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Between Tradition And Modernization: Saigo Takamori As The "Last Samurai" Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the essence and historical assessment of the phenomenon of Saigo Takamori within the framework of the historical contradictions that emerged between tradition and modernization during the Meiji Restoration. The study examines Saigo Takamori's role in the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate, his political and military activities in restoring imperial authority, and his position toward the early modernization policies of the Meiji state. Particular attention is given to how Saigo's views – grounded in samurai ethics, loyalty, and justice – came into conflict with the construction of a centralized, bureaucratic, and Westernized state. The research interprets Saigo not only as a historical figure but also as a socio-political and moral symbol reflecting the internal contradictions of Meiji modernization. The study concludes that the Saigo Takamori phenomenon represents the historical embodiment of traditional values and samurai ideology that were marginalized during Japan's transition to a modern state. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of Meiji reforms.

Keywords: - Meiji state, Tokugawa shogunate, Saigo Takamori, Okubo Toshimichi, Iwakura Tomomi, Kido Takayoshi, Seikanron, samurai code of ethics, Boshin War.

INTRODUCTION

The Meiji Restoration marked a turning point in Japanese history, aiming to transform the country from a feudal system into a modern nation-state. This transformation brought radical changes to political institutions, social classes, and value systems. In particular, the samurai class – long the military and political backbone of Japanese society – faced a profound crisis in status and identity.

Within this historical context, the figure of Saigo Takamori holds particular significance. Although he emerged as an active reformer in the early stages of the Meiji Restoration, he later adopted a critical stance toward the process of building a centralized state modeled on Western institutions. His political views and actions are often symbolized by the image of the "last samurai."

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the formation, essence, and historical significance of the Saigo Takamori phenomenon within the broader context of Meiji-era modernization. Both classical and modern historical research methods were employed.

Using the comparative historical method, Saigo Takamori's position was analyzed alongside the modernization approaches of Okubo Toshimichi and Kido Takayoshi. This comparison clarifies that Saigo was not merely a reactionary force opposing modernization, but rather a historical figure embodying the internal contradictions of the modernization process itself.

A source-critical approach was applied to official Meiji documents, memoirs about Saigo Takamori, contemporary correspondence, and scholarly studies in both Japanese and Western historiography. Through these sources, Saigo's historical image and interpretation as a phenomenon were reconstructed.

Analytical and logical generalization methods were used to systematize the political, moral, and social dimensions of the Saigo Takamori phenomenon and to determine its conceptual and historical significance within Meiji modernization.

DISCUSSION

The Meiji Restoration sought to dismantle the feudal order and establish a centralized modern state based on imperial sovereignty, bureaucratic governance, and Western-inspired institutional reforms. However, this transformation inevitably generated deep tensions between traditional samurai values and the emerging modern political order. The restructuring of social hierarchy, the abolition of feudal domains, and the gradual elimination of hereditary privileges disrupted a centuries-old system in which the samurai class had occupied a central moral and political position.

Saigo Takamori was born on January 23, 1828, in the Satsuma domain (present-day Kagoshima Prefecture) into a lower-ranking samurai family. Although his family possessed limited material wealth, they maintained a strong commitment to samurai ethics and domainal loyalty. Growing up in modest economic circumstances, Saigo developed a sense of austerity and discipline that would later characterize both his political conduct and personal lifestyle. From an early age, he internalized values such as loyalty, sincerity, humility, and responsibility toward both his lord and the broader community.

In his youth, Saigo was educated within the Satsuma domain's communal educational structure known as gochu. This system emphasized collective training, moral cultivation, and peer-based discipline rather than purely academic scholarship. Education was inseparable from ethical formation. Loyalty to one's lord, self-sacrifice for the domain, and the subordination of individual interests to public duty were core principles. The ethical code of bushido profoundly shaped Saigo's worldview, fostering in him a belief that moral integrity and honor outweighed political expediency. This ethical orientation later influenced his political decisions, especially when confronted with policies he perceived as morally compromising.

Saigo played a decisive role in forging the alliance between the Satsuma and Choshu domains, which became the structural foundation of the Restoration movement. This alliance was not merely a tactical military agreement but also a shared political vision aimed at restoring imperial authority and reforming the state. At the same time, its leaders consciously chose a Western-oriented model of modernization, recognizing that the adoption of Western military, administrative, and technological practices was essential for strengthening Japan and preserving its sovereignty in the face of foreign pressure.

During the Boshin War (1868–1869), he served as one of the principal commanders of imperial forces. His leadership in key campaigns around Kyoto and Osaka significantly weakened the shogunate's military resistance. Most notably, his negotiations during the surrender of Edo prevented extensive bloodshed and urban destruction. This episode demonstrated that Saigo was not simply a military commander but also a statesman guided by moral restraint and political foresight.

After the Restoration, Saigo emerged as one of the leading figures in the new Meiji government. He supported the establishment of a modern military force directly loyal to the emperor, recognizing that national defense was essential for preserving Japan's sovereignty in the face of Western imperial pressure. At the same time, however, he remained cautious about the speed and scope of institutional transformation. He opposed the rapid dismantling of the samurai class and questioned reforms that appeared to disregard traditional ethical frameworks. His concerns were not purely conservative; rather, they reflected anxiety over

the social and moral consequences of abrupt structural change.

These disagreements gradually intensified tensions between Saigo and other reformist leaders such as Okubo Toshimichi and Iwakura Tomomi. While Okubo prioritized centralized administration, fiscal reform, and industrial modernization, Saigo placed greater emphasis on moral governance and social cohesion. For Saigo, modernization without ethical continuity risked undermining the very foundations of national unity.

The 1873 Seikanron debate over Korean policy marked a critical turning point in Saigo's political career. Contrary to later simplified portrayals of him as an aggressive expansionist, Saigo did not immediately advocate war against Korea. Instead, he proposed traveling personally as a special envoy of the emperor to demand diplomatic recognition. If insulted or rejected, such treatment could provide a morally legitimate justification for military action.

His proposal reflected a samurai ethic of personal sacrifice and national honor – he was prepared to risk, and even lose, his life in service of what he perceived as the dignity of the state. At the same time, he believed that a foreign expedition could also help ease growing dissatisfaction among former samurai, who were increasingly marginalized by domestic reforms. In his view, external engagement might redirect their frustration, restore a sense of purpose, and preserve social stability within Japan.

When the Seikanron proposal was rejected by the government leadership, Saigo resigned from his posts and returned to Kagoshima. His resignation symbolized not merely political disagreement but a deeper ideological divergence regarding the direction of modernization. In Kagoshima, he supported the establishment of private military academies (shigakko), which provided education and training for former samurai who had lost status and income due to government reforms. Although Saigo did not initially advocate rebellion, these institutions gradually became focal points of samurai dissatisfaction.

Government policies – including the abolition of hereditary stipends, the prohibition of sword-wearing, and the introduction of universal conscription intensified social unrest among former warriors. For many samurai, these reforms signified not only economic hardship but also the erosion of identity and honor. In 1877, mounting tensions culminated in the Satsuma Rebellion. Although Saigo did not originally seek to overthrow the Meiji government, he became the symbolic and practical leader of the uprising.

The rebellion ultimately ended in defeat against the modernized imperial army. Saigo Takamori's death marked the conclusion of large-scale samurai resistance to Meiji reforms. Yet his legacy endured. He came to embody the image of the "last samurai"– not simply as a nostalgic defender of feudalism, but as a moral figure representing the ethical costs of rapid modernization. His life illustrates the profound tension between continuity and transformation in Japan's transition to modern statehood.

CONCLUSION

Saigo Takamori phenomenon vividly reflects the complex and deeply contradictory nature of the Meiji Restoration. Although he played a decisive role in overthrowing the Tokugawa shogunate and restoring imperial authority, he eventually found himself in ideological conflict with the centralized and Western-oriented state that emerged from the very revolution he helped to lead. His political evolution illustrates not a simple reversal of position, but a deeper tension between differing visions of Japan's national transformation.

Saigo understood the urgent need to strengthen Japan in the face of Western imperial pressure and acknowledged the importance of institutional and military reform. However, he could not fully accept a model of modernization that, in his view, weakened the ethical foundations of society and disrupted continuity with traditional values. For him, modernization was not merely a technical process of administrative efficiency or industrial growth; it was inseparable from moral legitimacy and social harmony.

In this sense, Saigo's stance was not anti-modern but morally cautious. He questioned whether rapid centralization and Westernization, without regard for inherited ethical structures, might produce social alienation and identity loss. His concerns reflected a broader dilemma faced by many non-Western societies in the nineteenth century: how

to modernize while preserving cultural coherence and moral continuity.

Therefore, Saigo should not be reduced to either a restoration hero or a reactionary rebel. Rather, he can be understood as a symbolic figure embodying the internal tensions of modernization. His life and political struggle reveal that the Meiji era was not only a story of successful state-building and reform, but also a period marked by social displacement, moral conflict, and the difficult negotiation between tradition and modernity.

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