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作成者（著者）	HAUK, Alan
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## Saigo's Statue

Alan HAUK

### Abstract

This paper examines the history of Saigo Takamori's role in the Meiji Restoration and his subsequent rebellion against the same Meiji government that he had helped to create. The first part of this paper looks at the part he played in overthrowing the old Tokugawa regime and the creation of the new government under Emperor Meiji. The paper then discusses the Meiji government policies that Saigo disagreed with because he thought they went too far in the push for modernization. His disagreements with the Meiji leadership culminated in the Korean crisis, which convinced Saigo to resign from the government and return to his home in Kagoshima. This paper then turns to the economic and social reforms that turned Japan into a modern state but also hurt and then eliminated the samurai as a class. These reforms were the precipitating cause of the Satsuma Rebellion, in which Saigo led an army with the intention of marching to Tokyo to make a direct appeal to the emperor on behalf of the Japanese people. The paper then examines the events of the Satsuma Rebellion and the causes for its defeat. Finally, the paper looks at Saigo's legacy and the reasons for his continuing popularity. The paper concludes that Saigo's popularity is a result of the Japanese liking for tragic heroes who sacrifice themselves for a worthy cause.

### 1. Introduction

Just about every Japanese person is familiar with the statue of Saigo Takamori in Ueno Park. The statue shows Saigo san, as he is called today, wearing a casual kimono and walking his dog. The image from the statue's face is often used in Japanese advertising and media, and everyone recognizes it as Saigo without his name ever being mentioned. He is probably the most famous figure from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which was when the old feudal regime led by the Tokugawa clan was overthrown and a new national government was formed with the emperor as its head of state.

However, perhaps not so many people know what Saigo did or the real story behind his statue. Saigo was a crucial figure in establishing the new Meiji government, but he also opposed many of the policies of the Meiji Government and later came out in open rebellion against the very government he helped to create. Called the Satsuma Rebellion in English and the Southwest War (Seinan Sensou) in Japanese, this rebellion marked a turning point in the history of Japan because, with its suppression, the leaders

of Japan could concentrate on modernization and foreign relations without worrying about internal crises.

The Satsuma Rebellion was the most serious crisis faced by the Meiji government. In the end, Saigo and his followers were killed by government forces in a last stand outside of Kagoshima. It might seem strange that one of the founders of a new government would turn against it and become its enemy, but this is actually not so rare. Some of the early leaders of the Russian, French, and Chinese revolutions also turned against and were killed by the revolutions they started when they thought those revolutions had gone off course. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French journalist Mallet du Pan is famous for saying, "The Revolution devours its children" (Kennedy 113). He was talking about how the early organizers of the French revolution ended up being killed by the revolution they helped spawn. Today, however, historians often use this quote to characterize not just the French revolution but revolutions in general.

What makes Saigo's case unique is that the same government that killed him turned him into a national hero and erected a statue to honor him just a few years after his death. To non-Japanese, this might seem like a strange thing to do. Saigo was an enemy of the state and rebelled against it. Understanding the reasons why Saigo was given a statue is important for understanding the history of the Meiji period. And to understand the statue, it is important to go back and look at Saigo's story: how he helped overthrow the Tokugawa regime and form the new Meiji government, how he later came to oppose the government he had helped create, and finally how Saigo's legacy forced the government to transform him from an enemy into a hero.

## 2. Saigo's Role in the Meiji Restoration

Saigo first rose to national prominence because of his role in overthrowing the Tokugawa regime and in implementing the early reforms of the Meiji Restoration. The Tokugawa clan, which had ruled Japan since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, had enforced a policy of strict isolation from the rest of the world as a way to maintain internal stability. However, when western countries broke through Japan's isolation in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the legitimacy of the Tokugawa regime was put in doubt. The leaders of several domains from the southwest part of Japan, mainly Choshu, Satsuma (where Saigo was from), and Tosa, decided that the Tokugawa regime was no longer capable of ruling the country. They formed a coalition army with Saigo as its leader and defeated the Tokugawa forces in what was called the Boshin War, which lasted from 1867 to 1869 ("Boshin War"). In 1868, even before the Boshin War was completely over, the young Emperor Mutsuhito was installed as the new ruler of Japan in what was known as the Meiji Restoration ("Emperor Meiji"). After the defeat of the Tokugawa government, the victors then had to decide what form the new government would take.

The new leaders of the Meiji government agreed that a strong central government

was necessary to protect Japan from foreign expansion and help it become a world power. Therefore, they implemented a series of reforms to replace the fragmented, feudal system of government with a modern, centralized system. The first reform was the Charter Oath of April 1868, which was, according to the historian Marius Jansen, designed to gain support of the feudal lords, the daimyo, by promising them a voice in the new government (337-340). This was followed in 1869 by the hansei houkan, the "return of the registers," when the lords of Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen gave their lands back to the emperor in return for being made governors, with large salaries, of their old territories (Jansen 345-6). This was only the first step towards centralization, and the new government was very weak at first since it only controlled a few domains.

Convincing the lords of other domains to give up their power to the Meiji government was more difficult. According to historian Mark Ravina, some lords ignored the central government, and there was some concern of an uprising against the new government. This concern was heightened when a group of samurai from Choshu, unhappy with the new government, staged a rebellion (166-7). The Meiji leaders realized that they needed Saigo's help to make a strong central government, so in 1870 they asked Saigo to lead their new national army (Jansen 347). They also convinced Saigo to lend his moral support to the elimination of all of the feudal domains and the daimyo class, which they believed was necessary for Japan to modernize (Ravina 168-70). In August of 1871, the 300 feudal domains were abolished and replaced by 50 prefectures in what was known as the *haihan chiken*, the "dissolution of domains." The feudal lords were replaced with governors, usually from other parts of Japan (Jansen 348-9). This transition was able to go smoothly in large part because of Saigo's presence. No one wanted to oppose Saigo, especially since he controlled the army that would put down any possible opposition (Ravina 168-9). Saigo's prestige was so great that his support for the new government convinced the daimyo to submit to the new reforms without a fight.

By late 1871, the Meiji government was strong and centralized, but it had not yet finished transforming itself into a modern state. The leaders wanted to find the best form of new government and society, so they sent their main leaders, including future Prime Minister Okubo Toshimichi, on a trip known as the Iwakura mission to study the political, economic, and educational systems of other countries. The leaders who stayed behind were known as the Caretaker Government and included Saigo and Okuma Shigenobu (Ravina 172-5, Jansen 361), the future founder of Waseda University.

### 3. Saigo's Disagreements with the Government

While half of the leaders of Japan were overseas on the Iwakura mission, the leadership back in Japan started to split. Saigo was critical of some of the policies of the new government because he felt that they went too far. He felt guilty about his support for the abolition of the domains because he thought it was a betrayal of his old feudal

lord Shimazu Hisamitsu, who had been the daimyo of Satsuma (Ravina 170-1). He also wanted to do more to help the samurai class that was being squeezed by the government's new financial reforms (Jansen 362) and he felt that the new economic reforms were bad for the peasants and would increase their economic burdens (Ravina 200). Saigo was not a good peacetime bureaucrat and did not like the discord that came with being in government (Ravina 175). However, Saigo's biggest conflict with the other government leaders was over how to handle the breakdown in relations with Korea.

The Korean crisis was the new government's first big foreign policy challenge. Korea had for many years traded and had diplomatic contact with Japan through the lord of Tsushima. However, when a governor replaced the lord of Tsushima in 1871, this trade stopped. When Japan sent envoys to try to negotiate a treaty with Korea, the Korean government refused to recognize the Meiji government and would not establish diplomatic relations or trade. They claimed that the Meiji government was an illegitimate usurper of power (Jansen 362-3). Okubo and the Iwakura mission returned to Japan to deal with the situation (Jansen 361).

Saigo and Okubo disagreed strongly over how to handle the Korean crisis. Saigo and many others were angry at Korea and wanted to threaten it. Saigo asked the government to send him to Korea as a special envoy. His purpose was to negotiate a treaty, even though, or perhaps because, there was a danger of assassination from Korean nationalists. Saigo believed that his assassination would provide Japan with an excuse for war with Korea, which would have the benefit of helping to unify Japan and speeding up modernization (Jansen 363-4). Okubo, however, believed that Japan could not afford a foreign war yet and was worried that Russia might intervene if Japan attacked Korea (Ravina 187-8). Saigo was given permission to undertake a treaty mission to Korea, but Okubo maneuvered to have it cancelled. Saigo was so disgusted by Okubo's refusing to protect Japan's honor, no matter how practical the reason, that he resigned from the government and returned to his home in Kagoshima (Ravina 188-9). Other government leaders who supported Saigo also resigned, leaving the Okubo faction in control of the government (Ravina 189). The way was now clear for Okubo to continue his modernization reforms without interference from Saigo.

#### 4. Meiji Economic and Social Reforms

The Meiji Restoration should really be called a revolution since it involved the overthrow of one regime and its replacement with another. However, it was different from other revolutions in that the people at the top of society, the samurai, carried it out without much participation from the lower classes. The leaders who overthrew the Tokugawa government, especially Saigo, believed strongly in samurai values. Ironically, however, most of the samurai ended up being hurt by the changes brought about by the Meiji Restoration (Jansen 367).

The problem for the new Meiji government and the reason for the social reforms that hurt the samurai class was money. During the Tokugawa period, the local lords taxed their peasants in units of rice called koku, and then paid the samurai under them in fixed stipends of rice (Hunter 83-4). The samurai owed their loyalty to their local lords, not to a national government. When the feudal domains were abolished in 1871, the Meiji government became responsible for paying the samurais' stipends (Ravina 174, Jansen 368). The Meiji government needed a lot of money in order to modernize as quickly as possible. However, according to Mark Ravina, paying the samurai cost the government over half of its budget, and they could not afford to pay for both the samurai and their modernization projects (174).

The government, therefore, undertook several measures to reduce the payments it made to the samurai. First, it examined the lists of the samurai and reclassified many of the lower-level ones as commoners, who would get no stipends at all (Jansen 368). Then it sharply reduced the stipends to samurai from the old Tokugawa domains (Jansen 368). This still left too many samurai who were receiving money, so in 1874 the government started a plan in which samurai could trade their stipends for a one-time payment of government bonds (Ravina 174, Jansen 368). However, these bonds did not provide enough money to live on, so most samurai did not want to take them. Not enough samurai voluntarily gave up their stipends, so in 1876 the government made it mandatory. Samurai were encouraged to use the money from their bonds to go into business, but samurai traditionally had no business training or aptitude and most soon lost everything (Jansen 368). In general, the samurai from the old Tokugawa lands did not complain about their treatment since, being on the losing side in the war, they expected that their situations would become worse. The samurai from the winning side, however, had expected to be rewarded for their help in the war (Jansen 368). The samurai who had helped defeat the Tokugawa government and establish the new Meiji government unexpectedly found themselves broke and unable to make a living, which made them very dissatisfied with the Meiji government.

The peasants also suffered from the reforms of the early Meiji period. The tax reform of 1873 changed the system so that rather than paying their taxes as a portion of their rice crop, the peasants had to pay a tax to the central government of 3% of the value of their land. Moreover, this tax had to be paid in cash rather than in rice (Jansen 366). Under the old Tokugawa system, local lords often knew the peasants' conditions and could offer some relief from the tax burden during hard times. Under the new system, however, the amount of tax remained the same whether the harvest was good or bad. Many peasants were unable pay the tax and ended up losing their land to moneylenders (Anderson 36-8). As a result, in the first few years of the Meiji period there were numerous revolts from peasants protesting the new system, and the government put these revolts down strongly with military force (Jansen 366-7). Thus, the peasants suffered as much as the samurai under the government's reforms.

In addition to the economic reforms, two social reforms in Meiji Japan hurt the samurai. The first big change was the Conscription Law of 1873. Traditionally, the samurai were the warrior class of Japan. As Marius Jansen's research shows, however, many of the leaders of the government believed that samurai were unsuited to a modern army. They lacked the discipline and teamwork necessary for modern military tactics. Therefore, the government decided that the army should be made up of peasant conscripts, who would be better at taking orders. This would help modernize the army on western lines (Jansen 367-8). Most of the samurai were unfit for any work besides the military, so, suddenly, the one job that the samurai were capable of doing was taken over by peasants, making their economic situation even worse.

The other big social reform affecting the samurai was the 1876 law banning the wearing of swords in public (Rickman, Ravina 198). This, along with conscription of peasants into the military, robbed the samurai of their former prestige and status. With their jobs, stipends, and symbols now all gone, the samurai class no longer had any meaning or reason for existence. These were the reforms that bothered Saigo and made him think that modernization was going too quickly.

### 5. The Satsuma Rebellion

After Saigo resigned from the government, he retired from politics and moved back to Kagoshima (formerly called Satsuma), where he established 132 schools, shigakko, to teach military training, Confucian philosophy, and foreign language. One of his purposes in establishing these schools was to give jobs as teachers to many of the military officers who had resigned with him (Ravina 193). These schools and the situation in Kagoshima made the government very nervous. The schools were very militaristic and pro-samurai. Many unhappy samurai were attracted to these schools, and they all looked upon Saigo as their savior. In addition, Kagoshima was a center for weapons production and importation (Rickman). This combination of elements must have been very worrying for the government, especially in light of unrest elsewhere in Japan.

Samurai in other prefectures had already rebelled against the new government's policies. In 1873, Eto Shimpei, who had been in the government and resigned at the same time as Saigo, rebelled in Saga in protest of the Korea policy, and in 1876, two rebellions, one by former government leader Maebara in Choshu and another rebellion in Kumamoto had to be put down (Jansen 369). Then, just as the government feared, the samurai in Satsuma rebelled as well.

The event that sparked off the Satsuma rebellion was on January 30, 1877, when the government sent a ship to remove weapons from a government arsenal in the city of Kagoshima. Samurai there, including many of Saigo's students, became alarmed that the government was going to attack them, so they broke into the armory and took the weapons before the government troops could (Rickman). Saigo had been away hunting while this was going on and so had no part in the start of the rebellion

(Ravina 201). The legend has it that Saigo did not approve of the uprising and only joined it reluctantly. However, according to Mark Ravina, Saigo had already expected the government to betray him and decided that the only recourse was to fight (201). Saigo left Kagoshima on February 17, 1877, at the head of an army of 12,000 men. He declared that he was not rebelling but was marching to Tokyo to petition the emperor to help the people of Japan. To show his loyalty to the emperor, he wore his old military uniform (Rickman, Jansen 369).

Uncharacteristically, Saigo did not prepare well for his rebellion. Since Kagoshima was a center for arms production and importation, his men were armed with the most modern weapons and cannon. However, they did not prepare any means to resupply themselves, and simply depended on what each soldier could carry. The government troops, on the other hand, were able to keep themselves resupplied throughout the rebellion (Ravina 201-2). One of the myths of the Satsuma Rebellion was that Saigo's forces chose to fight with swords against the government forces' guns because that was part of the samurai tradition. However, the real truth is that at the beginning of the rebellion, Saigo's samurai fought with modern weapons and wore modern uniforms. As the rebellion went on, the rebels could not get more ammunition when it ran out and had no choice but to fight with their swords (Ravina 3, 208). This is where the romantic myth of traditional samurai swords and values against modern guns comes from.

The rebel army had intended to march to Tokyo, but in the end never got even close. On February 21, Saigo found his way blocked by the government army at Kumamoto Castle. The rebels and the government troops fought several battles in the Kumamoto area, with the biggest battle being the Battle of Tabarazuka on March 3 (Rickman). Neither side was able to gain a decisive victory on the battlefield, but the government forces were able to replace their losses while Saigo could not. On April 14, Saigo realized that he could not win and retreated east, towards Miyazaki. As the rebellion dragged on, the government forces got stronger and Saigo's got weaker (Rickman). However, even with this advantage, the rebellion was a critical crisis for the government. They absolutely had to defeat Saigo or the new central government would fail. The government's army was mainly made up of peasant conscripts, but by the end these were not enough and the government had to use police and ask for former samurai from other prefectures to help them (Jansen 369). Even with all of their advantages, the government felt nervous about fighting Saigo, which is understandable considering his reputation.

After retreating from Kumamoto, Saigo didn't seem to have a definite plan, and he no longer seemed to think he could win. He led his army all over southern Kyushu trying to avoid the government armies. He was finally surrounded on Mt. Shiroyama near Kagoshima with the last 500 of his men. On September 24th, the government army made its final assault. Saigo was badly injured in the attack—too injured to



commit suicide in the traditional samurai fashion—so his follower, Beppu Shinsuke, cut off his head and hid it (Rickman). Seven months after it began, the Satsuma Rebellion was over.

### 6. Legacy of the Satsuma Rebellion

The defeat of the Satsuma rebellion removed the last internal threat to the Meiji government and also seemed to prove that an army of peasant conscripts trained in modern methods could beat an army of samurai. However, the main reasons that the rebellion failed were that it lacked focus and did not coordinate with other rebellions. There were other samurai rebellions at about the same time and many peasant rebellions also broke out in Kyushu as well, but there was no attempt to get them to join up (Ravina 202-5, Jansen 369-70). This also showed Saigo's lack of planning.

Unfortunately for the government, Saigo was still a threat to the government after his death. The government went on a campaign to brand Saigo as a traitor, but it didn't work. He became a focus for anti-government sentiment wherever people were unhappy with the new reforms. Rumors that Saigo was not really dead but had escaped overseas became popular (Ravina 7). The historian Ian Buruma attributes Saigo's popularity to a Japanese liking for "reactionary rebels" (40). This can be seen in the popularity of other famous figures who also rebelled against what they thought were unjust government policies, even though they were certain to lose. Oshio Heihachiro, who led a rebellion in Osaka in 1837 to try to seize food for starving people after a bad harvest (Papinot 495) is another prime example of a rebel fighting for a just and moral cause. Like Saigo, he is still a popular and admired figure today.

Finally, the government decided that to combat some of the anti-government sentiment that surrounded the cult of Saigo, they should make him part of the government again. On February 22, 1889, Saigo was officially pardoned by the government, restored to court rank, and declared a patriotic hero (Ravina 7-11). This was the government's way of trying to use Saigo's celebrity in the hopes of becoming more popular with the people.

### 7. Saigo's Statue

The final twist in the story of Saigo is related to his statue. In December of 1898, Saigo's famous statue, showing him wearing a casual kimono and walking his dog, was unveiled in Ueno Park ("Saigo Takamori"). Saigo's widow was present at the ceremony but apparently was not pleased with the statue because she had, "never seen him so poorly dressed" (Downer 547). However, Saigo was well known for preferring plain kimono over fancy clothes (Ravina 6), so perhaps the casual clothing of his statue was appropriate for him.

The statue, made by the sculptor Takamura Koun ("Takamura Koun"), is so well known in Japan that any Japanese person who sees the face of the statue recognizes it

as Saigo's. However, Takamura Koun had a problem when it came to sculpting the face. The statue was made after Saigo's death, and no photographs of Saigo existed. There is a photo, called the Verbeck photo, showing a gathering of samurai in Saga that features a large, forceful-looking samurai who some people think might be Saigo in the middle of the group, but there is no proof of who the person in the photo really is (Takahashi). To model the face of the statue, Takamura Koun used an official portrait of Saigo. The portrait had been painted by the Italian artist Edoardo Chiossone in 1883—six years after Saigo's death. For the painting, the artist used Saigo's brother and cousin as models, blending elements of their features to create the likeness (Beretta). Thus, ironically, the face of the statue in Ueno Park is not really Saigo's face but is nevertheless the best-known face of all the Meiji leaders.

## 8. Conclusion

Saigo Takamori is today considered one of Japan's greatest heroes. He may have been militarily defeated in the Satsuma Rebellion, but his continuing popularity represents a moral victory over the government that killed him. Like many other legendary Japanese heroes such as Oshio Heihachiro or Oishi Kuranosuke, Saigo fought knowing that he would die but that his honor required that he fight anyways. This represents the Japanese attraction for those who sacrifice themselves for a noble cause. Saigo rebelled, not to try to undo the Meiji Restoration, but to protest the parts of it that were hurting the people. In particular, he wanted to bring attention to the problems faced by the samurai class, who had defeated the Tokugawa regime only to be pushed aside once the revolution was over. The people recognized that he cared about them, while the unfeeling Meiji government was concerned only about modernizing as quickly as possible, no matter how much pain and suffering it caused.

Yet not all of Saigo's ideas were benevolent. He advocated a war with Korea even though such a war would have been potentially disastrous for Japan in terms of lives, monetary cost, and the danger of Russian intervention. Looked at objectively, Okubo's pragmatic approach of not provoking Korea while Japan was still weak was by far the more logical decision. But Saigo did not care about the danger to Japan of a foreign war. He believed that defending the honor of Japan from the Korean insult was more important than the consequences of a war. He was even willing to die in order to provoke a war with Korea, bringing up the possibility that he possessed a death wish that was later fulfilled when he rebelled against the government.

Still, Saigo's sincerity and loyalty to Japan is not in question. He represented the old, traditional spirit of Japan at a time when the government was seen as turning away from Japanese values. He was the model of the best aspects of the samurai spirit, and that, probably, is the source of his popularity.

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