

**A RESTORATION THAT NEVER BECAME
A REVOLUTION:
THE MEIJI RESTORATION AS A REBUILDER OF
JAPANESE CONSERVATIVE NATIONALISM**

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Abstract: The Meiji Restoration has traditionally been described as an event that ushered in great economic and technological progress, accompanied by rapid governmental bureaucratization and industrialization. Contrary to this view, the fact that progressive development served as a means to restore Japanese nationalism critically explains why the Restoration cannot be called a revolution. In this study, I will argue that the Restoration was no more than a restoration because beneath the veneer of pursuing rapid industrialization to keep up with the West, it had the deeper aim to restore Japanese conservative nationalism. More specifically, the restoration of the authority of the imperial throne as the core of nationalism or *kokutai* was aimed at the restoration of national pride after Commodore Matthew Perry's gunboat diplomacy, an

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ideal cherished by politicians and citizens alike. Economic and technological advancements and the recuperation of imperial authority were means through which the rebuilding of a conservative spiritual nationalism was to be accomplished as the ultimate goal. In other words, the Meiji Restoration was a societal reconstruction program initiated from above and supported by the Japanese public to re-establish Japanese conservative nationalism through rapid material advancement *and* the return of the monarch as a symbolic figurehead.

Keywords: *Meiji Restoration; conservatism; nationalism; Japan; reconstruction.*

The Meiji Restoration (1868) has traditionally been described as an event that ushered in great economic and technological progress, accompanied by rapid governmental bureaucratization and industrialization of the Japanese society. However, contrary to this view, such development served only as a means to restore Japanese nationalism. As such, the Meiji Restoration cannot possibly be called a revolution. The Restoration was no more than a restoration because beneath the veneer of pursuing rapid industrialization to align with the West, there was a subtler meaning in the Restoration as a rebuilder of Japanese Conservative nationalism. More specifically, restoring national pride through a restoration of the authority of the imperial throne as the essence of nationalism or *kokutai* after Commodore Matthew Perry's gunboat diplomacy was an ideal cherished by politicians and citizens alike. Economic and technological advancements and the recuperation of imperial authority were means through which the rebuilding of a Conservative spiritual nationalism was accomplished as the ultimate end.

The Meiji Restoration was a societal reconstruction program initiated from above and supported by the Japanese public to re-establish Japanese conservative nationalism through rapid material advancement *and* the return of the monarch as a symbolic figurehead. Of course, "conservative" is a contentious label; research is still needed on the liberalism of pursuing material progress to better understand how it philosophically reconciled with the conservative outcome of restoring the imperial throne.

Traditional scholarly consensus focused primarily on the Restoration's rapid achievement of material and institutional advancements. Yasuzo Horie (1937, 79-81) posited that the Restoration was a revolution that gave birth to a strong market economy, a Western-based parliamentary culture, and most importantly, the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate

by lower-class samurai. Such positive results “eliminated a feudal form of government” and helped “unify the country based on centralization of power and transformed Japanese politics into a democracy.”² This perception, proposed by Nobutaka Ike (1948, 7-8), remained very popular up to the late 1940s. Ike similarly concluded that European parliamentary models and alarming international events such as the Opium Wars inspired samurai leaders like Saigō Takamori (1828-1877) to propose a national assembly which could accommodate various interests across the nation without destroying the provincial clans. Thus, the Restoration was a capitalist, anti-feudal, democratic, and thoroughly progressive revolution.

While the consensus can be credited for jump-starting a fresh debate on the significance of the Restoration, an important question forces this traditional logic to stand on its head: Must the end results of economic and technological progress necessarily reflect a thoroughly liberal ideological consensus? The answer is no: reforms do not arise from a *tabula rasa*, but, as an event created by people, are deeply influenced by their objectives and interests. Although a decision may reflect a majority’s opinion, no majority is ever destined to be a majority without the existence of a minority whose thoughts may influence the majority to constantly revise its original position. The traditional consensus ignored this simple but crucial fact and left no room for any consideration of how Tokugawa sympathizers influenced the thinking of the new Meiji elite. It also ignored that the Restoration was a negotiated outcome between the new elite of reformers who desired rapid Westernization and conservative samurai who remained loyal monarchists. Hence, what resulted was a bland configuration of the Restoration into a one-dimensional historical event without any meticulous analysis of the *people*, or more specifically, their individual motives and roles. Only the Restoration’s material results were emphasized at the expense of practical cooperation between the reformers and the loyalists for national strengthening—the essential complexity of the Restoration.

“Practical” is the right adjective, for reformers cooperated with loyalists out of necessity and convenience. The reformers found allying with the loyalists convenient and desirable because they shared conservatism ideas, such as the preservation of monarchical authority, which stabilized the Japanese government and helped mobilize soldiers for national defense—goals of *realpolitik* (Emery 1915, 468). The Restoration was a “fundamental

² Horie also argues boldly that the Restoration was “bound to come, accelerated by the invasion of foreign capitalism,” without justifying his claim through analysis on p.70.

step taken towards absolutism” in reaction to the gunboat diplomacy of the Perry Expedition (Shigeki 1951). This led reformers to prioritize national security, relegating all technological and economic developments as means to ensure the stability and restoration of nationalism and monarchical grandeur. The Restoration was “fundamental” for igniting a comprehensive causal chain; political power depended on military power, which in turn, depended on strong finances.³ Thus, without the currying of favors with the Tokugawa elite, the reformers would have faced immense difficulty in initiating their reforms since they needed the military and financial support.

However, what made the Restoration truly “fundamental” is that it was also one of the first events in the history of Japanese modernization in which the general public had significant historical agency. The Reformers harbored a sophisticated variety of pragmatism that strongly influenced both the process and result of their quest to clearly identify what they had to exactly restore while pursuing what they truly wanted. More precisely, the Restoration had to realistically *be* conservative. The Meiji Reformers pragmatically concentrated on recovering Japanese national sovereignty by cooperating with Tokugawa loyalists to restore the imperial throne because they wanted to establish solid political legitimacy by acting according to popular will. What this means is that reformers inevitably had to comply with a highly enthusiastic popular support for this unified and coalitional effort to hasten modernization.³ Hence, the Perry expedition, a militarily and financially useful alliance between Reformers and Conservatives, and public support for collaboration between the two sides to prioritize restoring imperial authority explain why the liberal drive for technological progress was pragmatically tempered by the conservative desire for the preservation of the monarchy. Unfortunately, like Horie, Toyama was not able to see past the conservative perception of the Restoration as an event driven exclusively by the political elites, for ordinary citizens only briefly make their appearance as occasional sources of grassroots support for those elites. Thus, while Toyama offers a more nuanced assessment of historical causality than Ike or Horie, he fails to liberate himself from the shackles of the same limitations inherent in their opinions. Toyama’s inability to liberate himself is however telling, for it suggests that if the Meiji Restoration was indeed a restoration and nothing more, the fundamental question remains, what were the motives behind its conservative bend?

³ See also Marius Jansen’s review of Toyama’s book in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No.1 (November, 1952), 90-93. Toyama would agree with my usage of “fundamental” here, as he was one of the first historians to account for enthusiastic public support for the restoration of monarchy.

The complexity of human motivations and their change through time ought to be at the center of historical study since history is also the study of human behavior. Since history is a collective human enterprise produced through interactions between people regardless of class, understanding elite and popular conservative influences on the reformers' agenda is a crucial endeavor. Instead of engaging in generalizations and characterize the Meiji Restoration as “modern,” “progressive,” or “led by lower-class samurais,” a more comprehensive assessment of political motivations—including those of the imperial household—is necessary to understand it as a holistic human experience (which is the essence of history itself). An exclusive focus on elite actions and policies, as Toyama pursued, can be misleading. To understand the Meiji Restoration as a societal phenomenon, it is essential to account for emotional change—the ultimate golden mean between narrative history and general history. In other words, general history, where Toyama's work belongs, becomes especially problematic with its focus on generalization and heavy reliance on specific causes to explain a complex web of simultaneous events (Sakata and Hall 1956, 31-36). On the other hand, it is not clear *how* historians can maintain objectivity by focusing on emotional fluctuations, because emotions are liable to constant change and are far too limited in scope to represent a holistic human experience. Most importantly, there remains the lingering question of *how* psychological history can integrate well with the more traditional political and elite histories, open so much to speculation as it is. Even Sakata and Hall fail to provide a clear answer here.

Yet, the fact that they are not part of the analysis does not mean that emotions are absent from politics. Firm loyalty to imperial sovereignty, for example, might provide an answer to dealing with human emotions and their relationship with political history. A path is not smooth the moment it is made. Underneath the seemingly smooth layers of dirt or cement lie pebbles and gravel which make out the road's foundation. Likewise, the Meiji reformers could not easily dismiss the conservative combination of nationalism and imperial loyalty because the imperial household represented the symbolic essence of the Japanese people. What Tokugawa supporters had importantly reminded the reformers was that no matter how Westernized Japan might become, the Japanese people would never want to become Westerners themselves. Instead, Westernization could only be a sufficient condition for Japan's material progress. To justly qualify this truth, I would revise the traditional consensus about the Restoration by invoking “the loyalty and honor for the imperial throne” as a major connection between reformers and conservatives.

For example, the Chōshū loyalist clans provided significant support to the newly risen Westernized elites, so much so that, contrary to Toyama's assertion, the public had little to contribute to the success of the Restoration. As Albert Craig (1961) argued, the reformers easily incorporated the Chōshū clan members because they shared the conservative aspiration for a very nationalist Japan due to their long attachment to imperial loyalty and samurai values since the rise of a feudal order. Furthermore, the Chōshū domain had amassed immense wealth—an obvious boon for the cash-hungry reformers who wanted to speed up the modernization processes. Finally, the clan was militarily beneficial, as it had taken advantage of the Meiji elites' intolerance for Western superiority, and had enthusiastically embraced Western military technology to modernize its soldiers and strengthen itself. In essence, the Chōshū domain had ideas and means to exercise genuine *realpolitik*, preserving traditional samurai values while pragmatically supporting the reformers with their strong military power—the cornerstone for the modernization of the Japanese military.

Craig's theoretical contribution closely follows the political role of Chōshū clans during the Restoration, softening the traditional analysis by showing how Japan's modernization was built on highly pragmatic conservatism, while also toning down Toyama's argument by rejecting his treatment of the public masses as a significant historical actor. What is left, in Craig's conclusion, is a half-baked revolution which quickened the speed of Japan's technological advancement and bureaucratization based on European models because the reformers already had a firm base of wealth which the Chōshū domain had amassed long before the Restoration. The only thing left to figure out was how to invest the finances to acquire much-needed Western technology. The intense focus of the Meiji leadership on this issue prevented Japan from pursuing a thorough abandonment of the monarchy in favor of a liberal democracy. However, Craig's conclusion is rather grandiose because his only major body of primary sources supporting his analysis came from the *Bocho kaiten shi*, which in Craig's own words, is just a "pastiche of loosely organized letters and memorials" concerning the daily affairs of the Chōshū clan in the imperial court. Without hearing much from the reformers' perspectives, objectivity remains limited. (Craig 1961, 369-374)

Furthermore, because it was primarily the Meiji reformers' wise use of the Chōshū domain's finances which led to the landmark economic progress of the Restoration, just how much agency ought to be ascribed to the Chōshū

clans as a group is debatable, for they were only one conservative force at the court. How influential was their philosophy? For it's one thing to claim that a certain group was influential because they actually made the plans that resulted in the rapid progress during the Restoration. To state, however, that they were "influential" due to their material contributions, especially when the value of the ideal for which those contributions were used exceeds that of the means, is rather dubious. Aside from finances, the Chōshū domain was most probably a valuable supplier of labor force, even if reformers never isolated or completely rejected them. Many samurai were successfully integrated into Japan's mainstream economy and encouraged to participate in agricultural production while being allowed to engage in financial investments which the central government used to expand the Japanese banking system.

Thus, the reformers efficiently killed two birds with one stone, erasing the possibility of rebellion and securing additional labor force for the emerging industrial economy. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to assess how much influence the Chōshū clans' strong values had compared to their actual financial contribution. The mixture of doggedness, diplomacy, and duplicity of the Perry Expedition aimed at achieving a forced "opening" of Japan had already served as a wake-up call for the reformers—Japan needed a stable centralized government and technological know-how akin to that of the West in order to begin developing the ability to match the wealth and military power of leading nations such as England and Germany. Hence, many of the reformers probably knew well that ascribing historicity to Japanese nationalism through the preservation of the imperial throne and the rekindling of nationalism through economic growth for strengthening national defense and industry were not contradictory (Harootunian 1960, 433-444).⁴ So, an important question that arises from the conservative Chōshū clans' "pro-liberal" role in the Restoration is, what does the inclusion of a powerful conservative clan into the liberal program imply about the event's political identity?

A simple answer is that "identity is in the eye of the beholder." Rather than settling for a "black-or-white" assessment of the Restoration as only progressive or only conservative, one could perhaps understand the

⁴ Members of the Chōshū clans, largely middle-class, were also probably incorporated into the agrarian economy. See also Albert Craig, "The Restoration Movement in Chōshū," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (February 1959), 187-197. On Perry's Expedition, see Arthur Walworth, *Black Ships off Japan: The Story of Commodore Perry's Expedition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

Restoration as an ambiguous event with two fluidly interactive layers—a political revolution and a social counter-revolution. Neither had more importance over each other but were two equal halves. While the Restoration can be a politically progressive revolution which introduced a unified currency through the issuing of banknotes, universal male conscription for military service, and most importantly, bureaucratic centralization, the Restoration was also a minor social counter-revolution. Although there were small peasant revolts during the *bakufu* period when the grain market posted exorbitant prices during famines, those unrests were primarily “revolts of disappointment” demanding a return to better economic conditions. They were not major public movements aimed at achieving socio-economic equality or demanding universal suffrage. Hence, the Restoration is what I would call a “Goldilocks’ movement,” neither socially too hot nor politically too cold. Despite the mixed assessment, Akamatsu was the first to demonstrate Sakata and Hall’s point by objectively accounting for the complex variations in human interactions emotions. Yet, he also nullified his original ambiguity by concluding that the Restoration began as a political revolution but would *eventually* become a socio-economic one, arguing the obvious point that the Restoration already had a definite outcome. (Akamatsu 1972, 287-305)

If one resorts without proper examination of primary sources from before 1868 to historical determinism and assumes that the Restoration was a naturally progressive revolution, that is an easy mistake to make. However, there is no such thing as a promised historical outcome, and the results of political change are never evident upon immediate initiation. It involves slow and careful planning, calculation of the possible moves of the opposition, and a solution to block or reduce the influence of that opposition so that it never overwhelms the initiative. Historical events are products of this process which often results in unlikely political alliances, as the Tokugawa supporters and the reformers had formed. If one forgets this aspect, it is easy to mix up the murkiness of human emotions with the clarity of a political outcome. And no historian can ever read the human mind with accuracy, so there is no guarantee of the results of such analyses. Hence, rather than relying solely on human passion to describe the ambiguity of the Restoration process, we must consider the reality of a liberal-conservative alliance.

A plausible, albeit elitist, assessment of the Restoration that does justice to both factors and ties them together is that the Meiji Restoration

was foremost conservative *and* nationalistic. The qualifier “nationalist” is important because the reformers were realists who aptly incorporated rural landowners and entrepreneurs who had studied overseas and sought new economic and political careers. As W. Beasley showed through the analysis of governmental records, these qualities of the rural elites influenced their seemingly contradictory ambitions, and eased the Meiji elites’ push for the Restoration. On one hand, the rural elites had a “love-hate” relationship with the samurai class, emulating the samurai way of life and promoting a samurai code to the Meiji elite even though they wanted to obliterate their class altogether.

On the other hand, while rural elites utilized peasant rebellions to express their discontent with the existing Tokugawa *bakufu*, they were not radical enough to be completely sympathetic to the peasant class. Instead, the rural elites were attracted by the allure of a modern life as governmental bureaucrats and by the Meiji promise of recruiting talented men and, ultimately, seeking control over the farmer class that they once supported. Put differently, these two seemingly contradictory motives coexisted because the reformers were pragmatists and realists who believed that incorporating rural elites was a necessary condition for national unity and an effective national defense system which could support the newly emerging market economy, the very source of the wealth of the new elites. (Beasley 1972, 417-421 and 423-424) By discussing the interplay between economic interests, class, and political intrigue, this assessment not only provides a correction to Akamatsu by assigning conservatism a more complex and nuanced objective and face, but also debunks Horie’s assumption that a progressive outcome must emerge from a progressive intent.

Ends do not reflect the nature of the means. If so, then I would argue that the complex motives of the rural elites also indicate that the reformers’ flexibility was possible not because they were genuine egalitarians who pursued democracy, but because they were highly interested in pursuing the Meiji Restoration slogan of *fukoku kyōhei*, or “rich nation with a strong military.” This goal prompted the new elites to focus on acquiring technological expertise and industrial expansion led by strong government intervention. The only change was that the Tokugawa centralized bureaucracy gave way to the emergence of “centralized capitalism” without any promise for democratic reforms. The Restoration never became a revolution because it had no radical social program to encourage and support an egalitarian democracy. Instead, the movement’s chief objective was rapid realization

of national strength, a feat achieved precisely through a combination of modernized “feudal” elites and thin presence of “capitalism” under a highly centralized authority. So, what would be that ideal authority?

Tokugawa supporters who became members in the Diet had a clear answer to that question: the imperial throne. They had *earned* the right to be in the Diet because they knew that proving that an answer is right is always more difficult than only suggesting one. Fortunately, their appeal to the throne’s historicity and national stability proved very effective, winning various strands of enthusiastic support. Western envoys and monarchists desired a restoration of imperial authority to ensure personal security and recovery of national sovereignty. *Bakufu* and imperial loyalists, promising economic and military growth, yearned to preserve the influence they enjoyed during the Tokugawa Shogunate. Thus, they encouraged ordinary citizens to unite in supporting and celebrating a new collective national identity as “Japanese” citizens. Citizens, in turn, responded with both hope and anxiety, while also eagerly anticipating a stable government that could revive patriotism and nationalism. This matrix of societal responses to the Restoration aimed for what George Wilson calls a “double transformation”—a shared desire among civilians and the Meiji elites to achieve political reorganization internally and gain international respect by recovering national sovereignty externally. (Wilson 1992, 43-73 and 95-100) A “public” encompassing all strata of society had enough historical agency to establish the salience of a popular and genuinely societal view of the Restoration.

Yet, this argument has a significant limitation: primary sources on the actions of ordinary citizens are not available. Overall, motives cannot be considered historically constant determinants as that would lead to historical reductionism. Generalizations about motives are risky as they are mere ends to which the question of design or intent is the latent means and variable. Therefore, uncertainty cannot be ignored or concealed by modeling and statically compartmentalizing motives, as it does not do justice to the complex and fluid mixing of emotions and nature of historical change. Nevertheless, motives can still serve to indicate that writing history requires the inclusion of both elite and civilian voices to account for fluctuations in human psychology and the resulting emotional complexities over the flow of time. Wilson’s “societal synthesis” thereby gives a nice theoretical façade to Beasley’s primarily phenomenological analysis of the mixed interplay of motives, showing why considering societal origins of Japanese nationalism is *conceptually* important to understand that interplay’s complexity.

However, even without accounting for emotional complexities, it is evident that a political distinction between the new Meiji elites and Tokugawa-supporting samurai is rather difficult. Japan's "opening" in 1853 and reconstruction after the late 1860s civil wars convinced the former to replace the latter only to refashion conservatism with a modern and pragmatic twist. This, as Marius Jansen argued, meant preserving the imperial court as a "quintessential center of national identity and keeping the Tokugawa lands under Meiji control without redistribution"—a policy publicly enforced through centralization, education, and mobilization.⁵ (Jansen 1989, 364-366) The reformers modernized Tokugawa monarchism by pragmatically using the emperor as a nationalistic figurehead and the imperial court as the chief banker for the conservatives' wealth. Thus, the revolutionary fervor for technological progress which strongly captured the imagination of earlier historians was no more than a liberal peel to conceal the conservative fruit of Japanese nationalism rebuilt around the restoration of the imperial throne. For reform champions such as Saigō Takamori, the Meiji Restoration represented a prime opportunity for modernization through a sweeping professionalization of bureaucratic administration under the control of a strong centralized state.

"Modernization" in the Meiji lexicon was more than a word; it was a carefully and systemically conceived blueprint for progress from that early architect of the Restoration, Sakamoto Ryōma (1836-1867). Ryōma was the father of the very philosophy Beasley indicated as the reformers' ultimate ideal throughout the Restoration. As Jansen showed with the use of Japanese, French, and Dutch sources, Ryōma envisioned reforms that balanced technological progress with democratic political culture and recommended talented men for offices in court while encouraging open political discussions that had to go hand-in-hand with military modernization, and most importantly, with the promotion of collecting knowledge to strengthen imperial authority. (Jansen 1961, 294-311) What Jansen cannot really capture in Ryōma's biography is the larger picture—the complex mindset of the members of the new elites as they had to confront modernization—since a biography naturally puts a single individual at the center of the analysis. The larger political and social milieus heavily influence an individual's worldview more than the other way around, and Jansen must

⁵ Jansen might have been inspired by G. Wilson's "Plots and Motives of Japan's Meiji Restoration," *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 1983), 407-427, which served as the groundwork for *Patriots and Redeemers*. The book is an extension of the arguments in that article, using the same actors and scheme of a matrix.

have been aware that a biography is not the best format to portray Meiji Restoration as a collective human experience as Sakata and Hall had urged before. Therefore, it is natural that Jansen decided to deliver a moderate view of things after Wilson gave a definitive cue. Unlike the traditional consensus which singularly concentrated on linking elite activities with a progressive spirit, Jansen presented a more nuanced argument in both of his works, suggesting that “conservatism” did more than oppose “liberalism.” It was deeply committed to institutionalizing a conservative nationalism through the restoration of the imperial throne, reconciling with a progressive form of patriotism by supporting rapid industrialization and technological advancements—a genuine and pure *realpolitik* aimed at simultaneously pursuing political stability and economic growth.

Of course, this decision was not fully a reflection of the public will, for most citizens lacked direct experience with policymaking to understand the sophisticated art of *realpolitik*. Nevertheless, citizens can also become major historical actors if they can compensate for that deficit by their sociability, influencing politicians to exercise policies to specific ends. Matsuo Taseko, a social female activist who fervently supported the conservative cause, is a prime example proving this point. Although Matsuo could have simply led an ordinary life as a “dutiful mother and wife” (according to the precepts for Japanese female subjects of the time), her deep support for the loyalist cause made her go against that temptation. Her passion was such that she actively pursued an influential career as unofficial political adviser to the Tokugawa loyalists. For people like Matsuo, the Restoration *was* a revolution, because by expressing herself through debates with her guests, she was spiritually liberating herself from a world in which very few choices were available for women besides largely confining their lives indoors, lacking the opportunity to socialize and to discover what it meant to live as a human being. As Anne Walthall suggested, Matsuo demonstrated her dedication to the loyalist cause by advising Tokugawa supporters to stand their ground in defending the throne at all costs. She sought to realize her advice by encouraging her son to join the loyalist military ranks and actively lobbying the newly established Meiji government through letters to guarantee secure political posts for those whom she had protected.⁶ (Walthall 1998, 225-284)

⁶ Walthall convincingly illustrates her facts through Matsuo’s very few letters, poems, and memorials. Walthall continued to explore the Restoration through civilians’ eyes in *The Human Tradition in Modern Japan* (Delaware: SR Books, 2002). Matsuo’s significance is as a reminder of the importance of public agency, a point which I elaborate later.

Thus, Matsuo's autonomous decision to transform her home into a vibrant center for political debate suggests that we need to distance ourselves from the "progressive revolution" thesis. Matsuo's example appends Craig and Akamatsu's dismissal of public agency by demonstrating that the conservatives acted as leverage to ensure that the new elites implemented their intended programs of rapid militarization and industrialization. An ordinary woman and citizen Matsuo did, albeit rarely, play an influential role in an event whose historical focus has primarily been on male political leadership.

Indeed, conservatism may have had some, albeit limited, potential for civilian activism. Matsuo's true contribution was in realizing that the Diet was not the sole center of politics, illuminating the private home's political potential as an active space of public discourse in an age when women were socially confined indoors. This was possible because the frequent "public debates" Matsuo had with her male counterparts who provided her with a constant supply of information about national politics blurred the distinction between political and social spaces. Matsuo's engagement with the loyalists is significant because it suggests that women too could think radically and programmatically launch what was effectively one of the first public lobbying campaigns for legislative action. Matsuo critically shows that any political event can be discussed by the public, for without a civilian catalyst no reform could ever arise spontaneously among the political elites alone. The will of the public necessarily impacts that of the elite and pushes it toward various forms of change that civilians want as much as the elites. As such, the Meiji Restoration can be interpreted as a comprehensive *collective* public-elite project to restore Rightist nationalism in Japan. And a sophisticated and original woman who transcended her gender and managed male politicians to deliver her conservative ideals played a major role in that interpretation.

Finally, unlike Beasley, Walthall showed how nationalism was not exclusively an elitist concern, but also one that belonged to the citizens. Conservative public culture during the Meiji Restoration was explored in 1988 by examining the public protests against the reforms. The reformers succeeded in destroying traditional collective action because its rise was sequential rather than simultaneous and because some traditional samurai clans provided financial and military power to the reformers, and, finally, because some opposition groups such as the *shizoku* (nobility) simply lacked resources for effective mobilization. In other words, destroying tradition was

a sunk cost for state centralization and modernization. Unfortunately, that research study sacrificed depth for breadth, ignoring motives and actions at the individual level. Thus, “opposition” was merely a patchwork of groups discontent over failing to protect their own interests. (Vlastos 1989, 426-431) However, not all opposition necessarily arose from self-interest; some was borne out of a national interest. The passion for the latter was such that women, for instance, courageously opposed radical reforms not based on self-interest, but out of a genuine public concern that too much modernity would erode the imperial throne’s sanctity as the historical symbol of Japanese nationalism. Nationalism motivated even socio-politically marginalized individuals to autonomously orchestrate and counsel politics and politicians at home, exercising political influence without actually physically exerting themselves as politicians.

Collectively, the current scholarship has only presented mosaic pieces that *suggest* a need to move away from the traditional emphasis on the Restoration’s progressive results of economic and technological progress. However, how were diverse motives, the alliance between reformers and Tokugawa loyalists, and finally, popular support, able to converge together toward a conservative modern Japanese nationalism? I would argue that the Restoration was Janus-like, simultaneously utilitarian and idealistic. It stemmed from a pragmatic collaboration between a flexible “bureaucratism” that yearned for modernization and a devoted “loyalism” that yearned for the continuation of imperial authority, resulting in a Westernized and modern bureaucracy that would remain under control of and thereby preserve imperial authority. In other words, the reformers crafted the Meiji Restoration as a synergistic movement that drew in conservative samurai groups like the Chōshū clans because, as T. Najita put it, “restorationism” flexibly embedded idealism in utilitarianism, allowing the “stone” of solid imperial authority to kill the “two birds” of modernizing Japan and retaining its symbolism as protector of nationalism.⁷ (Najita 1974, 43-68)

The Meiji Restoration was *destined* to only be a restoration. It aspired to Westernize Japan’s technological, economic, and political environments without attempting to radically Westernize the Japanese national spirit and historical consciousness. It achieved its objective by reviving a conservative Japanese nationalism centered on the restoration of the imperial throne. If there was anything revolutionary about it, it was the realization that

⁷ The synthesis would also revise Akamatsu’s assertion that the Restoration was neither conservative nor progressive.

restoring the monarch while pursuing rapid economic and technological development could become the means to give nationalism a symbolic and physical essence. Yet, the Restoration was a consciously societal conservative movement, bound tightly by fervent nationalism. Almost the entire Japanese society—liberal reformers, Tokugawa loyalists, and the general public—was focused in unison on balancing a historical imperial nationalism with a rapid surge of economic and technological progress, “half-baking” Japan’s modernization.

Nevertheless, “conservative” remains a contentious label for the Meiji Restoration. More research on the liberal agenda for progress is required to fathom its reconciliation with the eventual conservative restoration of imperial authority. Only with a societal picture of Meiji liberalism can we understand why the Restoration remained a restoration that never bloomed into a complete political or social revolution.

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