasted his boasting to Katsura Hisatake, Saigō lamented to Kawaguchi Seppō, his friend from Okinoerabu:

I regret that I've joined the ranks of old men, so I can no longer fight, but just depend on others. I have already decided that when the fighting dies down I will ask for my leave and retire. To tell the truth, I can no longer serve like a man, and I am so timid and self-conscious that it's unbearable³³.

Whereas formerly Saigō would have relished the execution of the ex-shogun, the thought of his own mortality compelled Saigō to pursue a path of moderation with his defeated enemy: "The current situation in the imperial land is different from the past in that although brother is pitted

³² Yates, Charles L. Pg. 105.

³³ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 153.

against brother, they also know that it is time to avoid such a disgrace"³⁴. Retribution for the shogun, Saigō realized, did not necessarily mean execution. In the end, Keiki was permitted to abstain from *seppuku* (lit. "stomach cutting," the Japanese term for ritual suicide), although he was convicted of treachery and high crimes against the emperor. The last of the shoguns was granted leave by the emperor to retire to the domain of Mito, where he quietly lived until his death in 1913.

Saigō's decision to spare the shogun's life indicates an internal quandary, which pertained to Saigō's samurai duty to sustain both tradition and morality in Japan. Japanese warrior tradition had held that defeated enemy commanders were to be executed, and their heads presented to the emperor. In their presentation of severed heads, victorious warriors proved their fealty to land and emperor in a feudal and gruesome display³⁵. Saigō, however, was not a particularly violent man, which was the reason that he had rejected the *sonnō jōi*. Speaking through an emissary, Keiki appealed to Saigō's opposition to unprincipled violence. Saigō agreed that to "exhaust one's strength suppressing lowly vassals is not a worthy path [...] but merely a decision to die a fruitless, angry death under a hail of bullets"³⁶. Saigō believed that the needless execution of a defeated enemy would undermine Japanese morality with senseless butchery. As a samurai, this is something Saigō could not allow.

Though the shogun had permanently vanished from Japanese politics, Saigō had yet a role to play in the new state. Appointed to the role of *sanyo* (lit. "counselor") in the Satsuma government, Saigō became the mediator between the Meiji regime in Edo -- soon to be renamed Tokyo -- and the feudal domains that controlled the rest of the country. The Meiji state needed

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 155.

³⁵ Ibid. Pg. 2.

³⁶ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 155.

Saigō perhaps more than Saigō himself realized: they needed the hero who had dismantled the shogunate to legitimize their sweeping and controversial anti-feudal reforms. Political dissidents within the domains "would be unlikely to challenge the authority of any government in which Saigō held high office"³⁷.

Saigō's "high office," however, was more a ceremonial position than anything else. Because Saigō's function in the Meiji state was merely to act as a legitimizing entity, Saigō was permitted to retire quickly from cabinet meetings in favor of impassioned "stories of battle, [...] of sumo wrestling, or [...] of hunting and fishing" with his friend Itagaki Taisuke³⁸. Saigō had little actual interest in tiresome legislation: in keeping with his samurai ideals, Saigō famously declared that "loyalty, filial piety, humanity, and love," rather than an extensive legal code, would be the basis for a just society³⁹. As a result, Saigō was not at all opposed to his exclusion from the Meiji governing authority, and happily vacationed to his personal residence in Hinatayama in Satsuma.

Withdrawal from politics left Saigō disconnected from Meiji affairs. In the November of 1872, Saigō was surprised to hear that the traditional Japanese calendar was to be replaced by the western "Gregorian calendar, effective as of [the 3rd of December, 1872]"⁴⁰. Yet the traditionalist Saigō was unfazed, and in late December, when the Japanese New Year had traditionally been celebrated, he composed a poem:

Since long ago this has been the day to greet the New Year
How will the solar calendar reach the rough, remote villages?
The snow announces the coming of a bountiful year and the elderly are each
family's treasure

³⁷ Yates, Charles L. Pg. 119.

³⁸ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 175.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Pg. 178.

How joyous are the shouts of the village children⁴¹
 Saigō approved of the Meiji state's reforms because, even though Japan was inexorably becoming more modern, he optimistically insisted that important Japanese traditions -- like respect for the aged -- would endure and flourish beneath the Meiji state⁴². As the poem suggests, it was during this early period of the Meiji state that Saigō became increasingly concerned with the preservation of samurai and Japanese tradition within the increasingly modern government. While the replacement of the traditional Japanese calendar was not a particularly controversial issue, its impact was sufficient enough to provoke Saigō to write of the importance of certain Japanese customs. Whereas Saigō under the shogun had dismissed feudal tradition in the interest of maintaining moral rectitude in Japan, Saigō under the Meiji state advocated the observance of those customs he deemed to be important to Japanese righteousness and purity. Samurai across Japan, who feared for the preservation of their ideals, looked to Saigō for reassurances that the traditional realm would be, in spite of the reforms, retained. So although Saigō in practice had only nominal involvement in the politics of Japan, he found himself serving as the Meiji institution's official spokesman.

Saigō's first challenge as a representative of the Meiji government came when the state issued the Charter Oath of 1868, which effectively stripped the feudal aristocracy of their hereditary privilege⁴³. The Charter Oath excited the lesser members of the samurai caste⁴⁴ in the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Pg. 179.

⁴³ Lu, David John. *Japan: a Documentary History*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. Print. Pg. 397.

⁴⁴ All samurai in feudal Japan were not equal. Samurai who served as foot soldiers in domanial armies were known as *ashigaru*, and represented the lowest class of samurai. *Yoriki* were samurai who assisted in the administration of the Japanese government. High ranking samurai, such as Saigō, were typically known by imperial titles. Samurai were permitted to execute any lesser samurai who insulted their honor in a practice called *kiri sute gomen* (lit. "authorization to cut and leave").

Japanese domains, who had been traditionally bound to ignoble ranks and positions within the feudal government. Yet the aristocracy, unwilling to surrender their feudal privilege, resisted the imperial edict. Saigō the spokesman was forced to somehow reconcile his sense of justness, which reasonably favored the discontented samurai, with his duty to uphold the image of a traditional Japan. Deeply divided, Saigō devised an unconvincing half-solution. In a highly ritualized display of imperial authority, the daimyo of the feudal domains would release their lands and holdings to the emperor, thus technically eliminating the aristocracy. Then, the emperor would promptly reappoint the daimyo as his official *han chiji* (lit. "domain governors") and restore their property. Saigō, meanwhile, would become a *sansei* (lit. "councilor") in the realm and ensure that the "interests [of the common people] would be heard"⁴⁵. The restless, lesser samurai, through this token gesture, were momentarily, if reluctantly, appeased.

It is natural to wonder why Saigō placed such immense value on the preservation of the Japanese aristocracy. Part of the explanation can be attributed to Saigō's personal history and to the history of his native Satsuma domain. Hisamitsu Shimazu, Saigō's former daimyo and now an imperial governor, was head of the oldest warrior family in Japan. The Shimazu family could trace its history as warlords nearly 800 years in the past: the Shimazu had been daimyo since the Kamakura Shogunate in 1185⁴⁶. Serving the Shimazu house, Saigō learned the timeless relation of daimyo to samurai. Perhaps more than any other Japanese domain, samurai from Satsuma saw daimyo as a fundamental part of their traditional heritage. Indeed, on a personal level, Saigō was unwaveringly loyal to the Shimazu daimyo. Before Hisamitsu ascended to power, Satsuma was governed by Nariakira Shimazu. Upon Nariakira's death, a distraught Saigō, seeking to serve his lord even in afterlife, attempted suicide by throwing himself into the freezing waters of

⁴⁵ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 162.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg. 16.

Kagoshima Bay. Saigō was, of course, rescued and he regarded his survival as a sign that his duty on earth to the Shimazu was not yet fulfilled⁴⁷. When, in 1868, Saigō was confronted by the Charter Oath, which could dismantle the daimyo houses, his sense of tradition caused him to be opposed, both historically and personally, to the destruction of the family he was bound to serve.

The emperor's ceremonial role in calming the disaffected samurai in the Charter Oath controversy reveals the sheer moral force of the Chrysanthemum Throne. Indeed, the emperor, according to traditional thought, was "sacred and inviolable"⁴⁸. Saigō had regarded the concept of the emperor and the imperial court as the supreme force of righteousness on earth. Any action taken against the emperor was, by definition, a force of evil against the embodiment of good. Driven by his sense of loyalty to the emperor, Saigō's perception of righteousness had demanded absolute loyalty to the imperial will. Yet Saigō found himself conflicted over what appeared to be a legitimate expectation of the lesser samurai: why should increased equality be denied? Many other samurai shared in Saigō's confusion. Hisamitsu Shimazu stated that although he opposed dismantling the aristocracy, he found Saigō's purely nominal abolition of the aristocracy be an affront "to duty and human kindness[, which] will be judged harshly by history"⁴⁹. Confronted with an apparent contradiction in their struggle to uphold both tradition and morality, samurai began to regard reconciliation between tradition and modernity as unseemly and distasteful. They would rather preserve the centuries-old relationship between daimyo and retainer than see it replaced by a manufactured polity of the Meiji state. The incident over the Charter Oath left Saigō highly disillusioned with the wisdom of the "enlightened" government.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pg. 78.

⁴⁸ Ito, Miyoji, and Jonathan Dresner. "The Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889)." *History Department, Hanover College*. Hanover Historical Texts Project. Web. 31 Oct. 2011.

<<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/1889con.html>>.

⁴⁹ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 161.

How could a government opposed to tradition possibly seek to preserve morality in Japan? Such a question would haunted Saigō for years.

On a traditional and ideological level, Saigō was strained by the Meiji government's "national land tax, which broke feudal custom by establishing private ownership of land"⁵⁰. Saigō viewed the land tax as a corrupting influence on the traditional *jiwari* system (lit. "allotment of land," the method by which public land was divided among rural farmers). Saigō, as a samurai, had the responsibility to preserve the morality of Japan as a whole. Private property, in Saigō's mind, would introduce "market principles into landownership"⁵¹, which would in turn invite greed and barbaric struggles for profit. Saigō would rather preserve feudal tradition than see the people of the countryside "fighting over land, blinded by the prospect of immediate gain"⁵². He lamented that the land tax would "contaminate"⁵³ the purity and morality of the Japanese countryside, and Saigō became increasingly willing to subvert the Meiji government's reforms in the name of his traditional duty.

Saigō's resolve was again tested in the September of 1870 when Kagoshima⁵⁴, while nominally an imperial prefecture, began to ignore imperial edicts. The government in Tokyo had, for instance, commanded Kagoshima to further eliminate social distinctions by abolishing status gradations within the samurai class. Kagoshima not only disregarded this order, but, when reminded of the decree, defiantly established a new hierarchy for its retainers. Saigō was deeply disturbed by this particular reform, and became increasingly unwilling to openly support the

⁵⁰ Ibid. Pgs. 197-198.

⁵¹ Ibid. Pg. 200.

⁵² Ibid. Pg. 200.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ In August 1871, under the order of the Meiji state, the domains were abolished and recreated as prefectures, a fact that can still be seen today. "Satsuma domain" was renamed "Kagoshima Prefecture."

Meiji state. Saigō reasoned that, while "in the current situation, it is obvious that [a samurai's individual worth should be evaluated] irrespective of rank," samurai in high posts were "descendants of men who had rendered 'meritorious service'"⁵⁵ to Kagoshima. To deny these samurai their hereditary privileges seemed, to Saigō, a horrible injustice. Whereas Saigō had envisioned a government, in which the tradition of honoring and rewarding the actions of one's predecessors was of the highest importance, the Meiji state was constructing a society that rejected these ideas in favor of equality. The feudal polity that defined the relationship between all members of Japanese society, in other words, was being replaced by a modern mechanism to achieve a union of "all classes, high and low"⁵⁶. While Saigō brooded over the need for traditional compensation, other prominent samurai spoke publicly of the coming war with Tokyo. Murata Shimpachi, a samurai who had returned with Saigō to Kyoto in 1864, described trying to constrain samurai discontent as "trying to hold together 'a rotten barrel full of water with a rotten rope'"⁵⁷.

The confusion in Japan over who was actually in control of the country -- the samurai in the domains or the Meiji state in Tokyo -- was alarming even to foreigners. So great was the ambiguity that *The New York Times* reported the disorder in its headlines:

The Daimios are acting independently of the Mikado⁵⁸, and [Kagoshima Domain] seems ready at any moment to break into open rebellion. Foreigners are generally apprehensive of a renewal of civil war during the coming summer [...] and already public feeling is becoming alienated generally from the Mikado⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 161.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Pg. 200.

⁵⁸ *Mikado* (lit. "heavenly gate") is the title given to the emperor Japan. The etymology suggests the person who lives beyond the "heavenly gate" of the imperial palace, that being the emperor.

⁵⁹ "Telegrams.; Apprehended Renewal of Civil War in Japan." *New York Times* 19 Mar. 1871: Front Page. Print.

The *New York Times* proved remarkably perceptive. By 1876, the Meiji relationship with Kagoshima had deteriorated to a hopeless state. On March 28th, Tokyo "began its most direct assault on samurai privilege" by banning "anyone except officers at state ceremonies, soldiers, and police from carrying swords"⁶⁰.

For samurai, this act represented an unbearable dishonor: the Meiji state had stripped them of the last feudal remnant that placed them above amoral commoners. Traditionally, samurai were expected to perfect the art of *kenjutsu* (lit. "the technique of the sword"). Kenjutsu academies across Japan were centers of samurai thought, overflowing with samurai wishing to hone the skills of the warrior class that defined them⁶¹. Carrying the sword marked a samurai as one who both martially and intellectually committed to serving the realm. The ban on the public display of swords thus struck at the very heart of samurai privilege and identity⁶². No longer were samurai distinguishable from peasants. No longer was there an identifying characteristic that established the samurai as a moral authority. To samurai, it seemed as though their traditional duty to defend righteousness and purity had been revoked.

Combined with the ban on swords, general samurai discontent resulted in rebellion against the Meiji state. October marked the beginnings of armed rebellion when scores of samurai "stormed Kumamoto Castle [...] in Kyūshū, kill[ed] the garrison commander [...] and mortally wound[ed] the prefectural governor"⁶³. Then, on the 29th of January, 1877, samurai attacked imperial strongholds throughout Kagoshima, seizing "large quantities of weapons and ammunition" in the process⁶⁴, which would become the munitions of the samurai war effort.

⁶⁰ Ravina, Mark. Pg 198.

⁶¹ Beasley, William Gerald. Pg. 81

⁶² Ravina, Mark. Pg 198.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Yates, Charles L. Pg. 164.

And where was Saigō in the beginnings of this samurai crusade? According to popular stories of the time, when news of a samurai rebellion reached Saigō's ears at his residence in the foothills of Kagoshima, he exclaimed that this was "remarkably good news"⁶⁵. On the 7th of February, Saigō traveled to Kagoshima⁶⁶ and vowed to go to Tokyo in order to "question" the Meiji state⁶⁷.

Saigō's appearance in Kagoshima so enamored the dissident samurai that they rallied around him. Such was the excitement over Saigō that, according to Kabayama Sukeami, a samurai from Kagoshima, "even women and children were rousing themselves and volunteering" to "interrogate" the government⁶⁸ by Saigō's side. By the 15th of February, 1877, Saigō had amassed a following of some thirty thousand loyal samurai, who accompanied the legendary warrior, ostensibly serving as bodyguards. Thus launched one of the most famous military campaigns in Japanese history: these disenfranchised samurai, with Saigō among them, would be the casualties of Japan's bloodiest conflict in over three-hundred years, the so-called *Seinan Sensō* (lit. "War of the Southwest").

Why, now, did Saigō elect to join the rebel cause in Kagoshima? On the surface, Saigō's decision seems to contradict his principles: he had, after all, rejected the sonnō jōi for their radicalism. Yet pervasive throughout Saigō's life was profound sense of virtue and justice, and it seems unlikely that Saigō would abandon his moral compass so suddenly. Saigō himself embodied the notion of a Japanese national crisis in 1876 and 1877, fearing for the fate of tradition and morality while struggling to remain loyal to the central state. For Saigō, the samurai

⁶⁵ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 199.

⁶⁶ Kagoshima, in this context, refers to the administrative center of Kagoshima Prefecture. The city of Kagoshima is Kagoshima Prefecture's capital.

⁶⁷ Ravina, Mark. Pg. 202.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

embodied the phrase "*bushi no kotoba ni nigon wa nai*" (lit. "a retainer stands by his own word and never lies"), an eloquent, if idealistic, depiction of the samurai paragon⁶⁹. The dissolution of the samurai and their ancient privilege represented the destruction of social class entrusted to uphold integrity and promote purity in Japan. This vision of a pure and moral Japan is what drove Saigō to sympathize with the the sonnō jōi and to overthrow the shogunate. But the fantasy that Saigō pursued that cold January in 1868 was very different from the imperial bureaucracy that confronted Saigō in 1877. Saigō envisioned the new Japan not as a modern entity, but as a traditional one. Too soon, the samurai found that their antiquated notions of "*bushi no kotoba ni nigon wa nai*," of honor, of loyalty, and of righteousness had no place in the new regime. In one of the most horrible ironies in history, Saigō, in the interest of preserving a righteous Japan, had unwittingly destroyed the only government in which the samurai and their ideals had any logical purpose. Saigō fought because he feared for the future of a Japan with no samurai to reflect the pinnacle of selfless valor and virtue. Saigō was thus a traitor with a patriotic cause, and we can say he died defending what he believed to be fundamentally just, honorable, and righteous.

⁶⁹ Blomberg, Catharina. *The Heart of the Warrior: Origins and Religious Background of the Samurai System in Feudal Japan*. Sandgate, Folkestone, Kent: Japan Library, 1994. Print. Pg. xi.