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**Caught in Between:
The Japanese “Men of High Purpose” of the
Nineteenth Century and Their Ambiguous Position
Between Assassin and Terrorist.**

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Abstract

For a long time, the mid-nineteenth century Japanese *shishi*, or “men of high purpose,” have been considered terrorists for their violent campaign under the banner “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians.” As a result of a series of assassination plotted by the *shishi* in the 1860s, scholars often refer to them as terrorists without always providing a detailed assessment. Following the three criteria of historian Martin A. Miller (*The Foundations of Modern Terrorism*, 2013) in differentiating terrorism from other genres of political violence—“fear,” “violent entanglement,” and “contestation over state legitimacy”— this paper attempts to shed further light on our understanding of the *shishi* violence in Tokugawa Japan. This project investigates both individual *shishi* like Ōshio Heihachirō and Yoshida Shōin as well as collective *shishi* movement in the early 1860s. It pays special attention to both *shishi* and the state’s justification in using violence. This project also argues that the *shishi* cannot be collectively defined as either terrorists or non-terrorists. Although they appeared unified in fighting for the same political course, a deep investigation reveals some notable differences among them. For example, some *shishi* attacked foreigners, whereas others assassinated statespersons; some *shishi* chose violence as the last resort, while others preferred it over available peaceful means. Furthermore, the author argues that there existed a disjuncture between the overarching *shishi* ideology on top and individual *shishi*’s motives in practicing the terror and violence. All these variations complicate one’s understanding of *shishi*’s political identity.

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Introduction

In his seminal work, *the Foundations of Modern Terrorism*, historian Martin Miller conceptualizes three principal characteristics that distinguish terrorism from other genres of political violence. First, terrorism involves “repeated acts of violence that create an atmosphere of fear, insecurity and mistrust in civilian society”; second, it involves “a dynamic interaction between groups or individuals in both government and society who choose it as a means of accomplishing specific political objectives”; and third, terrorism is “a response to the contestation over what constitutes legitimate authority within a territorial nation state in periods of political vulnerability.”¹ While the first trait confirms the popular understanding of terrorism as fear-eliciting violent acts, Miller’s second and the third traits challenge the common portrait of terrorism today as deliberate violence committed by certain sub-state—and oftentimes clandestine—callous militants, who wish to sabotage civil orders to realize their political or religious goals.

In his second trait, posing terrorism as “a dynamitic interaction” between the state and the insurgents, Miller concludes that terrorism is a violent entanglement of two sides—therefore including violence from the state, which is often rationalized as protection of its citizens—as the other half necessary to completing terrorism. Other scholars like Mark Selden and Alvin So would agree with Miller when they define the two terms “state terrorism” and “oppositional terrorism” in parallel,² and when they firmly assert that “States are in fact

¹ Miller, Martin A. *The Foundations of Modern Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 1.

² Selden, Mark, and So, Alvin Y. ed. *War and state terrorism : the United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the long twentieth century*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 2004. p. 4. They define “state terrorism” as occurring when “a state systematically directs violence against the civilian population of its own or another state,”

uniquely imbued with the capacity to commit not only acts of war but also acts of terrorism as they go about seeking to monopolize violence for their own purposes.”³ In light of these understandings, terrorism ceases to be a single-sided story; it hence allows no moral high ground for either side. Both sides have their own definitions of “just” and “evil.” And they both provide justifications rationalizing their use of violence.

Miller’s third trait of terrorism underlines the contestation over state legitimacy in its focus on the two sides’ using violence to either defend or question a regime’s fundamental right to rule. This criterion of terrorism is an attempt to separate terrorists from other violent insurgents—in particular assassins. While assassination can be a popular tactic of terrorists, not every assassin should be considered a terrorist. This is because, as articulated by David Rapoport in *Assassination & Terrorism*, “the assassin destroys men who are corrupting a system while the terrorist destroys the system which has *already* corrupted everyone it touches.”⁴ And questioning the state’s legitimacy to rule is one key indicator of the doer believing that the system is “already corrupted.” This point is crucial in that, when a person with an open heart to violent methods comes to the point where he believes the regime no longer has the *right* to exercise any power over its people, that person is readier to accept “collateral damage”⁵ and more likely to continue scheming further assaults. Using one scholar’s metaphor, while assassins use daggers, terrorists would prefer bombs.⁶ In other words,

and “oppositional terrorism” as “nonstate actors direct violence against a state, including its military, its officials, and its functions” p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ As quoted in Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin. “From the Dagger to the Bomb: Karl Heinzen and the Evolution of Political Terror.” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 16, no. 1 (2004): 97. p. 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

insurgents who merely wish to “correct” the system take assassination—the death of one evil governor, for example—as the *end*, whereas insurgents who wish to “destroy” use assassination as a *means*—believing that the death of one person is one small step in overthrowing the whole regime. And from the latter emerges terrorists.

This project, based on these theoretical premises, is an investigation into one particular band of samurai—the *shishi*, or “man of high purpose”—in the 19th century Japan. An article in *National Geographic*, “The Samurai Way,” describes the subject in this way: “The samurai is the cowboy, the knight, the gladiator, and the Star Wars Jedi rolled into one.”⁷ But besides being master swordsmen, the samurai were educated in classical Confucianism, and many of them were poets, aesthetes, and masters of the tea ceremony. They had belonged to the ruling class since the 12th century, when Japan was ruled by the first military government, until the 1868 Meiji Restoration, after which the samurai as a social stratum were abolished.

The “men of high purpose”—as these samurai chose to call themselves—were usually young and middle-to-lower ranking samurai, who were popularly considered an extremist faction of samurai. In the mid-19th century, with the arrival of Westerners, the government of Japan was forced to end its centuries-long seclusion policy and signed trade treaties with foreign powers. This greatly disturbed the Japanese people, and the shishi reacted in an especially violent manner than the rest of population. Holding the banner “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians!” up high, the shishi announced themselves as “the instruments of heaven” and enforced numerous “divine punishments” on enemies both within and without.

⁷ O'Neill, Tom. "The Samurai Way." *National Geographic* 204, no. 6 (12, 2003): 98-104,106-108,110-120,122-130. Accessed at: <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/1353063109?accountid=10598>. (no pagination).

A series of “headhunting” ended many statesmen’s lives; and the shishi’s animosity against foreigners made Ernest Satow, a British diplomat in Japan at the time, comment that Japan was “a country where the foreigner carried his life in his hand.”⁸

But before diving into the most violent years from 1860 to 1864, which are treated in the fifth chapter, I start the paper with two personalities. The first one, Ōshio Heihachirō, is a “prototype” of shishi in the 1860s, who led a peasant uprising in 1837 and committed suicide before being arrested by the police. The second case study is on Yoshida Shōin, who planned an assassination of one government official, failed and was executed in 1859. The fourth chapter explains where and how the slogan “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” emerged and illustrates the opening act of shishi violence—when a small group of them assassinated the most powerful statesman at the time, Ii Naosuke, in 1860.

The overarching goal of this project is to use the research on shishi to further our understanding of terrorism. Therefore, throughout the coming chapters, I venture to draw the reader’s attention to the following matters: first, why is violence so vital to the realization of their intentions? Moreover, was violence the shishi’s last resort for that he had exhausted all possible nonviolent options, or was it shishi’s first choice as the most appealing option—even when all other peaceful means stood available? Fortunately to today’s scholars, the shishi had a peculiar habit of writing “statements of purpose” of some sort, in which they explain their motives and justify their deeds before setting off for the mission. In Ōshio’s case, he wrote the *Summons* and circulated it before the uprising; and Shōin, being a prolific writer, left behind

⁸ Satow, Ernest Mason. *A diplomat in Japan [electronic resource] : an inner history of the critical years in the evolution of Japan*, Tut books. H. Rutland, Vt.: C.E. Tuttle Co. 1983, p. 47.

volumes of memorials and letters; the assassins of Ii Naosuke and all the following “headhunters” all produced various kinds of “statements,” which sometimes were posted on the signboards beside the heads of the dead, and other times were carried with them and later found out by officials. These sources not only help us understand why they chose violence over peace, but also invite contemplation on the question of whether or not the specific actors were holding the dagger or bomb in their hands.

Second, is terrorism indeed a two-sided story? To assess this, I wish to draw the reader’s attention to both shishi and the government’s arguments—how they defined “justice,” how they defend or challenge the legitimacy of the state, how they reasoned what the best choices were for Japan, how they described their opponents, and how they reacted to the other side’s violent attacks.

With these heavy questions at hand, we must first endeavor to gain a better understanding of the historical context of the 19th century Japan.

Chapter One

Historical Context of the Nineteenth Century Japan

The Japanese imperial institution is one of the few across the globe that were strong enough to survive modern revolutions and live until today. Although a lasting imperial line, the emperors came before the Meiji Restoration in 1868 had hardly any political significance. Others—oftentimes military families—had come to rule in their name. The first *bakufu*, or military government, was established in the 1180s. Its leader gained his power by brutal force and, seeking to legitimize his ruling, went to and convinced the emperor to bestow him the great “*Shōgun*” title—which literally means “Barbarian Quelling Generalissimo.” In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu¹ defeated the newly acceded young shogun in the great battle of Sekigahara and had the emperor pass the shogun title onto him soon after. Henceforth started the Tokugawa family’s military ruling, which well continued into the late 19th century.

The Tokugawa era was one of the most stable and peaceful time periods in Japanese history, by virtue of a political structure which essentially established an equilibrium between three distinct political institutions—the imperial court, the Tokugawa bakufu (or shogunate), and the feudal domains.² By the 19th century, the Tokugawa family had control over about one-third of Japan with most important cities and ports.³ The rest of Japan was divided into approximately 260 domains ruled by feudal lords, each domain had its own army,

¹ Following custom of Japanese names, the family name proceeds the given name.

² Sakata, Yoshio and Hall, Whitney John. "The Motivation of Political Leadership in the Meiji Restoration." *The Journal of Asian Studies (Pre-1986)* 16, no. 1 (11, 1956): 31. p. 36

³ Botsman, Dani. *Punishment and power in the making of modern Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2005. p. 15.

administrative system, and capital city developed around the lord's castle.⁴ The domains enjoyed great autonomy within. Below the lords were the *samurai*, who offered their military services and loyalty to domain lords and received a fixed stipend from the latter. Due to the absence of warfare during the Tokugawa time, more samurai started to take up various administrative positions in their domains and became bureaucrats. It is noteworthy that most shishi were samurai from a lower rank and often lived impoverished lives, as higher positions and promotion opportunities were more available to samurai of middle and upper ranks.⁵

It is also crucial to grasp that the Tokugawa society is a strictly hierarchical society: in this military state, below the emperor, the military lords, and their warrior retainers were the commoners, including—in a discriminatingly descending sequence—farmers, artisans, merchants, and outcasts (such like prostitutions, priests, artists, foreigners).⁶ Each stratum of the society was defined in legal terms, which reflected the bakufu's expectation on not only its behaviors but also morality. In other words, the Tokugawa law discriminated people in light of his or her class, and it held samurai to a higher moral standard than commoners.⁷ For example, while their social inferiors would face execution only when steals something of a considerably high value, a samurai were to receive capital punishment for any theft, as explained one judgement, “because of their high status, members of the warrior houses who commit thefts or other such evil acts are to be handled differently and punished with considerably more severity

⁴ Jansen, Marius B. “Introduction.” Introduction. In *The Cambridge History of Japan*, edited by Marius B. Jansen, 5:1–49. The Cambridge History of Japan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 1.

⁵ Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan : From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ See Chapter Three “*The Power of Status*” in Botsman.

than towns folk or peasants.”⁸ Likewise, samurai who lied in interrogations could expect to meet extra harsh punishment for their attitude was “unsuitable for a person of high social status.”⁹ Certainly, the ruling class had its “privileges.” To save his dignity, a guilty samurai of a higher ranking usually was exempt from attending interrogation at court, samurai who had to attend were allowed to sit on tatami inside the same room with the official, whereas the commoners could only sit in the courtyard, and the outcasts even further away.¹⁰ Should a retainer inflict a major injury on his master, he was to be pilloried for three days then crucified; whereas if a master killed his retainer, he was only to be lightly punished.¹¹ Parents who killed their children were to be banished, but if the murder went the other direction, the children were to be paraded through streets then crucified.¹² And most telling of all is perhaps the samurai’s lawful right to “strike down on the spot any commoner who behaved disrespectfully toward them.”¹³ These sanguinary and unethically biased policies in today’s standard could enhance our understanding on the Tokugawa society if we acknowledge that laws and regulations are by nature tools a regime uses to guard its defined justice.

However, a regime could never sustain its hegemony for as long as the Tokugawa bakufu did if solely rely on bluntly coercive elements like law and police. The legitimacy of its ruling must be accepted, or better believed and internalized, by the people. To achieve this, some philosophical rationale was imperative. The biggest challenge for the Tokugawa system, which the prominent Japanese historian John W. Hall theorized as “rule by

⁸ Botsman, p. 72.

⁹ As quoted in Botsman, p. 72.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹² Ibid., p. 30.

¹³ Ibid., p. 72. Botsman also points out that in practice this only happened in limited circumstances.

status,”¹⁴ was indeed to justify the societal hierarchy. In other words, the challenge was how to have people submit to their inequalities by birth. Here the state-sponsored neo-Confucianism shall provide us answer.¹⁵ The most important feature of this ideology is perhaps the parallel relationship it established between cosmic nature and human society. As Hayashi Razan (1583-1657), a prominent neo-Confucian scholar, articulated this point,

Heaven is above by nature and earth is below. Since *the statuses of upper and lower have been determined in advance*, the superior is honorable, the inferior is despicable. Where the order of the principle of nature prevails, the distinction between high and low can always be observed. The mind of man should be likewise. When high and low are in harmony and the honorable and despicable are not confused, just human relationships will prevail. If human relationships within the domain and realm are just, the country will be in order.¹⁶

The cosmos is by nature hierarchical and orderly—from heaven to earth, from upper to lower. The emperor, as the son of the Sun Goddess descending from heaven, is the embodiment of ultimate divine virtues and stands obviously at the top of the hierarchy. He then bestowed the shogun his divine power to rule. Below them, on the earth, are their secular subjects. The “principle of nature” is the conspicuous hierarchy from high to low. To follow the principle of nature is for “the mind of man” to be likewise—that is, to observe the cosmic rule and recognize the hierarchical discrimination in human society is only natural. “Order” is just and “just” is guaranteed when people follow the order by carefully attending their proper positions in the society and behave accordingly. Being loyal and submissive to people from an upper

¹⁴ Sakata and Hall, p. 44.

¹⁵ See Harootunian, Harry D. *Toward restoration; the growth of political consciousness in Tokugawa Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1970. pp. 1-22. Hall, pp. 48-49. Gordon, pp. 36-37.

¹⁶ As quoted in Harootunian, p. 7. Emphasis mine.

class—as ruled to ruler, son to father, wife to husband, younger brother to older brother¹⁷—is the way for one to obtain just and harmonic human relationships, therefore contribute to one’s community and larger society.

If neo-Confucianism was designed to regulate Japanese society as a whole, the samurai had their customized official ideology known as *bushidō*— “the way of samurai.” This was a set of moral codes for samurai living in the peaceful Tokugawa era. It was born out of concerns over a seeming “moral decay” within the samurai class—arguments went that the long peace had rendered warriors soft and lazy.¹⁸ Deeply rooted in neo-Confucianism, which one may recall stresses the importance of “loyalty” and “duty” in the hierarchical society, bushido stood out as the moral code tailored for samurai for two attributes. First, since its bearers were fighters, it celebrated action and courage. The following lines are quoted from the book *Hidden Behind Leaves*, which was one of the most popular books among samurai:

The Way of the Warrior (*bushidō*) is to find a way to die. If a choice is given between life and death, the samurai must choose death. There is no more meaning beyond this. Make up your mind and follow the predetermined course. ... When you are forced to choose between life and death, no one knows what the outcome will be. Man always desires life and rationalizes his choice for life. At that very moment, if he misses his objectives and continues to live, as a samurai he must be regarded as a coward. ... Day and night, if you make a conscious effort to think of death and resolve to pursue it, and if you are ready to discard life at a moment’s notice, you and the bushidō will become one. In this way throughout your life, you can perform your duties for your master without fail. ... The bushidō is nothing but one of desperate courage. ...in desperate courage one can naturally find both loyalty and filial piety.¹⁹

¹⁷ Japanese neo-Confucianism centers on the so-called “five relationships.” The fifth one, the relationship of friend and friend, is supposedly the only “equal” one.

¹⁸ Hillsborough, Romulus. *Samurai assassins: "dark murder" and the Meiji Restoration, 1853-1868*. Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017, pp. 4-5. *A Documentary History*, 261.

¹⁹ Lu, David John. *Japan: a documentary history*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe. 1997. pp. 262-263.

A samurai was a servant before he was a fighter. The teaching on samurai courageously fulfilling his purpose in death as a loyal servant highlights this fact. Apparently, the reason for a samurai to uphold bushido was so that he could serve his lord better and protect the bakufu-domain system. When the conflict between loyalty and life instinct arrives, the samurai should readily embrace his own death and remain loyal.

The second attribute of bushido is that it shored up samurai's sense of civil obligation. Unlike the commoners who only attended their personal businesses, whether that was agriculture or crafts or commodities, the samurai—for the sake of being a higher class—must occupy himself with practices of a greater significance. However, the troubling truth was that the many samurai, living on stipends in a peaceful era, was idling their time away. Out of such distress articulated Yamaga Sokō first the concept of bushido, hoping that by assigning the samurai class a new living purpose, spirit would be lifted and the samurai would retrieve their dignity.²⁰ This “living purpose,” once again emphasizes samurai's mission in guarding the Confucian principles, in a way encouraged samurai to take on a more active profile when performing their services. Thus, samurai who practiced bushido understood their obligation as not only to protect what was right, but also to correct, and indeed to punish, what went wrong.

If the bushido—the “way of samurai”—imparted the value of fearless action and obligation among samurai, the shishi could in one way be understood as samurai who practiced the two teachings in such a heartfelt manner that it became extreme. Readily, one can glimpse this extremity from their telling name—shishi—not posthumously given, but chosen to call

²⁰ Hillsborough, pp. 4-5, 7-8.

themselves, the word originated from the Chinese word 志士 (*zhishi*), which firstly appeared in *The Analects of Confucius*.²¹ Centuries later, Zhu Xi—the organ of neo-Confucianism—made his interpretation of the term: “A shishi is a gentleman who has a purpose... If principle demands that he die and yet he clings to life, he will not be at peace in his heart ... If he dies when it is time for him to die, then his heart is at peace and his virtue is complete.”²² Furthermore, the Japanese characters for “purpose” and “death” are of identical pronunciations, this convenient coincidence had invited some shishi to call themselves “men of death.”²³

With a name containing such history, it should not arouse wonder to mention that shishi did not suddenly emerge in the dawn of Meiji Restoration. Before around 1860 when they entered the scene as an organized movement in a recognizable form, the Tokugawa history had witnessed sporadic shishi incidents. One of such that deserves special attention is the Ōshio’s Osaka Uprising in 1837.

²¹ *The Analects of Confucius* is a collection of the master Confucius’s teachings and conversations with his pupils. The line of concern here reads: “The Master says: men of high purpose should not compromise their benevolence for their desire to live, they [should rather] give up lives for the completion of benevolence.” (in Chinese: 子曰：志士仁人无求生以害仁，有杀身以成仁。)

²² Fraleigh, Matthew. "Songs of the Righteous Spirit: "Men of High Purpose" and Their Chinese Poetry in Modern Japan." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 69, no. 1 (2009): 109-71. p. 113.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 113.

Chapter Two

Ōshio Heihachirō: The Harbinger

Ōshio Heihachirō (1793-1837) is perceived by some historians as the harbinger of the 1860s shishi movement.¹ Born in a family of lower-ranking samurai, Ōshio inherited the family position as an inspector (*toriki*) in the Osaka's magistrate office, where he soon became famous for his efficient campaign against corruption. Upon retirement Ōshio devoted himself to his private academy, where he earned a considerable number of devout followers.² Like all samurai, Ōshio was brought up in the milieu of bushido: he had a vigorous and abruptly hot-tempered personality, with a strong sense of obligation to uphold a righteous morality.³ However, 1830s Japan was probably a difficult place to live in for anyone with an aspirational or even merely sympathetic heart. Successive bad harvests starting around 1830 due to extraordinary weather finally turned into famine, whose exhausting consequences peaked in 1836-7.

Ōshio's city of Osaka was hit especially hard. The populace was so much starved that people would eat anything at all edible—leaves, weeds, even straw raincoats. In certain areas the government instructed people to bury corpses once sighted without waiting for

¹ For example, Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan : From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 54.

² Until the time of his uprising, Ōshio had had hundreds of pupils in his academy. Newmark, Jeffrey. "A Self-Made Outlier in the Tokugawa Public Sphere: Ōshio Heihachirō and His 1837 Osaka Riot." In *Religion, Culture, and the Public Sphere in China and Japan*, edited by Albert Welter and Jeffrey Newmark, 115-143. Singapore: Springer Singapore. 2017. p. 120.

³ One scholar recounts an anecdote that illustrates the two traits of Ōshio: "During one of his lectures he worked himself into such a state of fury concerning the iniquities of the government that he abruptly seized a gurnard that was baking on a grill in the corner of the room and gobbled up the entire fish from head to tail with a loud crunching of bones." Morris, Ivan I. *The nobility of failure: tragic heroes in the history of Japan*. New York: Noonday Press, Farrar Straus Giroux. 1988. p. 192.

official permissions.⁴ One source recorded a whopping “465 rural disputes, 445 peasant uprisings, and 101 urban riots” in 15 years following 1830, with the number climaxing in 1836.⁵ Besides the weather, a callous officialdom also worsened the situation. While people below struggling daily for food, people on top kept up their extravagant lifestyle. Citing Ōshio’s own words—in the *Summons*⁶ he wrote and distributed before the Uprising:

...when the land is ruled over by those of little competence, disasters occur... during the 240-250 years of tranquility, those of the higher classes increasingly lived in openly arrogant corruption and took bribes... They devise clever schemes and plans to benefit themselves and their homes. They exact excessive taxes from the peasants and commoners residing in their administrative domains... they ignore people who beg them for food... In such a time of distress, they keep overindulging in banquets and fine clothes, surrounded by entertainers and prostitutes, as if they lived in the old prosperous time... The local officials unforgivably collude with merchants—day and night they cluster at Dojima street⁷ and conspire to manipulate the rice price, totally spurning the people at the bottom. These are [behaviors of] petty thieves, not of someone who follows the Heavenly Way and has a sage-like heart [as the officials are supposed to be like].

Witnessing these sufferings on a daily basis, Ōshio felt it imperative to take action. This impulse to act was rooted in the ideology Ōshio committed himself to. Schooled in the bakufu-sponsored Zhu Xi’s neo-Confucianism like everybody else, it was nonetheless the Wang Yang-ming faction of neo-Confucianism wooed Ōshio. The latter distinguishes itself in

⁴ Bolitho, Harold. “The Tempō Crisis.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of Japan*, edited by Marius B. Jansen, 5:116–67. The Cambridge History of Japan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁶ The translation of this document is adopted from three versions of the *Summons (or A Call to Arms)* in English from Lu, David John. *Japan: a documentary history*. pp 280-281. Waltham, Anne, and M. William Steele. *Politics and society in Japan's Meiji Restoration: a brief history with documents*. pp. 37-41. Newmark pp. 124-28, with some emendation from me. Because I did not majorly rely on any of the above translations, later references to this document will not be given page numbers.

⁷ A famous street in Osaka where rice vendors gathered.

one crucial aspect: whereas the former highlights “reason,” the latter highlights “action.” Wang Yang-ming once famously said that “Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action brings completion to knowledge.”⁸ Ōshio evidently subscribed to this concept when he said that “to know without acting means that we still do not know... If we do not immediately transform our moral truths into action, our actual understanding [of those truth] is nullified.”⁹ This ideology-- that a person of knowledge should feel obligated to act --caused Ōshio great agonies, as he was living daily in the knowledge that municipal officials were emptying warehouses to send rice to Edo—where the Tokugawa shogun lived—when the poor were dying from starvation. The famine, lamented Ōshio, was not “an act of Heaven,” but “an act of government.”¹⁰ He was determined to do something.

Yet understanding Ōshio’s inclination to take action is not enough as we aim to catch the “last straw” that pushes the person across the line—from nonviolence to violence. And however furious was Ōshio at the circumstances, he did not find a violent revolt more appealing than nonviolent methods until later. He explains in the *Summons* that he had “tolerated till the intolerable point” and that the situation eventually left him with no other choice but to risk his whole family’s life¹¹ by calling for an armed uprising. Indeed, before his final commitment to violence, Ōshio had tried petitioning, but only received a warning of prosecution for not being loyal and challenging the order; he even sold his private library of about fifty thousand volumes and distributed the money among the desperate.¹² Still but

⁸ In Chinese: “知是行之始，行是知之成。” This is arguably Wang’s most recognized motto.

⁹ As quoted in Morris, p. 198.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹¹ It was customary to punish the whole family for one person’s crime.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 203.

unsurprisingly, individual efforts like this were only meager to a national suffering like this. This was when Ōshio—claims one historian—realized that “nothing could be gained by legal, nonviolent methods.”¹³ The plan was, according to the *Summons*, to “gather men of purpose to rise up against those officials who inflict misery on people, as well as to condemn and punish the profligate Osaka rich merchants.” Moreover, Ōshio planned to distribute their money and rice to the people and welcome all from the neighboring villages to come to Osaka and take what they need, and that “if among the people who come [from the surrounding villages] there are men of merit, they should be recruited in the militia and join the mission of punishment.” Furthermore, they were to burn all taxation files. Though it was not certain when Ōshio first contemplated punishing by force what he deemed as the outrageous injustice, he did start purchasing weapons—torches, swords, rifles, iron cannons—after selling his library.¹⁴ He also paid someone to train his followers to use firearms in combat; they met regularly at Ōshio’s house, where the library had now turned into an arsenal.¹⁵

The *Summons*, written in Chinese with abundant classic Confucian rhetoric, was quietly copied and circulated before the uprising. It threatens to “execute on the spot” whoever was “afraid of the impending disorder and hides away this Summons.”¹⁶ Yet Ōshio was betrayed: the information was leaked to the local police and Ōshio had to initiate the uprising many hours earlier than planned. He and his followers successfully seized the rich merchants’ warehouses as planned, but thanks to the intelligence beforehand, the police soon arrived.

¹³ Ibid., p. 203.

¹⁴ Newmark p. 130; Morris, p. 203. The two disagree on the number of cannons.

¹⁵ Morris, pp. 203, 205.

¹⁶ And according to Morris, Ōshio did order one execution on someone he found suspicious. Ibid., p. 206.

Ōshio's inaugural advantage lasted only a short time: his force proved to be completely feckless and inexperienced when confronting Osaka domain's professionally trained army. Before long, one of the leader insurgents was struck down, his head "promptly severed, stuck on the end of a spear, and paraded through the city streets as a grim warning of the fate that awaited all rebels."¹⁷ The high spirit of the insurgents was quenched as they saw the police force's overwhelming efficiency, and many abandoned their weapons and ran for their lives. Before long, Ōshio had also to admit defeat and ordered his men to retreat and escape; he fled to a nearby mountain with some followers. The whole uprising was quelled in just one day. A few days later, Ōshio decided to return to the city, and when his hiding place was surrounded by the local police, together with his son, they set fire to it and committed suicide, refusing to be arrested. Nevertheless, the bakufu could not let the story leniently end with a total defeat of the rebels and deaths of the ringleaders. In the end, the insurgents burned down one-fourth of the city,¹⁸ including almost 5000 houses, more than 200 barns and 100 cellars. They also attacked numerous rich merchants' stores and officials' homes.¹⁹ From the government's standpoint, such flagrant defiance to order and loyalty must be brought to justice and made a lesson for the public.

So thorough was the bakufu in handling the case that, from the official hearings to the final announcement of the verdict, the prosecution took almost two years.²⁰ In the final decree, Ōshio was condemned for "criticizing the government" and for using his private

¹⁷ Morris, p. 208.

¹⁸ It should be noticed that, since almost all buildings at that time were made of wood, arsonists were always punished by the most severe forms of death punishment—with burning alive a popular choice. Botsman, *Punishment and power in the making of modern Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2005. pp. 29, 47.

¹⁹ Newmark p. 132.

²⁰ Morris, p. 212; Newmark, p.133.

academy to grow rebellious followers.²¹ The corpses of Ōshio and his son (who had died 16 months before) were salt-pickled, paraded through the city, and crucified; no tombstone was allowed in case it became a pilgrimage destination for sympathizers and admirers. Even Ōshio's infant grandchild were sentenced to life imprisonment.²² Twenty others were paraded and crucified in the same manner.²³ The rest of the participants were either decapitated, imprisoned, or exiled.²⁴ In total nearly 1000 people were prosecuted: most of them were punished for witnessing the riot without helping the officials, while some were put under house arrest for having previously attended Ōshio's private academy (even just for few lessons).²⁵ And such "justice" promised not only to punish the defined wrong, but also to applaud the desired right. Huge awarding payments were thus made to those who assisted the bakufu in eradicating the "enemies within"—to defectors, whistle-blowers, policemen, and magistrates.²⁶

Thus ended Ōshio Heihachirō's Osaka Uprising, valiant and perhaps doomed from the onset. This fleeting yet intense antagonism between Ōshio and bakufu officials is valuable to us in that, somewhat like a prototype, it well illustrates three principal characteristics of shishi and their deeds. First, it displays an overarching heroic romanticism: the shishi's common background in bushido, propelled by specific ideologies (as in for Ōshio it was the Wang Yang-ming branch of neo-Confucianism), conjured up a romanticism that made shishi prioritize action over consequence. They concentrated much on the "purity of action": such

²¹ Morris, p. 212.

²² And this was considered a courtesy of the court since the child would normally be executed. Morris, p. 212.

²³ Only one of them was alive to the cross. Nobility of failure, pp411, note 8.97; another source counted 19 who were executed. Newmark, p. 133.

²⁴ Morris, p. 212.

²⁵ Newmark, p. 133.

²⁶ Morris, p. 213.

“purity” is attained when acting under the exclusive guidance of their belief and not being “contaminated” by mundane factors such as fear of death or the desire to win. It was important to them to give themselves unconditionally to the high course of their belief irrespective of the outcome.²⁷ As a result, although the shishi movement was unequivocally political, its political sophistication seldom went beyond grand slogans like “Save the people,” “Punish the wicked,” and later on in the 1860s “Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians.” In other words, this romanticism bolsters the shishi’s determination in plans that were destined to fail.

Second, though nascent in Ōshio’s case, is a political nostalgia leading to a yearning for “the good old days” direct imperial rule, which would eventually transform into an outcry for “restoring” the emperor. In his *Summons*, Ōshio alludes to the first Japanese Emperor Jimmu:

Today we form a militia and denounce the wretched. This is different from the disturbance brought by the commoner mobs, for they simply want disorder. We want to reduce taxation of various sorts and also to revive the political way of the great Jimmu Emperor. [After that, officials will] treat the people with compassion and benevolence, reconstruct the moral disciplines, and finally stop the lavish and pompous culture of recent years.

Moreover, there is an inclination to blame the social chaos on the absence of imperial rule:

Ever since [the first bakufu] came to power, the emperors have been living as if in seclusion—having long lost the power to honor or punish. And people from below had no one to whom they could tell their misfortunes and who would rule in justice for them. Thus, they gather in mobs and break the tranquility of the society.

²⁷ It has been pointed out that the Japanese heroic tradition values made leaders of rebellions often “not expect victory and accept their martyrdom.” They, in a way, chose self-destruction to make a point felt. Morris, p. 412, note 8.107.

This nostalgia of a peaceful and prosperous time under the direct imperial rule leads us to the shishi's third characteristic, regarding how they made justifications for their deeds. As historian Martin Miller observes: "the disputes lying at the center of terrorist situations are frequently focused on the right to use violence and control over access to advanced weaponry to accomplish their particular goals," because "states have traditionally reserved this as an exclusive right" to ensure their power.²⁸ The Japanese shishi, as warriors in a military state, faced another challenge in justifying their use of *legal* weapons against the state they were supposed to protect. Ōshio, and later shishi of 1860s, broke the law not because of wielding their swords but for principally challenging bakufu's rule. Therefore, instead of arguing how unjust it was for the government to claim sole right to violence against its citizens (but not the other way around), the shishi justified their violent deeds by arguing for a certain "ultimate moral truth," which would be more important than their loyalty to the bakufu. This "truth," as we shall see, would pertain to the imperial course later in the 1860s. And Ōshio indeed had implicitly given us a taste of this: the ending of the *Summons* is a line that reads "Answering the divine calling, meting out the divine punishment." Ōshio justified his disloyal uprising by announcing himself an instrument of a divine undertaking. And this claim of "divine punishment," or sometimes "loyalty to heaven," would soon appear repetitively in the shishi's writings and become indeed a signature rhetoric in 1860s.

While the Osaka Uprising was an absolutely violent entanglement between Ōshio and bakufu, can one so confidently conclude it to be an event of terrorism? As we know, terrorism requires the insurgents contesting state legitimacy—challenging the regime's right to

²⁸ Miller, Martin A. *The Foundations of Modern Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. p. 4.

rule at its core.²⁹ And here is exactly where scholars diverge: some argue that Ōshio wished to reveal the Tokugawa bakufu's illegitimacy,³⁰ whereas others insist he was only rebellious against certain evil persons while being a firm supporter of the bakufu system himself.³¹ One very recent work even suggests that Ōshio might have only "embarked on a vainglorious path toward self-destruction."³² When explaining his motive in the *Summons*, Ōshio enumerates multiple historical notorious throne-pretenders and asserts that "today's uprising is different from their rebellions, and it is not motivated by the personal desire to seize the nation and crown ourselves;" rather, it is the outcome of sincere hearts simply wanting to "mourn for the people and punish the evil." It is true that both the *Summons* and the "save the people" banner carried during the uprising are dominated by a sense of heroic romanticism. And they condemn outright the rich merchants and abusive officials without, at least explicitly, holding the bakufu-domain system responsible for such problem. It would take our second personality—Yoshida Shōin—to complete the leap and argue assertively for the bakufu's illegitimacy.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁰ See for example, *personality*, especially pp 170-71.

³¹ This interpretation would be the majority. See Morris for one example.

³² Newmark. The quote is on p. 132.

Chapter Three

Yoshida Shōin: The Prophet

1. Early Influences

Yoshida Shōin was born in 1830 in Chōshū domain. Similar to Ōshio, his samurai family was one of a lower rank. At the age of four, he was adopted into his uncle Yoshida Daisuke's house.¹ This adoption proved to be crucial for Shōin's later development, since it had been a long-time family obligation for the Yoshidas to educate the Chōshū domain lord and his retainers in the Yamaga school of military training. The founder of this school—Yamaga Sokō—was nobody else than the theoretical founder of bushido. No wonder that growing up, Shōin was imbued with a predisposition for courageous direct action and a sense of civil obligation.

When Shōin was six years old, his adoptive father passed away; this left Shōin the head of the Yoshida family, who now shouldered the responsibility of educating his lord. A voracious reader and a responsive learner by nature, Shōin excelled in his early education.² By the age of nine he became an apprentice-teacher at the domain's academy and became a formal teacher one year later. At the age of eleven, Shōin lectured before the domain lord Mori for the first time on the topic of military strategy. Greatly surprised, lord Mori exclaimed, "What a remarkable child!"³ By the time Shōin turned seventeen, his reputation was so great that the

¹ Interfamily-adoption was a common practice at that time. Shōin's adoption was following a family tradition that has been established for generations. Huber, Thomas M. *The revolutionary origins of modern Japan*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 1981. pp. 8-9.

² Some of Shōin's students recalled that their teacher rarely slept and would stand or walk in the snow in order to stay awake at work. Craig, Albert M. *Chōshū in the Meiji restoration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1961. pp. 157-158.

³ Coleman, H. E. "Life of Yoshida Shoin." *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*. 1st Series 45, no. 1 (Sep 01, 1917). p. 135.

lord himself would come to attend Shōin's lectures and invite Shōin to his castle inquire after his opinions on current events.⁴ So far, Yoshida Shōin would probably strike anybody as a teen with great potential and a bright future, yet the truth was he spent half of his adulthood either under home arrest or in prison and died under the bakufu's sword shortly after he turned thirty.⁵ One biographer and clear admirer summarized Shōin's life in this way: "His spiritual father was the spirit of Reverence for the Emperor and Protection of the Country; his mother was the Distress of the Country; and it was from the union of these two that the great character and suffering martyr, Shōin Yoshida, came forth."⁶ Following this metaphor, if one wishes to understand the dramatic change (or downfall) in the ephemeral life of Shōin, he or she might well begin this journey by endeavoring to understand his "spiritual parents."

When Ōshio wrote his *Summons*, if one would recall, he expressed a sincere nostalgia for the "good old times" under direct imperial rule. However, this yearning was more for a prosperous world governed by benevolent rulers than a deliberate call to restore the imperial rule. Ōshio himself did not show a significant interest in the living Emperor of his time. Also not difficult to discern is that he could not imagine a world without the Tokugawa bakufu—the military government that was ruling in the Emperor's name at the time. Unlike Ōshio, Shōin always had the deepest reverence for his living Emperor. This was a direct consequence of the family environment he grew up in: Shōin's parents were both deeply loyal subjects to the Emperor. For an instance, when the eleventh Shogun remained home and did

⁴ Straelen, H. J. J. M. van. 1952. *Yoshida Shōin, Forerunner of the Meiji Restoration; a Biographical Study*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1952. p. 20.

⁵ Murakami, Toshiharu. "The Philosophic Attitudes of Yoshida Shoin: One Modular Pattern of Late Tokugawa Thought." *Philosophical Studies of Japan* 11, (1975): 139. P. 140.

⁶ Coleman, p. 134.

not go to Kyoto (where the imperial court was) to receive his inauguration Imperial Scripts, Shōin's father wept and lamented, "Alas! The decline of the Imperial House! And the presumption of military vassals! Has it come to this?!"⁷ Later, Shōin would repeatedly write sentences of a similar sentiment in his journals. In one particular passage, he even dared to call the Emperor a "prisoner" in the imperial palace:

Day by day I think of you [the Imperial House] as I travel Westward. Now at dawn, after my cleansing, I bow in reverence to the noble Emperor's palace. Melancholy grips my heart at this holy spot. The palace is decayed. Will it ever rise again in splendor? ... his followers at court, forgetting their duties... How can the Emperor—now a prisoner—again command his men? How can the power of his virtue once more rule over Japan?⁸

Also contributing to Shōin's sincere faith in the Emperor was the intellectual milieu of his time. This was a remarkable time of great intellectual diversity. Many of the new disciplines and ideologies, although they did not directly advocate overthrowing the Tokugawa bakufu, challenged the state's neo-Confucianism and inspired the nineteenth century revolutionaries like Shōin. One of these ideologies was the Nativism (also called the school of National Learning), which had a great impact on Shōin. This Nativism was first conceived out of the concern that Japan was losing its spirit for its heavy reliance on Chinese philosophies. Consequently, Nativism stressed the originality—as well as superiority—of Japanese history and culture. One unique characteristic of Japan is her unbroken imperial line, to which was paid due attention by the Nativists. The prominent Nativist Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), whose book *Commentary on the Record of Ancient Matters (Kojiki den)* was regarded as Japan's earliest

⁷ Coleman, p. 129.

⁸ Straelen, pp. 69-70.

historical work,⁹ reasons that:

As foreign countries...are not the special domain of the Sun Goddess, they have no permanent rulers. . . In those countries any bad man who could manage to seize power became a sovereign. Those who had the upperhand were constantly scheming to maintain their positions, while the inferiors were as constantly on the watch for opportunities to oust them. The most powerful and cunning of these rulers succeeded in taming their subjects, and having secured their position, became an example for others to imitate. . . The Holy Men of China were merely successful rebels. [On the other hand,] the Emperor of Japan is the Sovereign appointed by the pair of deities, Izanagi and Izanami, who created this country. . . He [the Emperor] is the immovable ruler who must endure to the end of time, as long as the sun and the moon continue to shine. In ancient language the Emperor was called a god, and this is his real character. Duty therefore consists in obeying him implicitly without questioning his acts.¹⁰

And Shōin would be furthering this perspective to the next level by asserting that the whole country belongs to one person alone—the Emperor:

The State does not belong to one man alone. That is the opinion of the Chinese. It is true in China, but in the land of the Divine Nation, it is not so. The dynasty...holds the succession through its descendants generation after generation and like the Universe it is endless. . . Therefore it is evident that the State belongs to one man alone. . . Suppose that in our country our Emperor oppresses us as Jie and Zhou¹¹ have done. In that case the whole people can do nothing but offer their heads to the Emperor. They incline their heads before him bowing deeply down to the ground in front of the Imperial Palace and they all begin to weep. Then they turn their heads heavenwards begging that the Emperor may change his ways. If unfortunately, however, the Emperor gets angry and begins to massacre his people, then, if there are no more descendants, the Divine Nation perishes.¹²

⁹ Fairbank, John King. *East Asia : tradition & transformation*. Edited by Albert M. Craig and Edwin O. Reischauer, *East Asia : tradition and transformation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1989. p. 422.

¹⁰ Translations adopted from “*Anthology of Shōin’s Works*” in Straelen, pp. 88-89, with only minor change on my part for the consistency of translations.

¹¹ Both were notorious Chinese tyrannies.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

This absolute loyalty to the Emperor can nowadays easily be judged as irrational, but to Shōin and other like-minded activists, the Emperor was the only owner of Japan, whose legitimacy to rule was unquestionable in that it was divine. The Tokugawa bakufu, ruling in the Emperor's name, was not challenged in times of peace because their rule depended on a chain of logic that reasoned thus: the people should be loyal to their lords, the lords should be loyal to the shogun (as head of the bakufu), and the shogun should be loyal to the Emperor. In other words, the ultimate loyalty to the Emperor, justified by the bakufu's neo-Confucianism, was broken down into levels of more personal and immediate loyalties according to one's social standing. The bakufu was regarded as legitimate in that they were loyal to the Emperor. However, this logic is fragile in that it assumes there would be no conflict between the bakufu and the emperor. And the history was that conflict soon arrived, and loyal subjects like Shōin found themselves facing a conflict between their immediate loyalty to their lord (and bakufu) and their supreme and ultimate loyalty to the real owner of Japan—the emperor. One influential domain lord living at this time once famously said, "history shows us that internal disorder invited external difficulties, while external problems provoke internal unrest."¹³ We have had a glimpse into the "internal disorder" through Ōshio, and now with the teenager Shōin, we shall experience the "external problems"—the arrival of Westerners.

To be sure, being a loyal subject to the Emperor and a reader of Nativist texts does not suggest Shōin was xenophobic. As a matter of fact, Shōin was famous for being eclectic in his studies, and thus should not be reduced to one single school of thought. Notably,

¹³ Bolitho, Harold. "The Tempō Crisis." Chapter 2 in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, edited by Marius B. Jansen, 5:116–67. The Cambridge History of Japan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 129.

his unwavering reverence for the Emperor did not impede acknowledging certain advancements of the West, especially their military power. On this subject, Japanese scholars of the Western Learning School,¹⁴ in particular Shōin's much respected teacher Sakuma Shōzan, had largely enlightened him.

In 1853 Matthew C. Perry, with three steam frigates and five other ships—a quarter of the American navy,¹⁵ sailed from the Indian Ocean and anchored at Edo bay in July. On behalf of the United States, he came to seek trade relations—under a threat of war. He left in a few months, promising to come back for the bakufu's answer in one year's time. Around the same time, Shōin's teacher Sakuma petitioned the government to send promising candidates abroad to study, which was unsurprisingly denied by the bakufu. Yet samurai like him, with the bushido-doctrinal sense of civil obligation, would not give up despite the discouraging official stance. Therefore, when foreigners came to Japan, Sakuma decided to arrange his own students to travel to the West unlawfully. And Shōin—with an eager heart to learn from the West so as to defend Japan from it—earnestly volunteered himself. Thus, under his teacher's encouragement and assistance, Shōin first went to Nagasaki in 1853 and intended to board the Russian vessel there but missed it. In 1854 when Perry came back as promised—this time with four war vessels and three steamers,¹⁶ Shōin attempted a second try. With a friend, Shōin boarded Perry's ship one night and politely handed in a letter where they expressed their admiration and wish to study in America.¹⁷ The two, despite the long travel,

¹⁴ Also referred to as the Dutch Learning School.

¹⁵ Fairbank, p. 486.

¹⁶ Coleman, p. 121.

¹⁷ The complete English translation of the letter can be found in Straelen pp. 24-25.

apparently made a good impression on the Americans, who nevertheless turned down their request.¹⁸ On the next day, Shōin turned himself in to the local police, and soon his teacher Sakuma was also arrested for his emotional and financial support to Shōin's offence. According to the bakufu law, one unauthorized attempt to leave the country would mean execution,¹⁹ which was indeed the decided punishment—especially after the convicted kept on criticizing the bakufu's foreign policies instead of begging for their lives during the interrogation. But a friend of Sakuma's stepped in and argued successfully for a leniency: the two were to be held under home arrest in their domains of origin.²⁰

This altered decree did not merely change Shōin's life, but also to some extent influenced the trajectory of Japan's history. This is because, during this home arrest, Shōin was allowed to run a private home academy. From there would emerge a handful of personalities who would become leaders of the Restoration and hold key positions in the new Meiji government.²¹ Also it was during these teaching period, which was in total less than three years, that Shōin gradually came to the conclusion that the bakufu must be overthrown, and transformed himself from to a reformist to the mastermind behind an assassination attempt.

We therefore must devote attention to this private school. Starting his school,

¹⁸ One of Perry's officers later recounts in his journal of his impression on Shōin and his friend: "They seemed much fatigued by their boating excursion, and their clothes showed signs of being travel-worn, although they proved to be Japanese gentlemen of good position. They were educated men, and wrote the mandarin Chinese with fluency and apparent elegance, and their manners were courteous and highly refined." *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Indeed, in the letter presented to Perry, it mentions that "...the prohibitions of our country are still existent, and if this matter should become known, we should uselessly see ourselves pursued and brought back for immediate execution without fail..." *ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁰ Huber 18.

²¹ Itō Hirobumi became a long-time Prime Minister and one of the "original elders" who wrote the Constitution; Kido Kōin and Meabara Issei both became state councilors in the beginning of Meiji era; Yamagata Aritomo was another Prime Minister; Shinagawa Yajirō made the Cabinet Ministers; also important are Nomura Yasushi, Yamada Akiyoshi, etc. Straelen, p. 29.

Shōin wrote down the “Seven Principles for the Samurai,” which reflects the spirit of the school very well. Among the seven, some discuss the significance of action, courage, and devotion to justice: for example, the third Principle reads, “The way of the samurai consists in the Great Justice. Justice is brought about by courage, and courage grows when one stands for what is just”;²² the fourth one reads, “The deeds of the samurai must be simple and honest. To excuse oneself with skillful lies is shameful. If we refrain from these, all our dealings will be open, fair, and just”; finally, the last one orders the students to reflect sincerely on the maxim “Die and then give up,”²³ and reasons that behaving otherwise would render one’s life meaningless. Other Principles deal with manners and loyalty. Under these guidelines, students who went to Shōin’s academy developed, as one scholar aptly puts it, “an appreciation for the interdependence of thought and action, and a readiness to use both for the amelioration of society.”²⁴ This should remind one of Ōshio, who also insisted that to know but not to act is not knowing at all. In other words, with better knowledge comes greater responsibility. Knowledge should not serve just for personal intellectual cultivation, but more importantly as a stimulus to action. A student who was attending Shōin’s academy vividly recalled,

When students came to [Shōin] for the first time he would invariably ask for what purpose they wished to study. They would usually reply that they could not read adequately and wished to develop this skill. To this the teacher would reply, “It will not do to become a scholar. It is real action that is of utmost importance for a person. If you apply yourself to your studies and at the same time devote yourself to real affairs, you will come naturally to be able to read.”²⁵

²² The translation here is a result of two English translations in Straelen, pp. 83-84; and Huber, p. 24, with alteration on my part.

²³ Ibid. Another translation would be “To take rest only after death.” Straelen, p. 84.

²⁴ Huber, p. 27.

²⁵ As quoted in Huber, p. 26.

Apparently, activism was important for Shōin. Nevertheless, when Shōin emphasized “action” and being prepared to die, he did not encourage a meaningless death. To him, man has only one life and one chance to die: therefore he should die “wisely”—to die in real crisis and for great justice. Shōin explains this resolution in a letter to his friend: “Someone like Sakura [Sakura Ninzo] says that though death is easy he will not die vainly. And in our clan [domain] all our comrades say the same. This is a great lie! . . . We do not have more than one life, let us therefore value ours highly. Let us expend our lives only in an extreme emergency.”²⁶ In other words, in Shōin’s mind, a real shishi should never die for the sake of the heroic gesture. Before the “extreme emergency” arrives, a real shishi should cherish his life and strive to use it in serving his country. This mentality tells exactly Shōin’s reluctance to commit to violence. Since a violent mission most likely would bring death to him and his followers, which means the ultimate termination of their way to protect their country, violence should be the last resort.

Indeed, the determination to take action does not entail that action being violent. And except his final year, Shōin lived actively as a reformist and did not advocate toppling the bakufu. Being a prolific writer as he was, Shōin’s reformist inclination was evident in the avalanche of memorials and petitions he wrote to the government. This is a trait that allows historians to set Shōin some distance apart from the shishi stereotype, which was unpractically romantic and lacking in political sophistication.²⁷ Shōin’s memorials were submitted to both domain’s government and national government.²⁸ He suggested that when

²⁶ As quoted in Kōsaka, Masaaki ed., *Japanese thought in the Meiji era*. Translated by Abosch, David. Vol. IX, *Hyakunen Kinen Bunka Jigyōkai. Japanese culture in the Meiji era, 9*: Tokyo, Pan-Pacific Press, 1958. p. 38.

²⁷ Huber, p. 42.

²⁸ On a more detailed analysis of Shōin’s reform policies, see Huber, pp. 43-50.

selecting officials, government should place meritocracy over aristocracy, not minding the person's family origin—which means that the governor can be anyone from the four classes of the social hierarchy should he prove to be competent for the position. This proposal was truly revolutionary because Shōin was essentially suggesting the bakufu abolish its foundation in the social structure. Shōin also petitioned his domain government to purchase Western weapons, to study Western military strategies, and to send students abroad. All of these went largely unheeded by the people on top; if anything, they increasingly became more suspicious and insecure of Shōin being potentially too powerful a rebel.

2. Internal and External Troubles

The years 1857-1858 were indeed a turbulent time for the bakufu: severities of both internal and external disorders were reaching their first peak, complicated by the dispute over shogunal succession. By this time, the shogun as the head of the bakufu had become only nominal; the actual ruler of bakufu was the shogun's head councilor.²⁹ The shogun at the time, Iesada, was dying of ill health and had no heir; the bakufu thus was at the crucial moment of having to select a new shogun. And the lords below were divided into two factions: one faction, led by the head councilor Hotta Masayoshi, chose the shogun's first cousin—a 12-year-old boy who was weak and presumably easy to control. The other faction, led by the powerful Mito lord Tokugawa Nariaki, supported Nariaki's own son, who was reputedly able and intelligent. The latter faction also opposed signing trade treaties with the West and started adhering

²⁹ The Japanese term for this position is *tairō*, which literally means "Great Elder." There exist too many different translations, I adopt mine from Gordon. Other popular ones include "Prime Minister," "Senior Councilor," "chancellor," etc.

themselves closer to the Court. Shōin obviously belonged to this faction.³⁰

During this time, Townsend Harris from America was pressing the bakufu to complete the treaties. Acting often as a diplomatic adviser to the bakufu, Harris was updating the officials in Edo (where the shogun's castle was) on conditions in the world—the popular practice of international trades, and the West's substantially better developed military technology.³¹ Perhaps persuaded by Harris about the profits international trade would bring, as well as being scared of a war where Japan stood no chance of winning, the bakufu gradually leaned towards signing the treaties. Seeking the Court's approval of this, the head councilor Hotta decided to pay a grand visit to the Emperor, a gesture with only rare precedents. But to Hotta's complete surprise, Emperor Kōmei, unlike his apolitical predecessors, articulated his clear-cut stance: not only did he refuse to give Hotta the ratification to sign the treaties, the Emperor also hinted his preference for Nariaki's son as the next shogun.

To be fair, Emperor Kōmei was not as well-informed as the central bakufu on either national or international situations. Like almost all of his predecessors, Emperor Kōmei was for long kept in semi-seclusion and away from politics. But now his own xenophobic sentiments were buoyed up by powerful lords like Nariaki who, sharing a similar anti-foreigner feeling, had reemphasized their loyalty and support to the Emperor. Hotta, facing such a political fiasco, resigned almost immediately. His successor, Ii Naosuke, was a much tougher and unflinching politician, who abandoned the politics of concession and ventured to sign the

³⁰ It might seem contradictory between Shōin's interest in Western Learning and his opposing the treaties. However, as mentioned in the foregoing, Shōin wished to study in the West so that he could help strengthen Japan and fight back against any unwanted foreign disturbance.

³¹ Forerunner 32.

Harris treaties without the imperial endorsement in July 1858.³² He also superintended the 12-year-old boy's succession as the new shogun. After these two bold moves, Ii was still not about to stop—he wanted to secure his faction's dominating position in the country's politics.

Forceful repression and removals of dissidents—specifically people in the opposing faction on the disputes over shogunal succession and the treaties—soon developed into the Great Ansei Purge (Ansei being the era's name). Powerful lords, like Nariaki, were put under house arrest with tight monitoring; trivial figures like samurai retainers were executed. This purging fire first started in Edo, Kyoto, and other areas under the bakufu's direct jurisdiction, and it would soon burn into distant domains like Chōshū (Shōin's domain)—and to Yoshida Shōin who was still under home arrest.³³

3. Leaping from “Dagger” to “Bomb.”

From Shōin's perspective, in the early years of the 1850s, when he was still a reformist, his expectation in cooperating with the government was already dampened through the countless rejected or ignored petitions. From this he concluded that the bakufu was indeed failing its job. In a letter to a friend in 1856 while being confined in his house, Shōin was furious, promising that he would spend every effort to make the disloyal ones aware of their crimes, and that he would even sacrifice his life for that undertaking:

For over 600 years our Lords have not bound themselves completely to the service of the Emperor. This crime is evident. It is my intention to make him expiate. . . This opportunity will occur, when...I can freely visit those who have the same opinion as I. Then I shall undertake with them: I—to show to the Shōgun his crime

³² The Harris Treaty of 1858 was followed by treaties with Holland, Russia, Britain, and France.

³³ Huber, pp.70-71.

committed during more than 600 years and to show him his actual duty, and II—to show also to our daimyō [domain lord] and all the other daimyōs their crimes, and III—to show to the whole Bakufu all their crimes in order to make them serve the Emperor. . . . If one day, I explain the wrongs to my Lord and he does not listen, I shall sacrifice my life in order that he might repent...³⁴

But however enraged Shōin was about bakufu's incompetence, he was still writing in defense of its basic authority—to point out their crimes “in order to make them serve the Emperor.” He still assumed the bakufu's legitimacy to be the vehicle to reform Japan; and he strenuously held onto this thought until 1858.³⁵ Yet, as described above, Shōin's blueprint for Japan was by nature too revolutionary. And his insistence on bakufu's authority was by and large a result of his own feudal education. As one historian concludes, that Shōin “never attacked the institution of the bakufu itself was characteristic of the period...and must not detract from the advanced nature of his views.”³⁶

However, from there it did not take much longer for Shōin to accept the fact that his ideal polity for Japan and the bakufu were mutually exclusive. During the years 1858 and 1859, internal and external disputes together threw Japan into chaos. People in antagonistic factions started turning to violence as normal procedures of public discussion had broken down.³⁷ For Shōin, the news of the completion of the Harris Treaties was his last straw. The “extreme emergency” that deserves the commitment of his life had arrived. Shortly after hearing the news, Shōin submitted a memorial titled “Discussion of the Great Justice” to his domain government. In one scholar's analysis, this memorial

³⁴ Straelen, pp.103-104.

³⁵ Huber, p.74.

³⁶ Craig, p.163.

³⁷ Huber, p.69.

contained for the first time a sophisticated assault on the Bakufu's basic right to rule. The Bakufu, Shōin claimed, was guilty of a serious violation of the realm's constitutional principles. Not only had it terminated the traditional practice of seclusion out of timidity. . . it had done so in disregard of the court's and many others' wishes that there be no unilateral concessions to the outsiders. The Bakufu had gravely infringed the mandate from the court on which the legitimacy of Bakufu rule depended.³⁸

With this memorial completed, Shōin took the irreversible leap from “dagger” to “bomb,” and by 1859 he would be writing sentences like “The measures taken till now were deplorable.

These were based on the idea of *cooperation with the government*, which was an *utter mistake!*”;³⁹ “Informed people understand that there is no opportunity for reverencing the Emperor and expelling the barbarians when the Tokugawa [bakufu] are not yet destroyed”;⁴⁰ and “not to shed blood means not to be capable of discussing the concerns of the Realm.”⁴¹

Evidently, Shōin had cut the final thread of any belief he possibly still held in bakufu, and he was not to shy away from violence.

4. Planning the Assassination

Due to his reputation since preadolescence, officials in Chōshū (Shōin's domain) had always respected Shōin even if they often disagreed with him. And the domain government did assist Shōin with his less radical requests, such as around 1858 the government issued permits for Shōin's students so that they could travel outside Chōshū and study.⁴² This eventually allowed Shōin to establish his personal nationwide communication network—when

³⁸ Huber, p.75.

³⁹ As quoted in Kōsaka, p.42.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.43.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.46.

⁴² Huber, p.79.

his brightest students were sent to major cities like Edo, Kyoto, Osaka, and consistently mailed Shōin high quality reports on valuable first-hand news they had just obtained.⁴³ At this time, young angry samurai from other domains also started gathering in Edo and Kyoto. They bore the agony of the head councilor Ii Naosuke's dictatorship in his handling of the treaty and the shogunal succession and the resentment that their lords were being punished by Ii. Soon a group of shishi from other domains would approach Shōin's clique and inform them about their plan to assassinate Ii, expressing a wish that shishi from Chōshū would also join.⁴⁴

This information was swiftly sent to Shōin, who was still under home confinement. Instead of eagerly giving his consent, Shōin decided that Chōshū men should carry out an auxiliary mission by assassinating the bakufu emissary Manabe Akikatsu. This minion was sent to Kyoto by Ii to gain imperial approval on the treaties and also to supervise the Purge in Kyoto. Being physically restrained, Shōin had no choice but to rely on his students to perform this task. But his students had their own thoughts. By the end of 1858, the Ansei Purge was reaching its zenith. Rounds of arrests and executions had turned cities like Kyoto and Edo into hotbeds. From some students' standpoint, it would be too dangerous to attack an influential bakufu official now. They suggested in a letter to Shōin that they wanted to wait until the purge cooled down and took advantage of the backlash wave:

We are deeply moved by the brilliance of your just views which you have so painstakingly expressed. However, the situation in Japan today has changed markedly. . . the Bakufu officials behave as madmen. Not only do they persecute the loyalists, but they also force daimyo to retire and open the country to trade against the

⁴³ Shōin then would edit all information like this into a chronical that bears resemblance to modern newspaper. He named it "Flying Ears, Long Eyes" and made it free to access for anyone visited his private academy. See Huber, pp.72-73.

⁴⁴ Craig, pp.159-160.

wishes of the Emperor. Certainly a reaction against this will arise, and at that time we must truly cooperate on behalf of the country. Until then we must restrain ourselves...⁴⁵

To this, Shōin was tremendously disappointed. He was not willing to wait any longer. Perhaps hearing that his own friends were being thrust into jails, he knew the same fate would soon visit him. And after all these years, he was confident in concluding that bakufu would not back down and loosen the grip it had struggled so hard to gain, that the only way to ameliorate bakufu's cruel repression would be for the repressed to violently fight back.⁴⁶ In the end, 17 students of Shōin's signed up for a blood pact to assassinate Manabe.⁴⁷ After some planning, Shōin decided to inform the domain government about this, entreating for travel permits for his students, eight cannons, and in total 120 rounds of ammunition.⁴⁸

Many have criticized Shōin's decision because in the end the domain government turned Shōin into the hands of bakufu. From his home Shōin was first to be transferred to the domain's prison on charges of "impure teaching" and causing "unrest in the human heart."⁴⁹ From there bakufu would soon demand Shōin to be transferred to Edo. At his interrogation, Shōin "not only answered questions concerning his political beliefs, but he went on, to the amazement of the officials concerned, to recount the details of his plot to assassinate the bakufu emissary Manabe."⁵⁰ After the hearing, the interrogators submitted their suggested edict, which ruled Shōin to exile. But the head councilor Ii Naosuke intervened, as he did with

⁴⁵ Craig, pp.161-162.

⁴⁶ Huber, p.78.

⁴⁷ Craig, p.160.

⁴⁸ Huber, p.79.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.81.

⁵⁰ Craig, p.162. Also see another vivid recount of the interrogation in Coleman, pp.171-172.

many other Ansei cases, and changed “exile” into “death.”⁵¹

While waiting for the execution, Shōin wrote to his friend, calling bakufu officials “meat-eating, uncivilized fellows,” “weaklings,” and useless “drunks.”⁵² In the last letter to his family, he says, “The bakufu has lost all sense of justice and the foreigners dominate the government. However, our sacred country has not yet been ruined, because we have our heavenly Emperor on high and the loyal hearts below.”⁵³ These final letters, burdened with much rage, despair, and also hope, led Shōin to his final peace: on October 27th, 1859, the 30-year-old Yoshida Shōin was beheaded. Some would say the bakufu was a ruthless regime that could not handle criticism fairly and condemned unjustly talents like Shōin and many other activists through its brutal law. Others would argue that Shōin should have met his death the time he attempted to go to America, and that he only lived as a result of the government’s leniency. Therefore, when Ii Naosuke finally ruled him to death, “no injustice was done to him.”⁵⁴

5. The Prophet and His Legacy

From either stance, Yoshida Shōin is valuable to this study in several ways. In his own words, “Shishi is the samurai who desires to follow ‘the way.’ He who is born as a samurai and who endeavors himself to the exercise of weapons and who is grateful towards the state, and endeavors to exalt the name of his family...”⁵⁵ Shōin would most certainly think of himself

⁵¹ Huber, p.88. Coleman, p.172.

⁵² Walthall, pp.71-72.

⁵³ Straelen, p.107.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.33. Also see p.30.

⁵⁵ Straelen, p.97.

as a shishi—or disciplined himself to behave like one. Although he never managed to inflict any tangible damage on the Tokugawa society like Ōshio did by burning down one-fourth of a city, Shōin contributed to the regime’s insecurity through his words. And he nurtured a group of disciples who would later significantly impair bakufu by their deeds.

If Ōshio was the harbinger of shishi, Shōin could perhaps be the prophet.⁵⁶ The latter had a much clearer blueprint for the ideal polity he envisioned for future Japan: he had diagnosed correctly that the rigid four-class social hierarchy and the principle of prioritizing heredity over meritocracy were stalling Japan in all aspects; he produced volumes of specific proposals for local and national governments to install the reform; to appeal to his audience, Shōin carefully developed an intellectual legitimacy in his writings through using historical rhetoric and precedents;⁵⁷ he had once had hope in the ruling class and defended the bakufu, before he had exhausted it all; he encouraged action, he was never afraid of violent confrontation, but he also dearly cherished his life and swore to only expend it in an extreme emergency. In many ways, Shōin was ahead of his time. In a pioneering study of Chōshū politics, historian Albert Craig articulates that, “what the Restoration reformers arrived at only after long years of struggles, he [Shōin] seems to have gained with a single leap.”⁵⁸ This prophetic pragmatism had rendered Yoshida Shōin a hopeless romantic of his time.

Also characteristic as a shishi was the unquestionable and unwavering faith Shōin displayed towards his Emperor. From Ōshio to Shōin, the call for direct imperial rule had evolved from a nostalgic undertone to an emphatic theme song. Upon this point, the roaring of

⁵⁶ This idea of considering Shōin a prophetic figure was inspired by Craig. See pp.156-164.

⁵⁷ See “*Ideological Strategy*” in Huber, pp.59-66.

⁵⁸ Craig, p.163.

“revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” (*sonno-joi*) would only get louder among the shishi. More importantly, as illustrated in the foregoing argument, to move from Ōshio to Shōin is to make a vital leap from dagger to bomb. When, near the end of his life, Shōin realized that Japan could only be protected when the Tokugawa bakufu was overthrown, it was decided for him that, whatever other schemes he might have contemplated besides the assassination were not to be a simple act, an individual event; rather, they would represent aspects of a kind of systematic destruction—of potential terrorism.

To be sure, this is not suggesting that every single shishi who came after Shōin was a terrorist. Clearly, not every shishi subscribed to Shōin’s teachings. Even for those who did, how much they agreed with Shōin about the bakufu’s illegitimacy in ruling would be a different concern. And overall, what is especially difficult to judge are people’s real motives. Even within the same assassin squad, each shishi might have had his independent mind, and they simply clustered because their aims temporarily overlapped. Nevertheless, it is precisely this lack of definite homogeneity that nudges us to look closer and makes us halt before the temptation to laxly assign anyone a weighty label such as “terrorist.”

Though a short life, Shōin did leave a legacy of enormous impact. He essentially articulated, and indeed advocated, a way for shishi to justify their deeds. Approaching the end of his life, as Shōin was holding firmer on the idea of dismantling the bakufu, he began to instill increasing faith in an army made of the “unaffiliated.” We understand the primary burden for the shishi was to resolve the conflict between their “assigned loyalty” and their “spiritual loyalty.” Whereas the former was the consequence of bakufu’s feudal education of various kinds, the latter was the outcome of individual cultivation—a personal faith. After 1858, the

conflict repeatedly occurred because the pursuit of the latter almost unavoidably involved spoiling the former. On another point, it also caused great agony to any righteous man that, when he made an offence, his family—sometimes even their lords— were also to be punished. Therefore, the justification shishi had to advance should be particularly convincing since it was not only for the public, but also for shishi’s own moral wellbeing.

The case of Ōshio reveals one possibility: that is for the shishi to fixate on an “ultimate moral truth” of sorts that would transcend the bakufu-assigned loyalty, among other duties. Shōin found a second possibility amongst the group of so-called unaffiliated samurai—they were samurai who voluntarily severed their ties with their domains and families and became “drifters,” who no longer had masters or were restrained in their domains of origin. Doing so would mean to lose all their stipends and social titles, but they ought to have enjoyed considerably greater freedom.⁵⁹ Shōin once explained why he had much confidence in the unaffiliated in a letter:

Li’s [Li Cho-wu] metaphor—finding a hero among the ordinary people is like fishing in the well—I think is brilliant. There *must* be someone among the non-affiliated samurai who can get things done! The affiliated samurai lives on his stipend, he only desires luxury, beautiful women and delights in his beloved children. This sort of samurai has no room left revering the Emperor and expelling the barbarians.⁶⁰

And not only did Shōin place great hope in the determination and bravery of the unaffiliated samurai in giving up their stable lives. Shōin chose them also because these samurai would no longer *need to* justify the violation of their “assigned loyalty”—when they

⁵⁹ Later they would popularly be identified with the word *rōnin*.

⁶⁰ Kōsaka, p.44.

courageously detached themselves from the bakufu-domain system, they obtained a privilege to strip off everything “assigned.” In another letter written in 1859, Shōin discusses the potential power of unaffiliated samurai:

...the Bakufu and feudal lords are already besotted and there is no way of supporting them. There is no hope except in the rise of the unaffiliated samurai. We are not forgetting the obligations to our clan [Chōshū domain], the virtue and grace of the Imperial Court. With the power of the emergent non-affiliated lower samurai we are able to give support first of all to this domain and next aid in the restoration of the Court, though it at first glance seems to violate the spirit of allegiance of individuals, still, anyone who does such things [i.e., plans and puts them into effect] can be said to have rendered meritorious service on behalf of the Divine Country.⁶¹

From this letter, one could discern that Shōin provided a justification with allusion to both possibilities: first, he stresses a higher moral truth that could transcend personal loyalty, which is to rationalize the violation by reasoning that the doer was actually offering services “on behalf of the Divine Country;” and second, he encourages determined individuals to become unaffiliated. This logic, as a central legacy of Shōin’s, was to be believed, practiced, and promoted by other shishi. Very soon, on the other side of the story, bakufu would be experiencing the result of it.

⁶¹ This is a result of two translations. See Walthall, p.72 and Kōsaka, p.45. The letter selected in Walthall was written to Kitayama Yasuyo (pp70-72) while Shōin was waiting for the execution. The letter appeared in Kōsaka was said to be addressed to Kusaka Genzui in 1859 (pp44-45). Curiously the paragraph hereby cited appears to be identical. It is possible that Shōin was reproducing pieces of his arguments and distributing them in his final days. It also needs to be pointed out that in Walthall’s translation, the correspondence for “non-affiliated lower samurai,” which was from Kōsaka, is “lower-ranking people.”

Chapter Four

the Mito Scholars: “Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians!”

1. *The Mito School*

The Mito domain, with a historical tradition of being intellectually active, could be argued as the birth place of imperial loyalism. The Mito school scholars of the 19th century developed the philosophical and theoretical tenets for the shishi movement in the 1860s. Their guideline slogan “revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians” was indeed the brainchild of Mito. Therefore, delving deeper into the 19th century Mito school ideology would enhance our overall understanding of the shishi violence inspired by it.

Yoshida Shōin the “Prophet,” who had once traveled to Mito in his early adult years, could barely conceal his excitement recounting Mito’s sparkling intellectual atmosphere: “It is a place where one does not conceal but rather gives expression to his thoughts. If someone could have heard the discussion in our meetings, he most certainly would have grasped brush and recorded the way to achieve a strong country and to transmit [those ideas] throughout the country.”¹ And one can certainly presume with confidence that the assassins of Ii Naosuke—with 17 of them from Mito—were learners of this school of thought. Not to mention bakufu’s eminent opponent—Tokugawa Nariaki—was nobody other than the lord of Mito. All that said, the Mito scholars did not begin their project with even the subtlest object to insinuate the overthrow of bakufu. Quite the opposite, their intention was rather benign and

¹ Harootunian, Harry D. *Toward restoration; the growth of political consciousness in Tokugawa Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1970. p. 35.

loyal.

Early Mito thought started with a project on writing Japan's history. It had its roots in the official neo-Confucianism, emphasizing performing one's loyalty according to one's social status. As the renowned Mito scholar Fujita Yūkoku articulated, "If the shogunate [bakufu] reveres the imperial house, all the feudal lords will respect the shogunate. If the feudal lords respect the shogunate, the ministers and officials will honour the feudal lords. In this way high and low will support each other, and the entire country will be in accord."² In other words, Mito scholars understood that respecting bakufu as legitimate agents of government was in itself respecting Heaven's will—after all, the shogun's ruling power was entrusted by the emperor.³ And one historian on this subject also confirms that all of the Mito authors' work "shows that they respected the institutional framework of the shogunate and regarded as the contemporary embodiment of the national polity."⁴

However, the same Mito authors also reiterated the phrase "As Heaven has not two suns, so earth has not two masters" in their writings.⁵ In this respect they were akin to the nativists in accentuating Japan's divine origin and the emperor's sole and absolute superiority. Therefore, the first half of the slogan— "revere the emperor"—was present from the beginning. With their nativist aspect of arguments, the Mito writers unwittingly achieved something of great significance: *within the bakufu narrative*, they allowed a leeway for the loyalist to rearrange the sequence of his duties. This "leeway" was not immediately palpable

² As quoted in Beasley, W. G. *The Meiji restoration*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 1972. p. 146.

³ Webb, Herschel. *The Japanese imperial institution in the Tokugawa period*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1968, p. 192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

only because it was not yet desired. Before troubles arose from within and without, reverence to the shogun and reverence to the emperor were in harmonious terms. An emperor-centered rhetoric at the time read in no way as subversive. It was when submitting one's loyalty to the two recipients became incompatible that the leeway was sought, unveiled, and prudently appropriated. Discernible as early as in Ōshio's Osaka uprising, the insurgents' rationales for violence often fashioned a commitment to a certain "truth"—pursuing which necessitated transcending their assigned and scripted duty. The Mito scholars, by simply reaffirming the emperor's unchallengeable status—without questioning bakufu's authority, rendered it almost only natural for any loyal subject to side with the emperor in a time of national crisis. But before that, the advocacy of revering the emperor posed no threat whatsoever to the bakufu.

The emergence of the second half of the slogan— "expel the barbarians" denoted a turn of the Mito writings. When writing against the backdrop of arriving foreigners, according to one historian, their arguments were now "characterized by a new, aggressive attitude that demanded that use of force in repelling foreign encroachment and in making Japan respected by other nations as well as by its own people."⁶ Interestingly, Mito scholars did not coin the phrase "expel the barbarians." When Perry's first arrival was reported to the Emperor, the latter sent this prayer to Ise Shrine, in which he expresses his own concern: "Barbarian ships have of late been frequenting the waters neighboring Japan. Our mind is greatly disturbed. We earnestly look for divine assistance to speed the expelling of the barbarians lest they destroy the national polity."⁷ Here was the first time the phrase "expel the

⁶ Earl, David Magarey. *Emperor and nation in Japan; political thinkers of the Tokugawa period*: Seattle, University of Washington Press. 1964. p. 88.

⁷ Kōsaka, Masaaki ed., *Japanese thought in the Meiji era*. Translated by Abosch, David. Vol. IX, *Hyakunen Kinen Bunka Jigyōkai. Japanese culture in the Meiji era, 9*: Tokyo, Pan-Pacific Press, 1958. p. 18.

barbarians” was ever uttered, and it was soon picked up and politicalized by Mito scholars.⁸

In 1824, Fujita Yūkoku (cited above), observing some English sailors landing on the Mito coast, suggested his son try to kill them if they were set free by the bakufu.⁹

Anecdotes like this unsurprisingly contribute to the impression that the samurai loyalists were outright xenophobes, that their imperial fanaticism was only motivated by racism and abhorrence of change. But a more patient reading would beget a deepened understanding.

Consider this Japanese chronicler’s description of Perry’s arrival:

The military class had during a long peace neglected military arts; they had given themselves up to pleasure and luxury, and there were very few who had put on armour for many years. So that they were greatly alarmed at the prospect that war might break out at a moment’s notice, and began to run hither and thither in search of arms. The city of Edo and the surrounding villages were in a great tumult; in anticipation of the war which seemed imminent, the people carried their valuables and furniture in all directions to conceal them in the house of some friend living farther off.¹⁰

If for a moment we indulged ourselves in these imperial loyalists’ mentality, hardly could we resist the impulse to celebrate with them Japan’s glorious past—the images of valiant, vigorous, and diligent warriors fighting off intruders of any kind; nor could we avoid getting frustrated with them, witnessing people of a military nation panicking and fleeing over rumors of battles. In light of such contrast, perhaps what mostly disturbed the Mito scholars and like-minded loyalists was not so much the foreigners, but what the arrival of the foreigners exposed them to: the decay of the country’s morale—cowardly, dispirited, and compromising. For a nation

⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

⁹ Earl, p. 88.

¹⁰ As quoted in Beasley, W. G. *Select documents on Japanese foreign policy, 1853-1868*. London: Oxford University Press. 1955. p. 89.

whose ruling class was warriors, such a picture must truly have been disheartening. This is why the infamous Mito scholar Seishisai (or Aizawa Yasushi) would write:

If there is indecision [between war and peace] on this point, the people will be apathetic... Morale will deteriorate while everyone hopes for peace that cannot materialize. The intelligent will be unable to plan; the brave will be unable to stir up their indignation. . . Waiting until defeat stares one in the face is due to an inner sense of fear that prevents resolute action. . . “Put a man in a position of inevitable death, and he will emerge unscathed,” goes the saying. . . So I say, let a policy for peace or for war be decided upon first of all, thus putting the entire nation into the position of inevitable death. Then and only then can the defense problem be easily worked out.¹¹

Clearly, from the author’s perspective, Japan was in desperate need of “a position of inevitable death,” which was believed to be able to essentially reignite Japan’s warrior spirit. Also noticeable was a naive optimism—that once Japan restored its morale, she would be undefeatable. One scholar rightly pointed out that “expel the barbarians” was a means, not an end.¹² The ambition of Mito scholars was not to rid the foreigners *per se*, rather, they aspired for a revitalized Japan, enjoying once again the awe and respect of the world. Merely being “xenophobic” could in no way empower this project. It was in fact “a more far reaching and aggressive plan than that of the Bakufu’s ‘open country’.”¹³

Aizawa Seishisai, the author cited above, was the arguably the most prominent Mito scholar in the late Tokugawa period. And the excerpt is from nowhere else than the *New Theses (Shinron)*—the chef-d’oeuvre of later Mito thought, which was often referred to as the

¹¹ Tsunoda, Ryūsaku, Wm. Theodore De Bary, and Donald Keene. *Sources of Japanese tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1958. pp. 593-594.

¹² Earl, p. 91.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

bible of the leaders of Meiji restoration¹⁴ and even “the most influential piece of political writing of late Tokugawa period.”¹⁵ Composed in 1825, it soon gained nationwide popularity and became a designated textbook in many domains’ academies. Moreover, in the 1850s and 1860s, it was said that no one deserved the name of shishi unless he held a copy of this book.¹⁶

Another important theme in *New Theses* is encapsulated in the line “Loyalty and filial devotion have always been one and the same.”¹⁷ In other words, a loyal subject owes to the emperor a kind of loyalty similar to the filial piety he pays his father. Aizawa passionately writes:

By the grace of the Imperial Sovereign all within the four seas are protected, and in eternal tranquility under an everlasting reign, the land is free from disturbance. These things are not due to his subjugating the people through terror and seizing control for his time. They are indeed, rather, necessarily due to the fact that the whole nation with one accord looks up to him affectionately, and could not bear separation.¹⁸

This narration reaffirms the emperor’s overarching lordship, while at the same time depicts the relationship with him as one of a secular kind like between father and son. This portrait of the emperor being both divine and human allows for a unity of worship and administration as characteristic of the state.¹⁹ And when applying this to the problems of barbarians, the equivalence drawn between loyalty and filial piety eventually rendered the two parts of the slogan— “revere the emperor” and “expel the barbarians”—mutually supplementary. Aizawa

¹⁴ Walthall, Anne, and Steele, M. William. *Politics and society in Japan's Meiji Restoration: a brief history with documents*. Boston, MA : Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017. p. 32.

¹⁵ Beasley, p. 74.

¹⁶ Earl, p. 91.

¹⁷ Walthall and Steele, p. 34.

¹⁸ As quoted in Earl, p. 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

asserts in *New Theses* that “the superiors apply virtue in nurturing life and loving the people; the inferiors with one accord devote their wills to serving the superiors. Their valor in war originates in their natural constitution”; it “must necessarily originate in the essence of loyalty and love.”²⁰ The determination to expel the barbarians by force was out of loyalty and love for the emperor—the “patriarch” of this family-nation; and in order to “revere” the emperor—to perform loyalty and love him, under those days’ circumstances, required a war on the barbarians to resurrect the Japanese spirit.

Hereupon the stance is clear, the intellectual preparation was complete.

Launching the program now awaited one last push: the summoning of followers. As it turns out, the person who executed this last bit was Fujita Tōko—son of Fujita Yūkoku. In one historian’s words, Tōko “not only creates the rallying cry for the imperial loyalists,” but also “sets the seal of approval on their use of the word *shishi* to describe themselves”:²¹

In this divine nation, the Heavenly Sun Succession generation after generation...reigns over all creation. The distinction between superior and inferior, between internal and external, is as unchanging as heaven and earth. For this reason, then, “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” is in truth the Supreme Duty of the *shishi*.²²

Answering this powerful calling, *shishi* scattered around the country inaugurated the most violent years of the 1860s. Their first blow aimed at nobody else than the head councilor, Ii Naosuke.

²⁰ Translation adopted from Earl, p. 104.

²¹ Ibid., p. 105.

²² As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 105, with minor alteration on my part for keeping translation of terms consistent.

2. *Shishi's First Blow: The Assassination of Ii Naosuke*

Although the plan of assassinating Manabe died together with Yoshida Shōin, the conspirators who sought to assassinate the head councilor Ii Naosuke strove to keep their plan alive. And this time they would not fail—Tokugawa Japan's most important and powerful statesman at the time was soon to die on a day of national celebration. This event, with tragic deaths on both sides, marked the beginning of the state of violent entanglement between shishi and the bakufu, which lasted for about five years until 1864. Many would credit this assassination as the most destructive blow the shishi ever managed to achieve. An event bearing associations like these naturally deserves some attention.

As briefly touched upon in the last chapter, the contentions of the 1850s concentrated on two problems—internally, the shogunal succession and, externally, the foreign treaties. Both involved two opposing parties, which eventually resolved into the shogun's senior council led by Ii Naosuke on one side and powerful lords from Mito and other domains on the other—led by Tokugawa Nariaki, the daimyo of Mito. If the argument over shogunal succession concerned competitions over key political seats in government, the decades-long debate on opening the country was a matter of a heartfelt principle. In 1853, after Perry's first visit, bakufu summoned written advice from lords on how to handle Perry's threatening request, asking that they should “without fear and without withholding in the slightest any expression of your true feelings.”²³ Such a political invitation from the bakufu was a serious departure from the past: before then the lords were excluded from the making of

²³ As quoted in Kōsaka, p. 17.

foreign policies. The feedback bakufu gathered showed an overall preference of “remain closed” over “open the country.”

One Japanese writer on this time period describes that “the whole history of contentions for and against the opening of the country was the history of the radical differences between the two lords.” By the “two lords,” he was referring to the Mito lord Tokugawa Nariaki and the Hikoné lord Ii Naosuke. Indeed, both were perhaps the most representative, but also most obstinate, advocates of their respective stances. Nariaki wrote to bakufu in 1853, listing reasons to support his resolute attitude to “expel the barbarians” at all costs—even war:

When we consider the respective advantages and disadvantages of war and peace, we find that if we put our trust in war, the whole country’s morale will be increased and even if we sustain an initial defeat we will in the end expel the foreigner; while if we put our trust in peace, even though things may seem tranquil for a time, the morale of the country will be greatly lowered and we will come in the end to complete collapse. . .²⁴

Nariaki’s stance relies heavily on “traditions.” People holding this stance believed that Japan, as a sacred nation with the unbroken imperial line, was both culturally and spiritually superior to the West. And such faith explained why they considered signing the treaties *according to the barbarians’ will* as if they were welcoming the foreigners to trample over Japan’s dignity. These were samurai who took great pride in their nation’s “essence” and would fight with their lives to preserve it. Nariaki emotionally illustrates this point:

Although our country’s territory is not extensive, foreigners both fear and respect us. . .[however] the Americans who arrived recently, though fully aware of *bakufu’s* prohibition, entered Uraga displaying a white flag as a symbol of peace and insisted on

²⁴ Lu, David John. *Japan: a documentary history*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe. 1997. p. 282.

presenting their written requests. . .They were arrogant and discourteous, their actions an outrage. Indeed, this was the greatest disgrace we have suffered since the dawn of our history. The saying is that if the enemy dictates terms in one's own capital one's country is disgraced. The foreigners, having thus ignored our prohibition and penetrated our waters even to the vicinity of the capital, threatening us and making demands upon us, should it happen not only that the *bakufu* fails to expel them but also that it concludes an agreement in accordance with their requests, then I fear it would be impossible to maintain our national polity.²⁵

In his opinion, Japan would not be intact if the divine core of it were stained, a nation with pride should not allow that to happen. Besides, choosing peace over war was simply a sign of cowardice to a proud samurai. This mentality makes it perfectly understandable that, when bakufu disregarded the Emperor's clear words about expelling the barbarians and went ahead to sign the treaties, Nariaki's faction turned furious. Not only were lords like Tokugawa Nariaki of Mito and Shimazu Nariakira of Satsuma²⁶ greatly disturbed, patriotic samurais below them felt also obligated to express and defend their belief. Not unlike Yoshida Shōin, the conclusion of foreign treaties was the last straw for many of them.

On the other hand, Ii Naosuke, the lord of Hekoné—another powerful domain like Mito—before becoming the head councilor, had also submitted his take on the matter to the bakufu in 1853 and expressed an oppositional view from Nariaki's. Ancestors and traditions surely ought to be respected, wrote Ii, but today's conditions of the world have changed drastically, the ancestral law of seclusion must be updated.²⁷ Ii stayed unequivocal on his

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 282-283.

²⁶ It is worth mentioning that Nariakira, the daimyō of Satsuma domain, died mysteriously before he could carry out his planned coup against Ii with backing from the Court in 1858. Hillsborough, Romulus. *Samurai assassins: "dark murder" and the Meiji Restoration, 1853-1868*. Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017. p. 27.)

²⁷ Read the whole memorial from Ii to bakufu at Lu, pp. 286-288.

stance. For example, in another letter he wrote:

The condition of foreign states is not what it once was; they have invented the steamship, and introduced radical changes in the art of navigation. They have also built up their armies to a state of great efficiency and are possessed of war implements of great power and precision, in short have risen to the formidable powers. If, therefore, we persistently cling to our antiquated systems, heaven only knows what a mighty calamity may befall our Empire.²⁸

Especially considering that the West had already brought China—a nation Japan had always in many ways looked up to—to her knees with the Opium War, Ii was determined that initial concession must be given to guarantee peace and avoid the fate of the Chinese. Meanwhile, Japan could start building her coastal defense for a fight later if necessary.

Both parties were keenly aware of their opponent's arguments and leverages, and they both, in a looming way, predicted their own fates. As early as in 1853, Nariaki wrote to the bakufu:

In these feeble days men tend to cling to peace; they are not fond of defending their country by war. They slander those of us who are determined to fight, calling us lovers of war, men who enjoy conflict. If matters become desperate they might, in their enormous folly, try to overthrow those of us who are determined to fight, offering excuses to the enemy and concluding a peace agreement with him. They would thus in the end bring total destruction upon us.²⁹

And later in July 1858, when Ii Naosuke could no longer postpone the conclusion of the treaties out of pressure from America and gave permission for signing without the imperial approval, he was confronted by his personal secretary, who recounted the conversation in his journal:

²⁸ Nakamura, Katsumaro, and Shunkichi Akimoto. *Lord Ii Naosuké and New Japan, Ii Tairo to Kaikō*. English. [Yokohama?: Printed at the "Japan times"].1909. pp. 103-104.

²⁹ Lu, pp. 285-286.

...I told him [Ii] that...to announce the signature of the treaty without waiting for the Emperor's instructions would be to put himself completely at the mercy of the Hitotsubashi party [Nariaki's faction]. They would accuse him of opposing the Imperial will, which would be most serious for his house and would bring severe punishment upon him personally . . . I pressed my arguments upon him, asking how it was that he who had always shown respect for the Imperial Court could ever have given such orders without awaiting instructions from Kyoto. He said...there was no time to wait for Imperial sanction...and reflection showed that the position of the foreigners was quite different from that of former times. . . They had both wealth and military power. . . There could be no greater national disgrace than to suffer defeat and so be forced to concede territory and pay an indemnity. . . Our coast defences, he said, are at present inadequate. For the time being we can only select those foreign demands which cause us no harm and grant them. Moreover...State policy is the responsibility of the Bakufu, which in an emergency must take such administrative action as seems expedient. None the less, he said, he was resolved willingly to take upon himself alone full responsibility for the failure to obtain Imperial sanction. With this he ordered me to say no more.³⁰

The two parties genuinely could not see eye to eye, yet both were acutely aware of the importance in winning support from Kyoto. Thus, both parties turned to the imperial court, maneuvering for legitimacy to bolster their arguments and actions. Upon concluding the treaties, Ii sent Manabe—the target of Yoshida Shōin—to Kyoto to explain the circumstances to the Emperor and to supervise the prosecuting of their political enemies. But Manabe was stalled in Edo for various matters and could not leave at once. His delay was taken full advantage of by the oppositional party in Kyoto: during this time they managed to have the Court issued two Imperial Scripts: the first one was sent to Edo, denouncing bakufu for signing the treaties and urging Edo to consult other domain lords to manage the national crisis;³¹ the

³⁰ Beasley, W. G. *Select documents on Japanese foreign policy, 1853-1868*. London: Oxford University Press. 1955., pp. 182-183.

³¹ See the letter at Beasley, *Selected Documents*, pp. 180-181.

second one was sent to Mito, instructing it to take the lead in the course of “Revere the Emperor, Expel the barbarians.”³² Scripts of this kind coming directly from the imperial court greatly unsettled the bakufu. Not only for its content, but that a direct communication from the Court to a domain was itself unprecedented: bakufu, being the “sole regent of the Emperor,”³³ had, in its full history, reserved for itself such right. Therefore, from Ii’s standpoint, this was audacious political meddling and not short of treason.³⁴ It indicated that the “enemy within” had successfully seeped their power into the imperial castle and was ready to thoroughly employ it to their benefit. It also revealed to the bakufu that its “God-given” right to rule was less axiomatic than it might have appeared. Responding to the emergency, bakufu did two things: it first denied the authenticity of the letter, saying that it lacked a necessary seal; meanwhile, their own connections at Court started issuing another Imperial Script to Mito, demanding the domain to return the previous script to Edo at once.

By this time, the politics in Mito had further complicated. Nariaki had earlier been ordered into house arrest and was forbidden to utter his political opinions. He was succeeded by his son as the lord of Mito, who adopted a rather different official stance from his father in accepting the fact that the barbarians could not easily be expelled.³⁵ However, the diehard samurai from below who supported expulsion had not changed their opinion. And the arrival of the second imperial message surfaced this divergence within the domain. The persons on top preferred to comply with the bakufu and return the first imperial letter because the

³² Hillsborough, p.19.

³³ Nakamura, p. 175.

³⁴ Hillsborough, p. 19.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

domain had suffered great losses in the Ansei Purge and li's dominance was apparently too risky to challenge—although interestingly they also suspected the letter as counterfeit for lacking a seal.³⁶ But the active samurai loyalists from below could not offer any more meek submissions. They believed, writes one author, that “if they should return the letter, ...they would lose their justification for war against li Naosuke,” and that “they intended to circulate the letter to feudal domains around the country to muster support for war.”³⁷ To them, the first letter empowered them with a rare opportunity of a justified fight against bakufu, and returning it was tantamount to renouncing the precious legitimacy. So when the Mito officials finally decided to return the letter, one samurai changed into his formal attire, went to Mito castle, and committed *seppuku*—literally “self-disembowelment”³⁸—right in the corridor of the grand hall, for he knew that was a place the carriers of the imperial letter must pass by. He “covered the dark wooden floor with his own blood in a distinctively *bushido*-based act known as *kanshi*, ‘remonstration through suicide’.”³⁹ The message was loud and clear, and the returning of the letter was postponed. Other rebellious loyalists from Mito also broke their ties with the domain and went to Edo, from where they would conspire in a plan to kill li Naosuke.

In the end, seventeen Mito men and one Satsuma man, with hearts heavy from the knowledge that they must die, appeared in front of the castle gate on March 3rd (in lunar calendar), which was a national festival.⁴⁰ As often happened with festivals at that time, many bystanders would gather on the sides of the roads to admire the awesome processions of each

³⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁸ It is a way to die reserved only for samurai—an ultimate display of a samurai's dignity, discipline, and courage.

³⁹ Hillsborough, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Today the day is known as “girls' dolls day.”

lord, who rode in fancy palanquins. The assassins thus mingled themselves into the crowds and prepared their ambush there. Many literatures on this event have noted the unseasonal snow on that day. As it turned out, the weather was not only mentioned for a dramatic effect of narration, but for it being in fact a decisive factor of the assassination's success. The head councilor's palanquin was accompanied by more than 60 persons, including 26 samurai.⁴¹ But none of them could react to the sudden assault efficiently enough because their swords were covered by special pouches to keep dry in the snowy day and could not be readily drawn. Suddenly the assassins jumped in front of the palanquin. They fought off li's retainers first and stabbed li from outside of the palanquin. Seconds later a shishi named Arimura tore open the door and beheaded li.

The whole incident that vitally altered Tokugawa Japan's history all happened in a mere few minutes. One assassin died on spot; more of them who were badly wounded would commit suicide later that day—instead of having themselves taken alive; some fled; eight of them turned themselves in and they presented to the authorities a crucial document—signed by seventeen of them (except the man from Satsuma for he arrived late). This was a “statement of purpose” in which the shishi painstakingly explain their motives. It enumerates li's evil deeds and justifies the assassination. It first holds li responsible for tarnishing the national customs and national dignity in that he allowed appeasement with the foreigners:

...it is entirely against the interest of the country and a shame to the sacred dignity of the land to open commercial relations, to admit foreigners into the castle, to conclude a treaty, . . . Under the excuse of keeping the peace, too much compromise has been made at the sacrifice of national honor. Too much fear has been shown in regard to the foreigners' threatenings. Not only has the national

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 32.

custom been set aside, and national dignity injured, but the policy followed by the Shōgunate has no Imperial sanction. For all these acts the Tairō Baron Ii Kamon-no-Kami [Ii Naosuke] is responsible.⁴²

It then proceeds to addressing Ii's abuse of power as the head councilor of a teenage shogun.

The Ansei Purge he ordered proved him an autocrat and "an unpardonable enemy of the nation," and his dictatorship in the shogunal succession had severely endangered the relationship between the Court and the bakufu:

Taking advantage of the youth of the Shōgun, he has assumed unbridled power. . . his autocracy has gone so far as to confine, under false charges, the Princes and Barons who would be faithful and loyal to the cause of the Imperial Cabinet and of the Shōgunate [bakufu]. He has proved himself an unpardonable enemy of this nation. The power of government in his hand will be too dangerous for a harmonious relation of the Imperial Cabinet and the Shōgunate, for he has gone so far as to interfere in the matter of the Imperial succession.⁴³

Furthermore, concluding that "our sense of patriotism could not brook this abuse of power at the hands of such a wicked rebel," the assassin squad consecrated themselves "to be the instruments of Heaven to punish this wicked man" and assumed themselves "the duty of putting an end to a serious evil by killing this atrocious autocrat."⁴⁴ Most importantly, they explicitly declare in the statement that their plot was aimed only at Ii's administration, that they intended not to overthrow the bakufu. Their motive was to forcefully remove the malignant tumor in a benign system, to steer bakufu back to its right trajectory and pay the Emperor and national spirits with due respect:

Our conduct, however, does not indicate the slightest enmity to the

⁴² Satoh, H., William Elliot Griffis, and Saburō Shimada. *Agitated Japan: the life of Baron Ii Kamon-no-kami Naosuké (based on the Kaikoku shimatsu of Shimada Saburō)*. Tokio: Dai Nippon Tosho. 1896. pp. 137-138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Shōgunate [another word for bakufu]. We swear before Heaven and earth, gods and men, that our nation is entirely built on our hope of seeing the policy of the Shōgunate resume its proper form and abide by the holy and wise will of His Majesty, the Emperor. We hope to see our national glory manifested in the expulsion of foreigners from the land. Thus will the whole nation be established on a basis as firm and unmovable as Mount Fuji itself.⁴⁵

This clearly indicates the shishi here (at least for the ones who participated in drafting the statement) were holding daggers, not bomb. The executions of them in the following year brought an end to this event, although this finale was only the prelude of the violent entanglement between shishi and the state. Very similar to Ōshio claiming his uprising as “answering the divine calling, meting out the divine punishment,” the shishi assassins here declared themselves as “instruments of Heaven.” Also, they could appear in front of the Edo castle on that festival day because they had severed their ties with their domains and families and had become “unaffiliated”—just what Yoshida Shōin energetically advocated for at the end of his life.

From the one who “protested through suicide” in the Mito castle to stop the imperial script from being sent back, to the assassins who chose to kill themselves rather than being taken alive—exclaiming “How wonderful! How wonderful!” as their dying words,⁴⁶ heroic romanticism was pervasive. Indeed, to their fellow shishi, they were martyrs who upheld the principle and essence of their beloved nation, brave enough to stand up against the most powerful man of the state. For them, Ii Naosuke was the enemy of the loyal Japanese, he was

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

⁴⁶ Hillsborough, p. 33.

the traitor who surrendered to the barbarians out of his own cowardice, he was drunk on power and was utmost disrespectful to the Emperor. When such a man met his assassins, he only met his proper and justified ending.

On the other hand, to people who followed the bakufu, it is the assassins who were the sinful traitors of the worst possible kind, who were the internal enemies. The admirers of Ii looked up to him as a farsighted and progressive person who was courageous enough to discard certain core values Japan had clung onto for centuries. For them, Ii took great personal risks for a course he deemed as right for the nation; he was the person who opened Japan to development and modernization with his life. When he died, Japan suffered an unparalleled national loss. Sympathizers of Ii emphasized the fact that when people urged Ii to resign in order to avoid personal danger, the head councilor told them “Resignation is easy, but the times are difficult. I will not, and must not, avoid both danger and difficulty on the simple ground of seeking personal ease.”⁴⁷ They also vividly portrayed, when the intelligence about assassination arrived to Ii, calm and peaceful he said, “I have done what I set out to do, what I had to do. The country is now open and a new history of Japan has begun. The death of one person cannot recall the tide of history. They might as well kill me.”⁴⁸ and insisted on not warning his retainers to be watchful.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Satoh, p. 143.

⁴⁸ Aoyama, Hiroshi. “Ii Naosuke, the Last Tairo—A Composition in Black and Red and White.” *The East = Higashi* volume:6, Issue:4, (1970-07-01): 16-25. p. 25.

⁴⁹ Nakamura, pp. 186-187.

Chapter Five

The Shishi Terror of 1860-1864 and the Transformation

1. Terror against “Enemies Without”

Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first British diplomatic representative, who lived in Japan through the most turbulent years of late 1850s and early 1860s, observed at the beginning of 1860 that “a sudden demand had arisen among the Japanese for fire-arms, and every foreign merchant and storekeeper was besieged with applications for revolvers, muskets, etc.”¹ To this he asked, “What did it mean? Did it bode some revolutionary proceeding on the part of the Japanese against their own Government, or some design against the lives of foreigners themselves?”² As readers of history we now know the answer to his question would be “both.” Under the banner “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians,” shishi occupied themselves with the divine mission of eradicating internal *and* external enemies.

Given Japan’s history of seclusion and pride, not uncommonly were Western elements dealt with disdain. For an instance, Sakuma Shōzan—Yoshida Shōin’s teacher of Western Learning—recounted receiving reproaches for using Western-styled saddles.³ But unlike commoners who held irrational prejudices against the outside world, shishi in the late nineteenth century had indeed employed political and more sophisticated arguments vindicating their anti-foreign aggressiveness. This hostility reached a new level starting 1859,

¹ Alcock, Rutherford. *The capital of the tycoon: a narrative of a three years' residence in Japan*. 2 vols. New York: Harper, 1863. v1. p. 291.

² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

³ Kōsaka, Masaaki ed., *Japanese thought in the Meiji era*. Translated by Abosch, David. Vol. IX, *Hyakunen Kinen Bunka Jigyōkai. Japanese culture in the Meiji era, 9*: Tokyo, Pan-Pacific Press, 1958. p. 24.

following the conclusion of different treaties. The declaration by some scholars that the shishi's chief weapon was political assassination would most positively find its evidence in these years.⁴

In 1859, Rutherford Alcock wrote a "vigorous protest" to bakufu, demanding the Japanese government to take action over its populace's hostility. In the letter, he did not try to hide his great anguish in living in such an insecure and fearful atmosphere:

No officer of the Mission of either country, Great Britain or the United States, can walk out of their official residence without risk of rudeness, offense, and latterly—more especially latterly—violence of the most wanton and determined character. Stones are thrown, blows are struck, swords are drawn on gentlemen passing along the great thoroughfares inoffensively and peaceably, offering neither offense nor provocation to any one.⁵

Alcock then recounts several incidents of a very personal kind: Henry Heusken, secretary and interpreter of the American legation, was "struck a violent blow while slowly walking his horse on the road" and "not by a coolie or a drunkard," but one of "those officers bearing swords."⁶ And just a day or two later was Heusken again, and this time together with the Consul of Holland, assailed with stones in the center of the town, and "not by idle boys—not by one, but hundreds of men—not for a moment either, but persistently for a considerable time."⁷ Alcock's own staff also complained to him about the "insolence and rudeness experienced in their walks" not from commoners but officers.⁸ In the end, Alcock observes that "Day after day these insults and outrages are offered to five or six individuals" and "they increase in frequency and

⁴ Fairbank, John King. *East Asia : tradition & transformation*. Edited by Albert M. Craig and Edwin O. Reischauer, *East Asia : tradition and transformation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1989. p. 537.

⁵ Alcock, v1. p. 216.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

violence...”⁹ In fact, these “five or six individuals” were the ones targeted by shishi for being facilitators of various sorts in negotiating the treaties—the persons who were responsible for forcing open the door of Japan and corrupting the nation’s essence.

Looking at a difference source, the journals kept by the American consul Townsend Harris—after whom the treaty was named—could also testify on the increased tension Alcock depicted. In the entry under December 3, 1857, Harris records a visit from a Japanese governor who “was very anxious to have me make promises not to visit about the city, saying that Yedo [Edo] contained a great many bad people who might insult and maltreat me...”¹⁰ To this Harris, in a rather innocent manner, replied that “I had no fears for my personal safety” and that “I could not give them any pledge or promise of any kind that might afterwards be used by them to limit me in my freedom of action... I also told him that exercise in the open air was the daily practice of all Western people, and was necessary to the preservation of health.”¹¹ Not only did Harris ask for recommendation for places to “take the requisite exercise,” but also demanded the guards sent by bakufu at his house to be discharged.¹² In just less than two months, Harris was informed that bakufu had discovered a specific plot conspired by some unaffiliated shishi¹³ against him and had arrested the ringleaders, but Harris was

⁹ Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁰ Harris, Townsend. *The complete journal of Townsend Harris, first American consul and minister to Japan*: Rutland, Vt., C.E. Tuttle Co. 1959. p. 456.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 457.

¹² Ibid., p. 457.

¹³ Harris wrote: “He [lord of Shinano] then said that of the sons and brothers of military men, none enjoyed any rank except the eldest son; that they all received a military education, being taught the art of war, the use of weapons, etc. They had no pay, nor any prospect of advancement in life. They were supported in idleness by the head of family, as their positions forbade their devoting themselves to any useful avocations, and they had no hope of honorable employment. Their only distinction consisted in their right to wear two swords. From these habits of idleness many of them fell into bad courses, became dissipated, drunken brawlers and bullies; and that their conduct became too outrageous they were disowned and cast off by their families. In this condition they form a class called *loneen*, which corresponds to bravo, bully, rowdy and loafer.” Ibid., p. 509.

convinced that it was “too trifling a matter to call for any serious reply.”¹⁴ According to Henry Heusken’s diary, Harris even requested the offenders be released to “make a good impression on the [Japanese] people who would see from this the friendly intentions of the United States.”¹⁵ This request was rejected by bakufu, and all of the offenders died in prison.

Harris wanted the two nations’ relationship to be a friendly one. But the increasing frequency of violent attacks on him and the entire foreign community was bound to frustrate him. In August 1859, three drunk Russians were attacked by some shishi, resulting in two deaths. Alcock gave a vivid description of the bloody scene:

The steward, though mortally wounded it was feared, still lives, having, after the first onset, succeeded in rushing into a shop. The other two were left in a pool of blood, the flesh hanging in large masses from their bodies and limbs. The sailor was cleft through his skull to the nostrils, half the scalp sliced down, and one arm nearly severed from the shoulder through the joint. The officer was equally mangled, his lungs protruding from a sabre gash across the body, the thighs and legs deeply gashed.¹⁶

Later in November 1859, a Chinese servant of the vice-consul of France in Yokohama¹⁷ who “dressed very much like a foreigner”¹⁸ was murdered. In January 1860, the Japanese interpreter working for the British Legation was killed, who was said to have lately received “a distinct warning that it was determined to take his life” from the shishi.¹⁹ In February, a French consul

This “loneen” is in fact “rōnin,” the word for the “unaffiliated samurai,” whom Yoshida Shōin invested huge hope in to topple the bakufu. Here from Harris, we can observe indirectly the government’s perception on the “unaffiliated samurai.” To Shōin these were brave shishi who gave up comfort and security, breaking up with their family to devote into a high course. But to bakufu, they were idle drunks and bullies, who by their samurai nature had a taste for violence and disorder.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 510, 511.

¹⁵ Heusken, Henry C. J. *Japan journal, 1855-1861*. Edited by Jeannette C. van der Corput and Robert Arden Wilson: New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press. 1964. p. 168.)

¹⁶ Alcock, v1, pp. 219-220.

¹⁷ A harbor city hosted the foreign communities. Most of the foreign legations were there.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 251.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 292.

was warned by a samurai at a teahouse that all foreigners were to be killed in one single night; around the same time, Harris was informed that fifty men were captured by the police on their way to Yokohama to murder every foreigner there.²⁰ Later in that same month, two Dutch captains were assassinated in the main street of Yokohama: “They had been set upon in the dark, and head and limbs had nearly been severed from their bodies... One had his shoulder nearly cut through, besides gashes across head, face, and chest, any one of which must have been fatal,” and the second one was mangled in a similar manner.²¹ In March, one piece of rumor followed Ii Naosuke’s shocking assassination was that shishi from Mito were marching towards Yokohama for a mass attack. This induced a security notification from the Britain consul Howard Vyse, urging that “All British subjects will, for the future, go about always armed as much as possible for their own personal safety, as regards a revolver or any other deadly weapon they may be able to obtain.”²² Then there was a relatively peaceful period of a few months without bloodshed, until the valet of the French Minister was severely wounded while standing at the gate of French Legation in Edo.²³

About two months later, January 1861, Henry Heusken, the interpreter and secretary at the American legation, was ambushed while accompanied by bakufu-assigned guards on his way home. Fatally wounded by swords, the Dutchman died from loss of blood in

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 299-300.

²¹ Ibid., p. 300.

²² Partner, Simon. *The merchant's tale: Yokohama and the transformation of Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. p. 73. A similar rumor that five hundred Mito men were going to attack Yokohama circulated again in January 1861. Partner 75. Rumor of attacking Yokohama indeed became a “regular event” into even 1864, with samurai from Mito were usually assumed for the acts. Partner, p. 132.

²³ Satow, Ernest Mason. *A diplomat in Japan [electronic resource] : an inner history of the critical years in the evolution of Japan, Tut books. H.* Rutland, Vt.: C.E. Tuttle Co. 1983. p. 46. A different source suggests it happened in February. Harris, p. 511f.

the American legation. The assassins this time were shishi from Satsuma domain and were members of the “Association of the Tiger’s Tail” (*Kobi no Kai*), which, according to one scholar, was one of the first shishi associations where members committed themselves “to transcend the narrow loyalty toward the lord of their fief...and replace it with a commitment to national ideals.”²⁴ It fully embraced the “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” slogan and included people from various positions across the country.²⁵ Its founder Kiyokawa Hachirō was an unaffiliated samurai originally from Shōnai domain, who undoubtedly exhausted his “unaffiliated” freedom, traveling around and making miscellaneous connections. One scholar writes that Kiyokawa was “suddenly galvanized into action” upon knowing Ii Naosuke’s assassination; and “seeing bakufu was powerless to stop or arrest a determined group of shishi, he became convinced that the collapse of the Tokugawa world order was imminent.”²⁶ He started organizing the Association immediately afterwards. Furthermore, by the time of Heusken’s plot, Kiyokawa was running his own academy—just like Ōshio and Shōin did—in Edo; it is thus highly likely that the plan was conceived and finalized in the private academy.²⁷

Arguably in many ways, Heusken had sped up his own doom. Not only was his position one of importance, but he was reckless for continuously exposing himself in public and coming home late, which had made him the most visible and accessible foreign diplomat in Edo—by this time packed with shishi from everywhere.²⁸ The death of Heusken caused great panic among the foreign community, and all moved to Yokohama seeking better

²⁴ Hesselink, Reinier H. "The Assassination of Henry Heusken." *Monumenta Nipponica* 49, no. 3 (1994): 331-51. pp. 346-347.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 347-348.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

security, except for Harris, who wrote in a private letter in the summer of 1861: "I remained here [Edo] alone, and my action probably prevented some very aggressive measure from being adopted by the French and English...the Japanese are loud in their thanks to me, saying that I had prevented the horrors of war from being brought upon them."²⁹ However in the same letter Harris also expressed that he was "sadly disappointed by the refusal of the New Administration to recall me" and that he was fixed in his determination to come home next year.³⁰

The shishi terror directed at foreigners indeed reached its climax in years 1861 and 1862. As mentioned before, around this time traveled the rumor of a mass attack at Yokohama. To this Alcock wrote: "...we hear of danger ever near and impending until, as day after day passes and no danger assails us, we grow hardened and indifferent; the constant strain of suspense, and hourly expectation of an impending danger, is so intolerable."³¹ This "intolerable" wait for terror was finally relieved when in July, half a year after Heusken's death, a group of shishi broke into the British Legation and wounded two foreigners. Alcock himself, doubtlessly a major target, only survived because the shishi missed his apartment. Afterwards a "statement of purpose" was found on the body of one assassin who died on spot, which reads:

I, though I am a person of low standing, have not patience to stand by to see the sacred empire defiled by the foreigner. This time, I have determined in my heart to undertake to follow out my master's will. . . With a little faith and a little warrior's power, I wish in my heart...to bestow upon my country one out of a great many benefits. If this thing...may cause the foreigner to retire, and partly tranquilize both the minds of the Mikado [the emperor] and of the

²⁹ Harris, Townsend. *Some unpublished letters of Townsend Harris*. Edited by Shiho Sakanishi, *Japan Reference Library publications ; no. 9*: New York, Japan Reference Library, 1941. Entry of letter 8, July 1st, 1861, no pagination.

³⁰ To be fair, Harris's eagerness to go home, besides the intense environment in Japan, also had to do with his ill health.

³¹ Alcock, v2, p. 146.

Government (Tycoon) [this refers to the shogun], I shall take to myself the highest praise.³²

The statement is followed by fourteen signatures. And all fourteen shishi³³ died, either on the crime scene or later by suicide to avoid capture. Several were made prisoner and then executed.³⁴

Another important incident happened in about one year's time after the attack on British Legation. In September 1862, an English merchant Charles Richardson and his three friends clashed with the retainers of Satsuma daimyo traveling on the highway. The conflict ended with Richardson being hacked by swords—in the distinctive shishi fashion—and died, with his other companions badly wounded. Ernest Satow, a new British diplomat who just arrived in Japan, commented on the incident in this way:

The Japanese sword is as sharp as a razor, and inflicts fearful gashes. The Japanese had a way of cutting a man to pieces rather than leave any life in him. This had a most powerful effect on the minds of Europeans, who came to look on every two-sworded man as a probable assassin, and if they met one in the street thank God as soon as they had passed him and found themselves in safety.³⁵

A little further down he writes:

[the news about Richardson] did not shock me in the least. The accounts of such occurrences that had appeared in the English press and the recent attack on the Legation of which I had heard on my way from Peking had prepared me to look on the murder of a foreigner as an ordinary, every-day affair...³⁶

These passages effectively convey the popular mindset of Westerners at that

³² Ibid., p. 150.

³³ Historians disagree on numbers, and Alcock himself insists it must have been more than fourteen.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 155-156.

³⁵ Satow, pp. 52-53.

³⁶ Ibid., pp.54-55.

time, and vividly depict the atmosphere of fear and mistrust. And bakufu was blamed in every single one of the incidents described above, which are representative of—but not at all exhaustive in documenting—how agitated Japan was in those years. Huge indemnities were often made by bakufu to the Western powers (for example a £25,000 payment was made to the British for the Richardson incident). And the bakufu’s power was in this regard drained by foreign powers who did not fully understand the Japanese political system. When Alcock lamented in his memoir that “justice in all such cases is no better than an idle dream”³⁷ and affirmed his belief that Japan was a barbarous country—drastically opposing the Western standards of civilization, his “justice” was an extraterritorial one. Indeed, as one scholar succinctly explained— “The bakufu, after all, represented Japan to those who did not know better.”³⁸ Westerners like Alcock failed to fathom the complex triangular relationship between the emperor, the shogun, and the domains. And they failed—or chose not—to understand its long history of imperial worship, great domainal autonomy, and bushido tradition. The bakufu therefore was pressured into an exceedingly frustrating position: it was held responsible for shishi’s terror against the Europeans under the latter’s continuous threat of war; on the other hand, the bakufu officials also had to defend against the growing shishi violence directed at them. To this we now turn.

2. Terror against “Enemies Within”

The opening act of the shishi violence aiming inwards at “domestic enemies” was

³⁷ Alcock, v1, p. 294.

³⁸ Hesselink, p. 338.

the assassination of Ii Naosuke in 1860. This let the genie out of the bottle: direct action had never been more seductive to the shishi. From this point on until 1864, numerous statesmen who were deemed “traitors” for various reasons would be harassed and many killed by shishi in a manner similar to the way “barbarians” were treated. The chart below illustrates well the intensity of violence during this period:

Incidence of Major Political Assassinations (per year): 1860-1866³⁹

Year	1860	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	1866
Number of Incidents	3	1	19	30	21	6	0

Besides the universal motto “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians,” two more specific triggers for shishi to adopt violence against the bakufu can be identified. First, it must be emphasized that samurai retainers belonged to different domains had a much stronger bond with their domain lords than with the distant shogun in Edo and the bakufu he represented. As a result, even after Ii was killed, many shishi still held a bitter resentment towards bakufu for Ii’s Ansei Purge, during which their lords and friends were either executed or confined. Hence, many assassinations after—and including—the murder of Ii, were vengeful counterattacks against a statesperson who assisted in carrying out the Purge. The second cause of the shishi’s agony was a bakufu policy promoted after Ii’s death, which was phrased

³⁹ Source: Thomas M. Huber, “‘Men of High Purpose’ and the Politics of Direct Action, 1862-1864” in *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: the Neglected Tradition*. edited by Najita, Tetsuo, and J. Victor Koschmann, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1982. p.111.

efficiently as “unity between Court and bakufu.” More precisely, they were offended by the imperial marriage proposed by bakufu between the Emperor’s sister and Shogun Iemochi in 1860. This move irritated shishi, for as they correctly sensed, it was a manipulative attempt to bring the Court under control so that bakufu could consolidate its power after losing Ii Naosuke. Furthermore, rumors said that the mastermind behind the marriage—Andō Nobumasa, who succeeded Ii as the head councilor—threatened to force Emperor Kōmei to abdicate should he refuse to sanction the marriage.

Hearing this, shishi from Mito decided to replicate their signature assassination of Ii, only this time with Andō. In January 1862, a month before the imperial wedding, a team of six shishi assailed Andō and his procession. But this time they did not succeed. Ever since Ii’s death the bakufu officials had been extraordinarily vigilant. This short but violent encounter between the two parties ended in Andō having his back wounded and all six shishi died fighting. Once again, the shishi carried with them copies of their “statement of purpose” which were found by bakufu officials later. An analysis of it reveals that, like Ii’s assassins, the shishi attacked Andō as an evil statesman, not as an iconic figure who represented the entire bakufu regime: the shishi denounced Andō as a traitor for “plundering” the princess, disrespecting the Court, surrendering to the barbarians, and punishing wrongfully the righteous men.⁴⁰

In summer 1862, another bakufu official named Shimada Sakon was killed in his bath by shishi from Tosa, Satsuma, and Higo domain. Shimada was a bakufu official who sided with Ii’s faction in the earlier shogunal succession dispute. He had also spied for the bakufu in

⁴⁰ Hillsborough, Romulus. *Samurai assassins: "dark murder" and the Meiji Restoration, 1853-1868*. Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017. p.54.

the early Ansei Purge and was just now urging the imperial wedding. His headless trunk—wearing only a loincloth—was delivered to his lover’s place, whereas the head was stuck on a stake, standing on the riverbed with a signboard next to it,⁴¹ on which wrote the assassins Shimada’s crimes: “He is a great traitor, unfit for heaven or earth. Therefore we punish him.”⁴² Around two months later, Ugō Shigékuni, who was Ii’s right-hand man and involved as well in the planning of the imperial wedding, was assassinated at home. In an almost identical “divine punishment” fashion, his head was stuck on a spear standing on the riverbank, with a signboard by its side—the divine punishment was enforced on Ugō for he had “committed crimes even worse than Shimada’s.”⁴³ Just one week after this, the “heavenly instruments” again exercised their power. They seized the man named Méakashi Bunkichi for his “evil scheming” under Shimada. The corpse this time “was completely naked, both legs red and swollen” with bamboo sticks “driven through the anus and penis,” all was exposed for the public to see.⁴⁴ One month later, four sergeants of bakufu’s police force in Kyoto were assassinated together in a hotel by some twenty shishi from Tosa, Satsuma, and Chōshū domain.⁴⁵ Three heads appeared the next day at an execution ground on the east side of Kyoto. The signboard declared the justice of this divine punishment: the four were especially active during the Ansei Purge and were responsible for many loyalists’ deaths.⁴⁶

One driving force behind most of these assassinations was the loyalist Takechi

⁴¹ Ibid., p.68.

⁴² Huber, “Men of High Purpose,” p.113.

⁴³ Hillsborough, p.73.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.74.

⁴⁵ The four sergeants were Watanabe Kinsaburō, Masamori Sonroku, Ōgawa Genjūzō, Ueda Masunosuke. All shishi died either on spot or later from wounds. Huber, “Men of High Purpose,” p.112.

⁴⁶ Hillsborough, p.75.

Zuizan from Tosa domain, who took the leading role in forming Tosa's loyalist party in 1862, which was illegal since the bakufu law banned forming parties.⁴⁷ This was a major step in that it showed the growth of shishi movement: it was strong enough to openly defy the law. The Tosa loyalist party's membership list contained 192 names signed in blood, which were not the only ones—later on more than three hundred people joined without signing.⁴⁸ The party's founding manifesto partially reads:

It is a source of deepest grief to our Mikado [emperor] that our magnificent and divine country has been humiliated by the barbarians and that the Spirit of Japan, which was transmitted from antiquity, is on the point of being extinguished. . . Our former lord [Yamauchi Yōdō], however, was deeply grieved by this, and talked and debated about it with those in power; instead of securing action, he was accused and punished. . . We now join our forces in this brotherhood to reactive the Japanese Spirit; we will let no personal interests stand in the way, and we will plan together to bring about the rebirth of our nation. We swear by our deities that if the Imperial Flag is once raised we will go through fire and water to ease the Emperor's mind, to carry out the will of our former lord, and to purge this evil from our people. . .⁴⁹

Any careful reader of Japan of this period would instantly recognize the pervasive Mito School rhetoric in this document: the unmistakable “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” thesis. Further, it admits that the party's most direct motivation was the members' indignation towards bakufu punishing their lord, and that they would not hesitate over adopting violent means. Also characteristic as a piece of samurai writing is the writer's clear animus and determination yet vague objectives. Grandiose wording such as “reactive the Japanese Spirit,”

⁴⁷ Jansen, Marius B. *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration*: Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1971. p.109.

⁴⁸ Hillsborough, p.47.

⁴⁹ Translation adopted Jansen, pp.108-109.

“ease the Emperor’s mind,” “purge this evil from our people” were effective at boosting the morale and enhancing the drama; however, conflicts often emerged when more pragmatic matters were considered. In other words, grand phrases made the movement easier for people to identify with, and thus to join, yet each individual’s understanding of it might have differed. One might well believe in its anti-bakufu undertone and a revolutionary indication, others could have joined out of simple negative emotions towards particular individuals. The vagueness unavoidably left room for personal interpretations, which applies to both shishi of the 1860s and historians of today.

In 1862, several members of the Tosa loyalist league, under Takechi Zuizan’s leadership, assassinated their new lord Yoshida Tōyō, who was hated for not endorsing the imperial loyalist course and was deemed as pro-bakufu. The murder was committed at a time when shishi from other domains—significantly Satsuma and Chōshū—were also fighting against their domain authorities and were on their way to Kyoto. It seemed to be a perfect timing for a national convergence of loyalists in the imperial city. It could be interpreted that the Tōyō was killed at this juncture because Tosa shishi wanted to contribute their force to Kyoto.⁵⁰ This would suggest the assassination as one of a systematic kind—that it was not an *end*, but a *means* to achieve something bigger. From this perspective, the growth of shishi as a budding oppositional terrorist force against the bakufu seemed conspicuous. However, the wooden signboard hanging next to Tōyō’s severed head did not pronounce him as a representative of corrupted bakufu or a defier to imperial loyalism; rather curiously, “the charges made no

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.118.

reference to national politics” and were limited to economic matters.⁵¹

But the overall atmosphere of extreme terror was undeniable: the chart above presents over seventy assassinations in just two years after 1862. Soon violence would become a commonplace to the extent of being normalized by people as a part of daily life. One biographer of Takechi describes this, saying that, “Even the dancing girls [*maiko*, the teenager version of geisha], frightened by the sound of the carp jumping from the ponds at night, would go together every morning, in their long-sleeved muslin kimonos, to see the freshly severed heads at the river bend.”⁵²

Unique to the Japanese case was the symbolism and melodrama the *shishi* violence incorporated, which effectively reinforced the threat they posed to the bakufu and aggravated the regime’s insecurity—regardless of whether the particular *shishi* was attacking the bakufu system as a whole or not. In early 1863, two bakufu officials who opposed the expulsion of barbarians were killed. For one of them, the “divine instruments” cut off his ears and sent them to two court nobles who were on the side of bakufu and asked them to resign within three days, which the two nobles did instantly; as for the other dead man, his arms were cut off and sent to their two compounds to make sure the two court nobles never reinstated themselves.⁵³ In another famous incident in February 1863, a band of loyalists went to the Tōji-in temple on the west side of Kyoto at night and beheaded the statues of three Ashikaga

⁵¹ Ibid., p.120; also see Hillsborough, pp.57-59.

⁵² As quoted in Hillsborough, p.60.

⁵³ Walthall, Anne. "Off with Their Heads! The Hirata Disciples and the Ashikaga Shoguns." *Monumenta Nipponica* 50, no. 2 (1995): 137-70. pp.152-153. See the statement accompanying one of the heads on p.153f, which in partial reads, “At the present time you are supposed to be expelling the barbarians and it is inexcusable that you are not opposing them...Although this head is extremely unsightly, we present it for your viewing pleasure as a token of the blood festival for expelling the barbarians.”

shogun. This time, the placard posted in front of the heads declares:

All the disloyal retainers since the Kamakura period ought to be investigated one by one and punished as they deserve. Since these three traitors did the worst evil, their vile statues have been visited with the vengeance of Heaven.⁵⁴

The second piece reads:

Today many people clearly surpass these traitors.... If they do not immediately repent these ancient evils and offer loyal service to expunge the evil customs existing since the Kamakura period and offer their assistance to the court . . . , then all the loyalists on earth will rise up together and punish them for their crimes.⁵⁵

What is of key importance in these bloodless decapitations is that the “Kamakura period” the shishi referred to is the period when Japan was ruled under the very first military government, dating back to the 12th century. The fact that these shishi had gone so far as to behead the founding fathers of bakufu is the strongest argument that their criticism had expanded to attacking the entire system of the military government. Scholars might still differ on whether these words, again grand and vague, can be considered as a call for revolution.⁵⁶ But as far as “terrorism” is concerned, the clear attack on the entire bakufu system is sufficient to distinguish these shishi from, for example, Ii Naosuke’s assassins—who used violence to “correct,” but not “destroy.”

3. The Transitional Years: The Waning of Shishi Terror

The years approaching the 1868 Meiji Restoration were marked by almost

⁵⁴ As quoted in *ibid.*, pp.157-158.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.158.

⁵⁶ For example, Walthall would argue that it is not. *Ibid.*, p.158.

inextricable complexity. What has been covered thus far is indeed a very small portion of what happened. Whatever the limitation, the previous discussion has demonstrated one core trait of shishi violence in this time period, which is the inconsistency of motives. Not only did shishi from various domains have differences and at times even antagonism with one another, but even shishi from the same loyalist party and under the same leadership, when they conducted their individual acts of “divine punishment,” had idiosyncratic goals. Their intentions—whether they wanted to merely use terror to pose threats and deterrence, or to correct what was wrong within the system, or to aspire to overthrow the bakufu—were not at all unified and did not follow one line of thought. Even though the terror was too real and too intense, even though they all held the same banner “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” overhead, individual shishi acts at bottom did not necessarily confirm with the overarching ideology they subscribed to.

With the violent tactics, shishi did bring a major success for the imperial course. For example, in early 1863 they persuaded the Court to create a new body that provided positions for sympathizers of imperial loyalism. In 1863 they also managed to secure an imperial sanction by which the Emperor formally required the bakufu to expel the barbarians. It appeared that the loyalist course was winning, but bakufu fought back. Generally speaking, after almost three years of shishi terror through direct action, bakufu had shored up its defense to the point that it got increasingly difficult for shishi to approach any important person on top.⁵⁷ More specifically, bakufu eventually formed their own specialized bands made of the

⁵⁷ Silke, Andrew. 1997. "Honour and expulsion: Terrorism in nineteenth-century Japan." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (4):58-81. 1997. p. 71.

“unaffiliated” samurai. As described by one historian, they were “instructed to mix and fraternise with the shishi—a tactic which produced some very valuable intelligence”; and eventually, bakufu, by deploying their own “unaffiliated” force, waged “a terrorist campaign against the shishi and their supporters, adopting the exact same tactics as the extremists.”⁵⁸

In the summer of 1863, the loyalists tried to start a coup d'état in Kyoto, but they suffered a major defeat, and this was followed by a sweeping of shishi in Kyoto—clearing several hundred of them out of the city.⁵⁹ After this most of them retreated to Chōshū. In other places, shishi—in many cases with local peasants joining the force—were losing ground too. The influence of the Tosa loyalist party rapidly faded away after Takechi Zuizan was arrested in late 1863 and later ordered to commit self-disembowelment.⁶⁰

The year 1863 also witnessed two major shishi revolts, one in Yamaga and one in Tajima; both were suppressed. In May 1864 a revolt started in Mito, calling for expulsion of barbarians, and soon developed into a civil war. This ended up in more than 400 loyalists being executed, 100 exiled, and countless more punished in other ways.⁶¹ Throughout these two years, more and more shishi sought refuge in Chōshū, where the domainal political environment was most welcoming to them. This created what Japanese historian Thomas Huber referred to as “shishi-in-exile.”⁶² Finally in August 1864, the shishi army of some three thousand from Chōshū marched again to Kyoto and tried to restore the imperial rule. This battle, commonly referred to as the “Forbidden Gate incident,” resulted in the Chōshū army’s

⁵⁸ Ibid., 74. The author also writes: “this development is also noteworthy as a good early example of state-sponsored terrorism.” p. 138, note 28.

⁵⁹ Beasley, W. G. *The Meiji restoration*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 1972. p.217.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.218, 437.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp.222-223.

⁶² Huber, “Men of High Purpose,” pp.115, 121.

total defeat brought by the bakufu militia with other domainal armies.⁶³ Some of the most active and famous shishi leaders either died during the fight or committed suicide. The remnant shishi force withdrew back to Chōshū.

The years 1863 and 1864 represent a transitional stage for shishi movement. As Beasley interprets it, the shishi extremists were “weakening.”⁶⁴ The slogan “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” gradually gave way to the new slogan “rich country, strong army.” The chief political method also shifted from individual direct action dominated by romanticism and randomness to carefully organized official action prioritizing pragmatism and political results.⁶⁵ The successive defeats in major military confrontations with the bakufu since 1863 made the loyalists realize that only a strong military force could bring about the Restoration they so intensely coveted, and the shishi violence supporting “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” died down with this realization.

⁶³ A very interesting and vivid first-person recount on the fight can be found in Walthall, Anne, and M. William Steele. *Politics and society in Japan's Meiji Restoration: a brief history with documents*. Boston, MA : Bedford/St. Martin's, Macmillan Learning, 2017. pp.99-103.

⁶⁴ Beasley, p.215.

⁶⁵ Huber, p.123.

Conclusion

In just four years of time after the Forbidden Gate Incident, Japan experienced possibly the most significant event of its modern history: the Meiji Restoration. It finally happened when, after major reforms and military enhancement, samurai from two domains—Chōshū and Satsuma—joined hands, together with large number of peasant soldiers (who had been banned by bakufu from carrying arms for 250 years), marched for the last time to Kyoto in December 1867 and seized control of the imperial palace successfully. In January 1868, in an almost effortless manner, Emperor Meiji was announced as being “restored,” and bakufu, the military government, was abolished once for all. The new Meiji government would eliminate the old four-strata system that had for centuries regulated the Japanese people’s occupation, clothing, manner, even marriage; a strong Home Ministry would uphold the principle of meritocracy rather than heredity; a constitution would be written; and Japan would essentially transform into a centralized modern nation-state.

The shishi who endorsed terror and direct action in the “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” movement did not bring about these profound changes, though they were doubtless a major contributor to Tokugawa bakufu’s ultimate downfall. However, when appearing in studies of the Meiji Restoration, their significance is commonly limited to being a mere “contributor.” The few years of shishi terror sped up the arrival of the Meiji Restoration, but, in Beasley’s words, “they were men who were ‘against’ things, not ‘for’ them; men who destroyed, rather than built; men who would spend lives recklessly including their own, but not make governments. They lacked organization, recognized too many ‘leaders,’ preferred slogans

to policy.”¹ And for all these reasons, the shishi’s course was almost doomed to fail. However, these same reasons have made shishi an extraordinarily exciting subject in the study of terrorism.

From Ōshio’s Uprising in 1837 to the Forbidden Gate Incident in 1864, there existed some clear linear development and uniformity. For example, the nascent nostalgia for direct imperial rule that appeared in Ōshio’s *Summons* developed into Shōin’s assertive advocacy that the emperor was the only legit ruler of Japan, which evolved into shishi of 1860s’ declaration of “revere the emperor.” Also, the ending sentence in the *Summons*— “answering the divine calling, meting out the divine punishment” is almost identical to the justification claimed by shishi in the 1860s for their assassinations. Throughout these decades, bakufu and shishi were indeed “entangled” together. As presented in the case of Shōin and Ii Naosuke, one side’s hero was often the other side’s villain—each side denounced the other as traitor, each had in mind the most promising blueprints for Japan—and both were the advocates and victims of political violence. By 1863, bakufu formed their own “unaffiliated samurai” army and started to attack shishi systematically. In no case came terror only from one side.

However, for other questions, we must prepare to accept the complexity of these events and to admit that there are no unified answers. Regarding whether violence was the shishi’s first or last option, evidence supporting both have been found. From the case of Ōshio and Shōin, one can observe how the two were, bit by bit, pushed across the threshold from nonviolence to violence. Violence was for them the last resort. However, in the later cases

¹ Beasley, W. G. *The Meiji restoration*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 1972. p. 225.

of headhunting, it would be reasonable to conclude that the shishi might have chosen violence because it was more appealing than other available options. This may be due to several possible reasons. First, it could be explained by the change of political atmosphere. After the conclusion of treaties in 1858, Japan entered a period of political vulnerability. The instability of the social environment could have easily encouraged unconventional responses to political currents. Second, the successful, and seemingly easy, assassination of the regime's most powerful person, Ii Naosuke, might have encouraged other shishi to embrace the tactic of direct action. Third, the romanticism shishi assigned on themselves—to aspire to “action of purity,” to be willing to fight then die rather than to live cowardly, to be true to the heart, to devote oneself completely to the “ultimate moral truth,” to answer the divine calling—certainly in many cases made direct action more appealing. And fourth, because most shishi were samurai from the middle to lower ranks, their access and opportunity to participate in domainal or national politics was very much limited. That is to say, direct action might have been more appealing because it was “convenient.”

Another question inquires into the shishi's motives. This is the question aiming to figure out whether the shishi were mere assassins who hated certain officials but supported the bakufu-domain system or that they were terrorists who believed the whole system was corrupted and bakufu must be overthrown. As expounded in the beginning, attention should be paid to this seeming nuance because it could potentially induce hugely different outcomes. Since the terrorists consider the entire system as already corrupted, most of them would recognize that, as Grob-Fitzgibbon argues, “some civilian casualties or deaths are an unavoidable, and acceptable, price to pay for the Cause;” the aim of terrorism is “to create as

much damage and instill as much fear as possible.”² Therefore, terrorism is much more dangerous to civilian society at large in that it could be continuous and totally random; whereas assassins would have specific targets.

However, the Japanese case provides us a more complicated scenario. First of all, the terror accompanied the “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” movement is a rare case where three, not two, parties were involved. Beside the violent entanglement between shishi and bakufu, another dynamic interaction existed between shishi and the foreigners, who in the eyes of shishi represented not particular regimes, but “the Other” at large. As outsiders, the Westerners and their culture were perceived as menace to the sacred Japanese Spirit and national pride, therefore it must be rid of. Different first-person recounts from foreigners who lived through that time vividly demonstrate the intensity of violence, the insecurity, and the mistrust infiltrated in the society. In shishi’s dealing with the foreigners, they had their eyes fixed on particular individuals—for example Heusken—who held important positions in the process of treaty negotiations. At the same time, they did not seem to refrain from limiting the assaults to only people with power. The rumors about a “massacre” at Yokohama could be a strong example to this point. Indeed, foreigners like Rutherford Alcock who lived in Japan at the time did not hesitate at all in calling the shishi “terrorists.” And many historians would agree too: in one study of shishi violence the author writes that, “assassination was a common violent tactic of the shishi, wielded against foreigners and those fellow countrymen viewed as kowtowing to the demands and presence of Westerners on Japanese soil. Historians have often

² As quoted in Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin. "From the Dagger to the Bomb: Karl Heinzen and the Evolution of Political Terror." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 16, no. 1 (2004): 97. pp. 111-112.

described these assassinations as acts of terrorism.”³ Nevertheless, if we consider the fact that the shishi’s violence was directed solely on foreigners *within* Japan—although foreign civilians were included—for the purpose of *protecting* the Japanese system, the shishi cannot so simply be concluded as terrorists since they were not condemning either regime. Moreover, the necessary “violent entanglement” between the two sides in the making of terrorism also suffers a degree of loss here in that the foreigners did not particularly fight back against the shishi violence; instead, they would protest to bakufu and ask for indemnities.

Second, in analyzing shishi’s violence against bakufu, one challenging task kept recurring: there appears a disjuncture between a political group’s overarching ideology and its members’ individual motives in specific acts of violence. The conclusion of whether shishi were terrorists vacillates as one shifts his focus between the “phenomenon” and the “item,” between the “group” and the “individual,” between the “top” and the “bottom.” For example, on top, prominent leaders like Yoshida Shōin and the slogan “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” itself advocated for direct imperial rule, which would mean to terminate bakufu’s right to rule. However, at bottom, shishi’s “statements of purpose” written at specific acts of terror constantly presented them as assassins, not terrorists—they denounced their targets as “traitors” while expressing their faith in the rest of the bakufu. This suggests that, even when the guiding ideology the insurgent group subscribes to is clearly questioning the regime’s right to rule, even when their approval of violence is unmistakable, even when they seem to enjoy eliciting fear, still, when one pulls closer and analyzes individual’s acts of terror, he might still

³ Siniawer, Eiko Maruko. *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists : The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860-1960*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. p. 13.

discover just an assassin—who poses no threat to civilian society. The dancing girls who went to the river bank every morning to see the display of human heads is one strong example proving that the shishi terror was not pervasive among the commoners.

The explanation to this disjuncture may be attempted if one considers the grand but vague wording the shishi often used. Phrases like “Japanese Spirit,” “ease the emperor’s mind,” “punish evils,” not to mention the slogan “revere the emperor” itself, sound grandiose but elusive, which indicates room for personal interpretations. Therefore, how much the “authentic” essence of the overarching shishi ideology on top was absorbed and internalized by individual actors from below also deserves our attention when trying to define a group as terrorists or not.

Also curious of the Japanese case is the distinctive “shishi style” of violence. The hacking of the foreigners, the headhunting and ear-cutting, and the public displaying of these deeds are all unique in Japan. By calling their assassinations as “divine punishment,” the shishi in the 1860s attached to their violence a metaphysical inflation, which proved to be particularly effective in causing fear and insecurity. However, such fear and insecurity were relatively confined within the circle of bakufu officials. Again, the dancing girls who would join hands and went to the river bank to see the freshly displayed human heads proves that normal civilians were not being so much influenced by the shishi terror, as they understood they were not to be targeted. From this perspective, it suggested that shishi, though extremely violent, were somewhat “predictable,” which is not a common trait of terrorists. Finally, to end with David Rapoport’s words: “assassination is an incident, a passing deed, an event; terrorism is a process,

a way of life, a dedication.”⁴ And in the case of the nineteenth century Japanese shishi, we have experienced both.

⁴ As quoted in Grob-Fitzgibbon, p. 98.

Glossary

Bakufu: military government, also referred to as shogunate

Tokugawa: Tokugawa is the family name of military family who was in control of the bakufu.

Shōgun: generalissimo, head of bakufu

Daimyō: domain lord

Samurai: warrior

Bushido: literally “the way of samurai,” a set of moral codes for samurai

Palanquin: or “sedan chair.” It is a form of transport.

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