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THE JAPANESE REVOLUTIONARIES

THE ARCHITECTS OF THE MEIJI RESTORATION, 1860-1868

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Abstract. Scholars have offered many conflicting interpretations of the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868, but few have put forth a comprehensive analysis as to the nature of the protagonists and the motivation of those who initiated this revolutionary movement. Although historical interpretations of the Restoration and its heroes have ranged from a romantic and generalized theory of economic struggle to focused studies of individuals whose motivations were singular, the true character of the samurai revolutionaries behind the Restoration is the issue here. Of those samurai who, acquired knowledge of Western civilization and technology, took part in the Restoration, and witnessed the death knell of feudalism, the Restoration revolutionaries stood apart from their samurai brethren and acted to lay the groundwork for a modern political system to replace it.

On January 3, 1868, Keiki (Yoshinobu), the fifteenth shogun of the Tokugawa bakufu (shogunate) surrendered sovereignty to the fifteen-year-old Meiji emperor, Mutsuhito, who had just succeeded his father, the Emperor Komei when he died early in 1867. This event marked not only the end of the longest shogunate in Japan, which lasted for over two hundred sixty years, but the beginning of a new, democratic Japan modeled after the European constitutional monarchies. This smooth political transformation, achieved without much bloodshed, known as the Meiji Restoration, has attracted the close attention of both Japanese historians and Western scholars. One of the most intriguing questions is what is the nature of those Japanese who instigated this revolution? Furthermore, what is the social, political, economic, and intellectual background of the Japanese who carried it out? This paper will attempt at reinterpretation on the nature of these Restoration leaders, who played leading roles in the
transformation of Japan from the feudal age to the modern era. It will first analyze and evaluate systematically the various, and often conflicting, interpretations that have been advanced since the successful completion of the Meiji Restoration. The paper will then suggest a new, fresh interpretation on the subject.

In 1940, E. Herbert Norman published his *Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State* and advanced a convincing interpretation on the Japanese revolutionaries. Drawing upon the works of Japanese economic scholars of the 1920’s and 1930’s, Norman argues that the Restoration was the work of “lower samurai” with full cooperation of the *chonin* (merchants) of Osaka and Kyoto. Norman’s analysis of the partnership that formed among these lower samurai, the merchants, and eventually the “outside” *tozama daimyo* (lords) begins with the economic challenges facing the “lower samurai” that spurred them to rebellion in the first place. As members of the lowest class of samurai, Norman points out, these leaders of the Restoration had endured the brunt of excessive feudal taxation and the subsequent manipulation of their livelihood by their daimyo. Without any means to escape this destitution, “the more restless spirits among them” fled their han (domain) to become *ronin* (wandering men). These *ronin* settled in the major cities including Edo (Tokyo), where, together with their lower samurai counterparts, trained in Western languages and science, becoming the intellectual forerunners in foreign knowledge and “the most ardent champions of Restoration.”

It was against this backdrop, Norman argues, that a “political struggle” developed, triggering the lower samurai to “turn against the rigid clan system which thwarted their

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2Ibid., 17
ambitions and jeopardized their social security.” The “corrosive of economic
uncertainty” in Tokugawa Japan “destroyed the fabric of feudal loyalties” and forced the
lower samurai to “search for some higher, more universal symbol worthy of devotion and
sacrifice.”  The bakufu’s continuous policy of keeping the emperor isolated in Kyoto
“was such as to evoke the most passionate feelings of loyalty” among the lower samurai
and ronin with respect to the theory that the emperor was the real “source of all power.”

Hence, “the breakdown of feudalism in Japan released latent social forces” into “the
hands of the lower samurai, who gradually superseded the upper ranks of samurai and
feudal lords as the political spokesmen of the day.” Their revolutionary political
philosophy, which included the facilitation of cooperation between the privileged and
lower classes, and their assumption of political leadership, would, concludes Norman,
serve the lower samurai well when it actually came time for them to instigate a
movement to remove the shogunate from power and restore the emperor to hegemony.

Norman describes the typical “lower samurai” as earning one-third of the annual
rice stipend of the “middle samurai.” He further compares this typical “samurai” income
as equivalent to that earned by an average “peasant.” Those typical “lower samurai,”
who earned only what an average peasant earned and had little opportunity to increase
their earnings under the feudal system, were clearly distinguishable from the middle-
ranking samurai in rank and in income.

The meager wages earned by the “lower samurai,” however, were a reflection of
the financial difficulty faced by the daimyo during the Tokugawa period. The average

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1Ibid., 25.
2Ibid., 27.
3Ibid., 31, 49.
4Ibid., 17, note 12
stipend of the "lower samurai" had decreased precipitously because his daimyo had "borrowed" a portion of his stipend to comply with bakufu laws. Rather than wallow in poverty, many of the lower samurai set off to the major cities, often without the permission of their daimyo, becoming sometimes ronin, to congregate with other lower samurai and ronin, "who, thanks to their freedom from clan interference and duties," were able to study the sciences and ideas of the West.\textsuperscript{7}

This is the reason why the ronin and their lower samurai counterparts became "the spear-point in the attack upon the Bakufu," Norman suggests, and were able to "rouse Japan to consciousness."\textsuperscript{8} These revolutionaries, acting in the interests of all the Japanese lower classes, struck a chord concerning their plight under the Tokugawa feudal system. The daimyo were unable to lead the Restoration movement, insists Norman, because they were preoccupied with other matters. Norman admits that the feudal lords did contribute significantly to the Restoration, to be sure, but the Restoration might have been delayed or even ended in failure without the leadership of the lower samurai. Norman suggests that the lower samurai were the only ones who could have coordinated and, ultimately, carried out a successful Restoration movement. Their forward-looking vision to a new system of government was, indeed, motivated by their deep desire to upend the inequities of the feudal system.\textsuperscript{9}

Norman points out that the chonin also played an important role in the Restoration. Since inception of the seclusion policy in the late 1630’s, the chonin had been unable to find new markets to increase their capital. The chonin, whose livelihood was regulated by the laws of the shogun, who regarded them as "immoral and usurious," had nonetheless,

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 29
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 62.
managed to accumulate a surplus of cash and specie which were in turn loaned to the feudal clans in exchange for a domain’s main staple commodity, rice. Although the chonin were virtually powerless to effect economic reform in the feudal society on their own,\(^{10}\) they were often able to manipulate rates of exchange or monopolize commodity markets, eliciting “the ill-concealed animosity of the bakufu.” Many chonin, therefore, were willing to support the lower samurai and the daimyo in their pursuit of defeating the Tokugawa government.\(^{11}\)

The chonin, members of the lowest class, were willing to finance the hard-pressed daimyo and, in many cases, the lower samurai in their plot to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate because of their desire to throw off the shackles of the oppressive Tokugawa bakufu. As this alliance began forming, many chonin were able, either through the purchase of the samurai status or the adoption of samurai as their sons, to become members of the samurai class.\(^ {12}\) This served the needs of both classes, because the chonin needed protection from the samurai and, conversely, some samurai needed valuable financial backing for their revolutionary activities. Norman emphatically asserts that the “lower samurai – often chonin in the position of samurai – were the most conscious leaders in the movement to overthrow the Bakufu.”\(^ {13}\) This alliance of lower samurai and chonin, while “slipping through the meshes of the feudal system,” was mainly the result of the alienation of the chonin class by the Tokugawa bakufu.\(^ {14}\)

The chonin of Osaka, the major marketing clearinghouse of the bakufu, where seventy-percent of Japan’s wealth was concentrated, became the major financiers of the

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\(^{10}\)Ibid., 17, 18.
\(^{11}\)Ibid., 20.
\(^{12}\)Ibid., 19.
\(^{13}\)Ibid., 62
\(^{14}\)Ibid., 19, 20.
Meiji Restoration. Though the coalition between the chonin and “lower samurai and ronin” was significant, they could not have overthrown the Bakufu only “by the sharpness of their swords or the daring of their resolve.”\textsuperscript{15} The major southwestern tozama daimyo of Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen, Norman argues, were involved in forming such a trust with the chonin. Not only were the bakufu’s oppressive regulations aimed at the chonin but, by virtue of their position as tozama (outside lords), the daimyo often were the target of restrictive laws, like the sankin-kotai (alternate attendance) system, aimed at weakening their will and finances, requiring them to spend alternate years in Edo and upon their departure to leave their wives and family behind as hostages. The southwestern daimyo, still in control of their han, despite the hardships perpetrated on them by the bakufu, actively sought out the financial services of the major Osaka chonin in an effort to relieve their financial stress. The lower samurai and their daimyo, Norman asserts, were willing to provide the military muscle to overthrow the bakufu but expected the chonin “to finance the political movement against the bakufu,”\textsuperscript{16} which preceded the Restoration Civil War.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus Norman considers the daimyo another crucial agent of the Restoration. The daimyo, finding their domains crumbling financially under the strain of Tokugawa high-handed policies had no choice but to borrow heavily from merchants, which forced them to become deeply indebted to the rich chonin. The chonin, however, Norman argues, could not afford to press the daimyo for timely repayment of these debts, as the chonin might need the daimyo’s favor in the future. More to the point, “the interests of the feudal ruling class and the big merchants became so closely intertwined that whatever

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 49.  
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 52.  
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 50.
hurt one necessarily injured the other.”

This relationship between the top class daimyo and the bottom class chonin had been formed well before the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate.

When the Tokugawa Ieyasu set up a military dictatorship over Japan after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, he rewarded those daimyo who had declared their allegiance to him prior to the battle (fudai daimyo). Ieyasu also remembered those southwestern daimyo who opposed him, such as Shimazu of Satsuma, Mori of Choshu, and others (tozama daimyo). Some of these tozama daimyo continued to wage a losing battle to fight off the tyranny of the Tokugawa bakufu. The bakufu, through such policies as the sankin-kotai system, the passport system of traveling between domains, the spy networks to enforce compliance, and the arbitrarily imposed public works projects, imposed heavy financial burdens on the tozama daimyo, not easily relieved, sending them into the hands of the chonin to form the mutual alliance between them.

At the time Commodore Perry kicked the Japanese door open, the Tokugawa shogun, which had been the dominant samurai overlord for over two and one half centuries, began to lose its governing strength, as the spirits of the tozama daimyo, their retainers, and the lower samurai were boosted. This hegemonic decline was also a signal of the decline of the entire feudal system. Scrambling to adapt to the changing times, the lower samurai, newly educated in the Western forms of government and philosophy, and chonin methods of finance, returned to their domains and became “the actual leaders in clan affairs.”

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18Ibid., 50.
19Ibid., 14.
20Ibid., 50.
In the great anti-bakufu domains, Norman insists, these *samurai* performed a vital function, by working in concert with those of others, taking virtual control over the domains and guiding ultimately the eventual success of the Restoration.\(^{21}\) These lower *samurai*, who were once considered a “parasitic” feudal institution in the late Tokugawa period, recovered their martial spirit to lead the movement to overthrow the Tokugawa *shogun*, to restore the emperor as the actual head of the state,\(^ {22}\) and eventually to democratize Japan as their future goal as they assume the leadership in the domains.

The lower *samurai*, whose ability to forge a coalition of disparate classes of people and feudal institutions, were able to “draw their superiors along with them” to the eventual overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate, thus changing the matrix of leadership in the feudal domains.\(^ {23}\) It was these lower *samurai*, concludes Norman, who became the “vanguard of modernization, in the establishment of a modern state in Japan,” by successfully organizing an unlikely coalition.\(^ {24}\)

Norman’s book, translated into Japanese, was widely read as a standard work on the subject in both Japan and the West. Beginning in the mid 1950’s, however, scholars began to challenge Norman’s basic thesis. Some argue that Norman’s Marxist or economic class-interest theory is too broad, while others find his definition of the “lower *samurai*” not sufficient enough. Still others have suggested that before the Meiji Restoration there was no single vision of a new polity, much less a blueprint among the

\(^{21}\)Ibid., 80.
\(^{22}\)Ibid., 16.
\(^{23}\)Ibid., 34.
\(^{24}\)Ibid., 102.
leaders outlining what a post-Restoration Japan was supposed to look like. Nevertheless, Norman’s work did stimulate the interests of scholars to conduct more exhaustive research and to produce more comprehensive studies on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries and the causes of the Meiji Restoration.

Sidney Brown was one of the first historians who challenged Norman’s thesis by concentrating on the life of Kido Takayoshi, who was born the son of a physician but was adopted by a “substantial samurai” family, attaining eventually higher rank within the feudal structure of Choshu. Far from being stuck as a “lower samurai” in the pre-Restoration feudal system, Kido’s rise attests to not only the interchangeability within the class structure, at least as applied in Choshu, but the flexibility within the composition of samurai rank. In addition, different domains developed their own samurai schools, which had been established, to educate samurai youths, especially for philosophical and military training. Kido, Brown points out, attended a Choshu private school that was considered “the cradle of the Revolution of 1868.” Kido, then, was able to elevate his social status through his adoption to a samurai family and attendance at this domain school. Kido, who later emerged as one of the leading revolutionaries, was not one of these typical lower samurai whom Norman considers as the molders of the Meiji Restoration. Moreover, as Marius Jansen argues in his Sakamoto Ryoma and the Meiji Restoration (1961), that it is problematical to generalize a local revolutionary phenomenon in one domain to be a nation-wide trend. Not only were the domains

unique in their outlook but the individuals who comprised the nucleus of the Restoration movement had different motivations and goals concerning the future of Japan even within one domain.

Brown further argues that Kido after the Restoration became a “spokesman for agrarian and feudal classes,” while other revolutionaries sought to dismantle the feudal state in favor of “a state-patronized industrialization program.” The Meiji revolutionaries, however, Brown admits, were not in full agreement as to how Japan should move forward after the Restoration. The movement of the revolutionaries to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate and restore the emperor, he maintains, may have been the only immediate and short-term agreement during the pre-Restoration movement. Many of the revolutionaries after the Restoration agreed to legislate changes that tended to benefit Japan as a whole rather than benefit their respective domain. Thus, a samurai need not necessarily travel to the large cities to find an education and to find like-minded samurai from other domains.

In Choshu, for example, a battle for leadership of the domain between the conservatives, who wanted to preserve bakufu hegemony, and the radicals led by Kido, who supported restoration of the emperor, had concluded with the radicals winning the Choshu Civil War. Brown points out that Kido ended up “serving as chief minister of the clan,” leading it to eventual victory over the shogunate on the field of battle. Norman’s naming of Kido as an example of the kind of “lower samurai,” upon whose leadership the

\[^{29}\text{Brown, “Kido Takayoshi,” 151.}\]
\[^{30}\text{Ibid., 153.}\]
Meiji Restoration was dependent, is inconsistent with Brown’s more specific account of Kido’s life, his samurai rank, and his actual contribution to the Meiji Restoration.

Later in the same year, Yoshio Sakata and John Hall also challenged the interpretation advanced by Norman. They believe that like Norman “Marxist historians who have based their analysis on the deterministic theories of economic change and class struggle” have too often relied upon “overly general concepts or upon a single cause to the exclusion of others.” For a more systematic analysis of the Restoration, they demand that a historian must “utilize multiple ‘levels of conceptualization.’” Outlining all of the historical methods that had been attempted to analyze the Meiji Restoration (narrative, economic, comparative, and general), Sakata and Hall suggest that “a more systematic approach” is necessary to comprehend such an historical event by attempting a middle ground or a synthesis combining many attributes of narrative and general history.

Utilizing this systematic approach, Sakata and Hall try to identify “the participating agents in the political process” of the Meiji Restoration. They argue that the impoverishment of the lower strata of samurai and peasants, for example, was a result of the restrictions placed on the feudal lords by the Tokugawa shogunate, not the policy of the feudal lords to arbitrarily tax the lower samurai and peasants at higher rates or that they wanted to take their land; the feudal lords had no other option. In short, Sakata and

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31Norman, Japan's Emergence, 70.
33Ibid., 33.
34Ibid., 32.
35Ibid., 34.
Hall criticize historians such as Norman for not having fully investigated all of the preceding causes of specific events to ascertain their effects accurately.

Disputing the specific argument put forward by Norman that it was the “lower samurai class” who engineered the Meiji Restoration, Sakata and Hall point out the need to examine “the degree of social heterogeneity” among the revolutionary samurai as a whole. They argue that many of the samurai who led the Restoration movement had the “ability to manipulate the political and military forces” within their own domains.36

Sakata and Hall emphasize, shishi (men of high purpose) who, through their political conviction of anti-foreignism, detached themselves from their daimyo in order to agitate for this objective. In other words, the ronin Sakata and Hall are highlighting already possessed a political agenda and did not leave their domain for economic reasons. Thus, these formerly loyal samurai were already “shishi who had become ronin, not ronin who became shishi.”37 In their investigation of the nature of the revolutionaries, Sakata and Hall admit that court nobles like Sanjo Sanetomi and upper samurai domain councilors like Goto Shojiro all had a hand in the success of the Meiji Restoration. They also give special credit to Katsu Rintaro, a bakufu naval bureaucrat, who convinced the shogun, Keiki, to resign his post to avoid a civil war.38

A systematic approach to history,

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36Ibid., 33.
37Ibid., 44.
38Ibid., 49.
covering as many individuals as possible, and investigating the causes of each event, the authors insist, will give any historian the ammunition they need to explain its effects.

Kee-Il Choi argues that it was the Tokugawa bakufu itself that made a major contribution to the success of samurai and daimyo plans and strategies in the Meiji Restoration. A “built-in mechanism,” Choi insists, like the sankin-kotai system instituted by the bakufu, was designed to force the daimyo to be under strict control of the bakufu. Choi points out that when the daimyo were performing their sankin-kotai duties traveling to the bakufu capitol of Edo every other year, it unwittingly produced many unexpected chain reactions, political, economic, and social, and turned out to be a most important factor in undermining the Tokugawa equilibrium.39

The policy of keeping the daimyo weak so the bakufu could maintain its hegemony was upended when the daimyo and their samurai entourages began observing the weaknesses in the Tokugawa system as a whole. Still not strong enough to threaten the bakufu militarily, the daimyo waited with vigilant hostility for an opportunity to present itself.40 The opportunity came with the sankin-kotai system itself, which had brought hundreds of thousands of samurai to Edo, comprising half of the population of this largest city in the world, and Osaka,41 where they gathered every other year to criticize the bakufu and talk about the possibility of revolution.42

The communication and travel network set-up as a result of sankin-kotai, insists Choi, made it easier for Western ideas of technology and philosophy to flow back and forth from the samurai in Edo to his daimyo back in his domain. After Perry’s Western

40 Ibid., 72.
41 Ibid., 75.
42 Ibid., 74.
“invasion” in 1853, many samurai, at first very anti-foreign in their ideas, began to appreciate this technology of the West. More importantly, the military advantage that the Western nations held over the Tokugawa bakufu, presented an opening to its overthrow that the daimyo and samurai needed.

The bakufu, attempting to adapt to this show of force from the West, began sponsoring diplomatic travel to the West to learn its ways. National schools were established in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, to encourage men of ability, no matter their rank or class, from everywhere in Japan, to come study the ways of the world, stimulating the competition between the individual domains and the bakufu.

Choi points out that the daimyo initiated a search for talent among their samurai retainers to exploit the weaknesses of the bakufu, while simultaneously encouraging them to learn entrepreneurial business and military ideas from the West. A new young breed of educated lower samurai would employ Western ideas to successfully compete with the bakufu.  

It was at this time, that more domain schools were built than in any previous time.

The prevailing samurai principle of absolute loyalty to the daimyo, aided by their worldly knowledge gained in these schools, helped cement the tie between the samurai and the daimyo, and they joined in their mission to modernize and, ultimately, out-progress the bakufu. The lower rank samurai, Choi argues, were the harbinger of a fledgling industrial program in Japan. By their demonstrated talent in Western learning

\[43\text{Ibid., 83.}\]
\[44\text{Ibid., 77.}\]
\[45\text{Ibid., 72}\]
\[46\text{Ibid., 80.}\]
gained in the domain school system, the *samurai* gradually became part of their new domain leadership.

The built-in mechanism of the *sankin-kotai* system, which unintentionally spawned a new entrepreneurialism, Choi reminds us, was the forerunner of a Japan that sought to progress to the ways of the West by means of industry. In order to train these up and coming industrialists, the *daimyo* had built schools, or sent their *samurai* to the cities to be trained. These newly educated and enlightened men, far from remaining static in their lower *samurai* rank, rose to become domain leaders, eventually to help carry through the overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate.

Choi explains that with all of the military and financial pressure the *bakufu* applied to the *daimyo*, their answer was to seize an opportunity presented by the Western nations in their threat to the hegemony of the *bakufu*. By building schools, the *daimyo* encouraged young minds to explore and exploit the knowledge of the West. Choi admits, that as a result of the *bakufu* and *daimyo* talent searches, a new leader, the *samurai* of lower rank, came to light.⁴⁷

The built-in mechanism was not necessarily the *sankin-kotai* system itself, nor was it the reaction by the *daimyo* and their *samurai* retainers to the trade invasion of the West, an invasion that weakened the *bakufu* and gave strength to its enemies. This mechanism that ultimately gave strength and initiative to the *daimyo* and the intelligent young *samurai* that soon emerged was Tokugawa feudalism, a hegemonic political system that educated its indigenous population, but could not adapt militarily and ideologically to the ways of the West. The kind of entrepreneurial initiative that could adapt to a changing Japan was that taken up by the domains. It was the Tokugawa feudal

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⁴⁷Ibid., 84.
system, Choi summarizes, that unwittingly unleashed an ideological environment in Japan from which it never recovered and from which its entrepreneurial daimyo and samurai leaders could emerge.\(^{48}\)

Choi points out that among the generation of samurai who sought the overthrow of the Tokugawa bakufu, the restoration of the emperor, and the setting up of the Meiji government, it was the older and more experienced revolutionaries born before 1833, like Kido, Okubo Toshimichi, and Saigo Takamori, who led these movements. The next generation of samurai revolutionaries born between the years 1834-1841, like Okuma Shigenobu and Ito Hirobumi, “were path breakers in various fields in the modernization of Japan” after the Restoration. The coeval of samurai born after 1841 eventually became the national leaders in business and cultural pursuits\(^ {49}\) as much as a decade after the Restoration. Though there is some overlap in the age brackets, it would be difficult, Choi admits, to assign the same motivations or even the same ranks to every samurai who played a part in the multi-faceted revolution during the Meiji Era. Thus, labeling the Meiji leaders “lower samurai,” as if they were all motivated to fight for the same purpose is to ignore their specific individual roles, contributions, and achievements during the many stages of the Meiji Era.

Three years later, Roger Hackett tries to present an alternative view on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries. His brief biography of Nishi Amane, a young samurai who became a Tokugawa bureaucrat, discusses how Nishi, a gifted student in his domain school, was assigned by the bakufu government to learn the secrets of a foreign

\(^{48}\)Ibid., 84.
\(^{49}\)Ibid., 82.
Not only were the domains sponsoring schools of learning but the bakufu was beginning to recruit bright young samurai of talent from all over Japan. The bakufu’s search for talent bore fruit as they began to travel to the shogunal capitol to enhance their education. Nishi, born the son of a court physician in Tsuwano domain, was selected to be educated at his domain’s school, a privilege generally accorded only to the sons of samurai. He was soon recognized for his ability in the literary and military arts, and as a result, he was sent to Edo to further his studies. While in Edo, Nishi learned the Dutch and English languages so quickly that he was further tasked by the bakufu to attend the Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books, which taught such subjects as statistics, law, economics, political science, and foreign diplomatic relations.

Hackett points out that Nishi recognized the valuable contribution of foreign learning to the bakufu. The Tokugawa shogunate’s internal enemies, the tozama daimyo, their samurai vassals, and the ronin, had come to discover the bakufu’s reluctance to defend Japan from foreigners, as evident when Tokugawa was forced to open trade to the United States in 1854. When some of the domains hostile to the bakufu began applying pressure on the bakufu to expel the foreigners, the bakufu, too weak militarily to compete with the West, began trying to find ways to learn of the strengths and weaknesses of the Western nations.

For this endeavor, the bakufu recruited bright young men, even from hostile domains, to study Western politics, philosophy, and military techniques. In order to

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51 Ibid., 213.
maintain its hegemony over Japan, the *bakufu* would be willing to do anything, even the promotion of Western learning. The *bakufu*’s motive to finance programs for Western learning, Hackett argues, may have been to eventually rid Japan of Westerners. The bright young *samurai*, who were eager to learn about the politics, diplomacy, and philosophy of the West, on the other hand, did become inspired to apply their newly acquired knowledge in the Japanese political arena. Nishi, however, chose to pursue his personal goals of the modernization of the Japanese nation by working for the *bakufu*.

The Tokugawa shogunate needed to implement new military techniques to resist the West, and that is where Nishi’s training in languages proved most effective. Sent to Europe in 1862 to translate Dutch naval strategy and to purchase ships to build up its navy, the Tokugawa *bakufu* discovered upon his return in 1865 that Nishi had acquired proficiency in military defense techniques and strategy. Pressured to teach at the new military academy in Edo, Nishi set about hiring faculty, setting up curricula, and recruiting cadets from all over Japan. Emphasizing the military and liberal arts, this model was adopted by the domain military schools that soon sprang up, teaching *samurai* of all backgrounds about Western military techniques.54

For many *samurai* seeking to learn about the West, these schools became commonplace in the Japanese countryside, and they provided the intellectual setting for the revolutionaries to adapt Japanese techniques to Western methods. Hackett points out, however, that for many revolutionary *samurai* wishing to excel in these Western techniques, there were peaceful and intelligent *samurai* like Nishi who imparted this knowledge to these revolutionaries, who used it as a means to eventually challenge the

54Ibid., 216.
55Ibid., 213.
Tokugawa bakufu. This up and coming Japanese intelligentsia, Hackett argues, as advocates of Westernization years before a movement to overthrow the Tokugawa bakufu even gained momentum, were important “agents of change” both before and after the Meiji Restoration. “Transformers” like Nishi, were the samurai forebears of the revolution that gave impetus to the revolutionaries in their drive to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate.

Contributing to the scholarship on the nature of the Meiji revolutionaries in the same year as Hackett, Joyce Lebra focuses on another samurai trained by the Tokugawa, Okuma Shigenobu, who, just like Nishi, became an intellectual revolutionary while studying and working for the bakufu. Naomasa Nabeshima, the tozama daimyo of Hizen, was, like Nishi’s daimyo, hostile to the bakufu. Born in a family of “middle” samurai rank, Okuma studied the Dutch and English languages in schools founded by the Tokugawa shogunate. And it was from this Western learning that Okuma would later develop his political philosophy of imperial restoration while a member of a radical, pro-imperial Hizen domain society, the Gisai domei. A post-Restoration proponent of political parties, public speeches, and British style parliamentary government, Okuma is best remembered in Japan as the man most responsible for promoting the idea of convening Japan’s first Diet and for founding Waseda University in Tokyo in 1882.

Norman has emphatically argued that the leadership of the revolutionaries consisted of “lower samurai,” and he included in that assessment, Okuma Shigenobu.

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56Ibid., 213.
60Norman, Japan’s Emergence, 70.
Jansen agrees ever so little with Norman’s opinion, pointing out that Okuma did fall out of favor with his own domain’s high officials for his pro-imperial stance. To become alienated from the other *samurai* in ones domain might give one pause to reflect on the values and goals of the leadership within the domain. In turn, this might drive a young *samurai* to reject the privileges once conferred upon him by his domain and become a *ronin*. Okuma, however, rejected the *ronin* lifestyle and would later become involved with high domain officials like Goto Shojiro, councilor to Yamanouchi Yodo, the *daimyo* of Tosa.  

The inter-domain coalition formed among the *samurai* of all ranks and in some cases their *daimyo* are more representative of the ideal Japanese revolutionary than those who Norman believes remained relatively static in their lower *samurai* class and idealism. To relegate these revolutionaries to a faceless “lower *samurai*” class, as has Norman, ignores the individual contributions of “middle *samurai,*” like Okuma who, as Jansen points out, quietly organized coalitions of *samurai* from all backgrounds to fulfill their collective desire to implement a more revolutionary Japanese polity.

Albert Craig also disputes Norman’s proposition about the characterization of the Meiji revolutionaries coming from the “lower” *samurai* class and maintains that Norman’s reference to them as “lower *samurai*” is absurd. When categorizing *samurai* in Choshu, Craig questions Norman’s postulate; he does not clearly define the term or how it applied to individual *samurai* revolutionaries. One must first distinguish between the forty different ranks that comprise the term “*samurai.*” There were “upper” *shi samurai* like Kido Takayoshi and “lower” *sotsu samurai* like Ito Hirobumi, which by
itself has twenty-three grades of rank. Some *samurai*, even those considered “upper” *shi samurai* in Choshu, received stipends comparable to “lower *samurai*” in other domains. Craig suggests that it would be a distortion to use the term that connotes a single class “united by common economic and political frustrations and bent upon turning the tradition in their domains and the nation upside down,” because the many *samurai* who did contribute to the Meiji Restoration came from many different backgrounds. Craig’s bottom line is that the Meiji Restoration was not led only by “lower *samurai*.”

That is not to say that there were no “lower *samurai*” who were key contributors to the Meiji Restoration. They were not necessarily the leaders of the Meiji Restoration but leaders of local militias who supported their more senior military leaders like Kido. Ito Hirobumi, for example, ascended from plebeian origin to the *samurai* rank in Choshu, clearly demonstrating the fluidity of the rank structure in feudal Japan, not the permanent station of a lower class of *samurai* as Norman states. As a soldier or lower class *sotsu samurai*, Ito led a militia unit during the 1864 Civil War that sought to replace the “conservative,” pro-*bakufu* leadership in Choshu. Ito demonstrated his ability to lead military detachments by recruiting commoners and other men of ability (not men of traditional rank), a revolutionary concept in Japanese military warfare, to fight in this civil war. These militia units were essential to Choshu’s decisive contribution to the Meiji Restoration. It was only after the Restoration that Ito would rise within the newly implemented Choshu and national political rank structure, contributing significantly to the modernization and democratization of Japan.

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64 Ibid., 190.
65 Ibid., 191.
66 Ibid., 187.
67 Norman, *Japan’s Emergence,* 56.
Far from being stuck as a plebeian in the feudal rank structure, Ito was selected for his ability, an ability that was recognized by his samurai superiors. By being recognized for his potential as a revolutionary supporter of the Meiji Restoration, Ito did not supersede his samurai superiors outside the domain rank structure, but he was rewarded by his superiors for his exceptional ability within the guidelines of traditional domain politics.

Norman also advocates the alienated ronin, who sought political change outside of the traditional domain political structure, became educated, and returned to their domains as leaders of the Restoration movement. Jansen, in his Sakamoto Ryoma (1961), describes such a samurai, who closely fits the profile of this type of revolutionary. Born into a family of goshi (farmer) samurai, Sakamoto’s radical anti-foreign politics, attracting the attention of his daimyo, forced him to flee for his life from Tosa to become what Norman would describe as the prototypical ronin. He would eventually become a leading proponent of radical assassination plots against Tosa and bakufu officials, until he had a life-changing experience.

Sakamoto was in the act of assassinating a bakufu official, who in turn persuaded him to change his mind. Sakamoto became ashamed of his zealous actions and eventually asked Katsu Rintaro, a high-placed bakufu naval commander, to become his mentor. Katsu guided Sakamoto to become a constructive member of the Restoration movement by working with other ronin, and even loyal samurai and daimyo from other domains, to take heed of the advanced military technology of the foreigners. Schooled in Tosa as a young samurai, Sakamoto left to continue his education in Edo where he

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69 Jansen, Sakamoto Ryoma, 78.
70 Ibid., 119.
71 Ibid., 164.
learned of Perry’s trade mission and developed his anti-foreign stance.\textsuperscript{72} Through Katsu’s pro-Western urging and advice, Sakamoto would eventually develop and run a private shipping company sponsored by Satsuma domain,\textsuperscript{73} which funneled arms to Choshu in its defense from a bakufu punitive expedition.

A typical lower-class ronin highlighted by Norman, Sakamoto had managed to bring to the negotiating table the hostile tozama daimyo of Satsuma and Choshu, brokering an alliance between the two that was the anchor of the successful multi-domain military force that eventually overthrew the bakufu and restored the emperor.\textsuperscript{74} Pardoned by his domain for his forward-looking diplomatic accomplishments, Sakamoto became a trendsetter among samurai of all ranks, and one of the most influential lower samurai leaders of the Restoration movement.

Sakamoto’s about-face from reactionary to intellectual leader illustrates that under the guidance of a bakufu mentor, he changed his opinions mid-stream to become an intellectual guiding force for the Restoration. Sakamoto might never have had the opportunity to lead the Restoration movement, unless Tosa’s social mobility policy allowed lower class clan members to acquire samurai rank.\textsuperscript{75} Credited with drafting a pre-Restoration document, the Eight-Point Plan, proposing an outline for a peaceful solution to avoid the upcoming Restoration Civil War, lenience towards the bakufu, and democratic political reforms,\textsuperscript{76} Sakamoto, once a fervent anti-foreign and anti-bakufu zealot, became an intellectual and inclusive revolutionary, emerging as the moderate exception to the single-minded and anti-bakufu “lower samurai” example championed by

\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{74}Ibid., 218-221.
\textsuperscript{75}Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{76}Ibid., 295-299.
Norman. Sakamoto’s attempts to change the Tokugawa political system by alienating himself from the feudal structure, along with the cheap intimidation of officials, proved a failure as he was relegated to the role of a meaningless and ineffective fanatic. Only by seeking alliances with the more influential samurai, daimyo, and even bakufu officials, was Sakamoto able to affect meaningful leadership and substantive change into a new Japanese polity.

The expositions of the alleged inconsistencies, in the works discussed above, seem to have closed the book on Norman’s grand and generalized theory, as the debate went silent for the two or three decades following the publication of Jansen’s Sakamoto Ryoma (1961), but the issue has not been resolved as a new interpretation is important for a full understanding of the Meiji Restoration and its leaders.

To what extent could Norman’s thesis withstand the challenges and criticisms of later historians? To state succinctly, Norman’s argument is that the overthrow of the Tokugawa bakufu was achieved through the combined anti-Tokugawa forces, led by lower samurai and ronin, particularly of the powerful southwestern domains, Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen, with full cooperation of the imperial court nobles (kuge) in Kyoto and supported by the rich merchants of Osaka and Kyoto. Among these groups, all of which played integral, essential parts, it was the lower samurai who assumed the leadership during this revolutionary change.

As we have seen, subsequent scholars, concentrating on specific events and the individual careers and motivations of major leaders of all types and examining them in depth, have come up with different conclusions. Focusing on limited, narrow topics but
altogether working on a wider sampling and more diverse leaders, they have revealed that the Meiji leaders were not primarily lower class samurai nor were they necessarily class motivated.

By so doing, most of these scholars have shifted the focus from the earlier Restoration leaders to the later Meiji leaders, who occupied important positions in the new government, and from the lower class to the middle class samurai. As Brown points out, Norman’s thesis does not explain how samurai, like Kido, rose within his domain’s feudal power structure to ultimately guide its contribution to a successful conclusion to the Meiji Restoration. Hackett’s study on Nishi and Lebra’s work on Okuma, as well as Brown’s Kido, all argue that these revolutionaries were not really considered “lower samurai.” Especially convincing is Craig’s study on Choshu, maintaining that major Restoration leaders came not only from the “lower samurai” class but from many different backgrounds. Upward social mobility was commonplace in the domains as the daimyo sought talented and intelligent men of ability to help compete with and ultimately defeat the Tokugawa bakufu. Sakata and Hall further argue that the degree of social heterogeneity among the revolutionary samurai as a whole demonstrates how they were not relegated to a permanent underclass, thus, undercutting Norman’s premise that the motivation for the mass movement of these revolutionaries was economic.

Moreover, many of those who were lower samurai during the Restoration like Ito and Okuma, some historians argue, did make valuable contributions to the success of the movement, but they did not lead it, due largely to their young age. These inconspicuous lower samurai followed the example of their feudal superiors, the daimyo and shishi, who
were by far more influential than the former. It was only after the Restoration that these lower samurai gained importance and began to agitate for further modernization.

These lower samurai, however, were not the main subject of Norman’s study. What Norman is talking about are young “lower samurai” who played a significant role in the Restoration itself. As if to advance Norman’s theory, Choi proposes his generational approach to distinguish the two generations of the “lower samurai:” the older and more experienced revolutionaries born before 1833 and the new generation of samurai born between 1834 and 1841. Norman’s “lower samurai” certainly belong to Choi’s first generation of samurai. The most prominent of these revolutionaries were Kido, Sakamoto, Nakaoka Shintaro, Saigo, Okubo, and all of the heirs of Yoshida Shoin, a loyalist teacher specializing in military instruction in the Choshu domain.

As Norman abundantly demonstrates, these lower samurai worked effectively with the rich chonin, their daimyo, their counterparts in other domains, the bakufu, and the court nobles in Kyoto, especially Iwakura Tomomi. Many important agreements were made between domains through their endeavors. Perhaps the most crucial agreement was made in 1866 between Satsuma and Choshu (traditionally enemy domains) by the efforts of Sakamoto and Nakaoka of Tosa. In the same year, Kido of Choshu and Saigo of Satsuma agreed that Satsuma would provide its help in mediating for Choshu at court and that both domains would work together for “the glory of the Imperial country.” It was also Saigo, who forced Edo, defended by the bakufu official Katsu Rintaro (Kaishu), to surrender in the spring of 1868.

Norman’s work on the revolutionaries, which was published some seventy years ago, continues to be vital, despite various attacks from all sides. His key concept of the
“lower samurai,” however, needs to be more fully refined. Norman’s lack of specificity regarding the identities of the Restoration samurai calls into question the thoroughness of his work, inducing recent scholars to misunderstand his work. He does not, for example, seem to imply, as later historians insist he does, that his “lower samurai,” a large number of nameless people in many domains, were the ones who, led by class or economic motivation, had instigated the revolution as a class struggle. Such misinterpretations are prevalent among many recent historians. Even Jansen in his book on Sakamoto Ryoma goes so far as to point out that “it is problematic to generalize a local revolutionary phenomenon in one domain to be a nation-wide trend.” Norman, however, does not appear to have intended to conduct such a comprehensive study. His objective is to affirm a group of specific lower class samurai from a small number of particular domains.

His “lower samurai,” therefore, were not representative of the lower samurai in the late Tokugawa feudal society. They were, instead, an incredibly small number of samurai, drawn from a few, influential domains, such as Satsuma, Choshu, and Tosa. Norman should also have emphasized the fact that these men were not only small in number but exceptionally gifted and well versed in Western civilization as a result of their training in the “Dutch Learning” programs in Nagasaki, Osaka, Edo, and their own domains, which had established private schools.

Norman should, furthermore, have asserted more strongly the fact that these “lower samurai” were remarkably young men, ranging from twenty-seven to forty-one, and the significance of their “lower samurai” status. Coming from relatively poor backgrounds, these samurai, in fact, grew up in the atmosphere of a rigid, regimented, hierarchical feudal society and witnessed, from their early childhood on, the suffering and
hardship their fathers (lower *samurai*) had to go through. They developed little emotional feeling and sentiment for the feudal system and came naturally to regard feudalism not only as detrimental to individuals and society but as “their fathers’ mortal enemy” and became determined to eradicate it. Through clever manipulation, persuasion, and steadfastness, these exceptionally talented men with strong self-assurance took the opportunity to establish for themselves, their domains, and their country a new society, where all the constraints of feudal rules and structure would be eliminated.

All the weaknesses, notwithstanding, Norman’s study still remains fundamentally sound. Although the *samurai* who contributed to the Meiji Restoration did come from many different backgrounds, it is Norman who singles out a group of leaders from the lower *samurai* class who instigated the Restoration and played a crucial role in it.

Eventually, the generational change forced the Restoration leaders, such as Kido, Okubo, Saigo, and Sakamoto, to be swept away, like the outdated *bakufu* had been, and the younger more progressive generation, who did not even participate in the Restoration, like Nishi and Okuma, or played only minor roles in it, like Ito, assumed the mantle of leadership and began to control the new government. But the generational shift was not the only force preventing them from participating in the Meiji government. To occupy important positions in the new government was not the major concern of these revolutionaries. By then, they must have realized that their mission had already been fully accomplished.
This bibliography consists only of secondary materials in the usual sense. None of the information culled from these works, however, has been used to reconstruct the past. Instead, these monographs, books and articles, have been examined to ascertain the specific interpretations of the authors. For the purpose of my essay, which has purported to present an original, new interpretation, all the works listed below have, therefore, been treated as primary materials, not as secondary works.


Curriculum Vita

Dana Kenneth Teasley was born in 1961 in Long Beach, California. The son of James and Nancy Teasley, he graduated from Cypress High School in Cypress, California in 1979. He served three years in the United States Army, completing one tour of duty in Germany. He moved to El Paso, Texas in 2005 and attended El Paso Community College, where he made the President’s List for academics and graduated with Honors with an Associate of Arts Degree in 2006. He began his study at the University of Texas at El Paso in 2007, earned History Departmental Honors, made the Dean’s List, won the Frances G. Harper and the Outstanding Academic Achievement Awards in History, and graduated *Summa Cum Laude* with a Bachelor of Arts in History in May 2009, with a minor in Religion. During his junior and senior years, he worked as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of History at UTEP.

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