Sakamoto Ryoma

For the column 'History: Japanese Destinies'



Figure 1 – Statue of Sakamto Ryoma in Kazagashira Park, Nagasaki

Although Sakamoto Ryoma's name is familiar to Japanese people, Western historians' work on him remains scattered and mostly dates back several decades. Yet throughout Japan's history he has repeatedly been invoked as a key figure of national unity and still brings people together across political divides. As with any figure at the centre of a national narrative, however, controversy still rages among Japanese historians over his actual role in the pivotal moments associated with him. This article is therefore intended as a very brief introduction to the figure and Japanese perceptions of him, but his involvement in the events described below should be treated with caution.

Sakamoto Ryoma was born in January 1836 in Tosa Province (present-day Kochi Prefecture) into a wealthy merchant family elevated to the rank of goshi (low-ranking samurai). The Sakamoto family's prosperity did not prevent him, like others of his social background, from harbouring mistrust of the shogunate and upper classes, which still exercised strong social control over lower ranks. Moreover, raised in the Confucian tradition and respect for the emperor, Sakamoto saw the shogunate's impotence, and to some extent collusion, in the face of increasingly intrusive foreign powers as a betrayal of the Japanese nation. Sent to Edo in 1853 to perfect his weapons training at the Chiba Sadakichi school, the tensions caused by the first encounter with Perry that year strengthened his mistrust of both Westerners and the shogunate. Barely a year later, when the shogunate signed the Kanagawa agreements under Perry's influence[1], he gradually drew closer to the pro-imperial, anti-shogunal Sonno Joi (尊王攘夷) movement[2]. Deeply involved in its local branch in his home province, he was inspired by the Shishi ideal originating in Mito Province, distinguished by vigorous criticism of Bakufu foreign policy, including violent action. In 1860, its activists assassinated a senior Bakufu dignitary who had authorised foreign access to Japanese ports. A year later, in October 1861, Sakamoto helped form the Loyalist Party under a local leader, Takechi Zuizan. He also made his first journey to Choshu in 1862, where criticism of the shogunate was growing as the bakufu tightened its grip on what it saw as a troublesome rival. However, as shogunal repression of the Shishi intensified, he fled Tosa to continue his struggle in Satsuma in 1864. During the two preceding years, he had befriended Katsu Kaishu, a senior shogunal official whom, according to a frequently repeated but poorly established anecdote, he initially approached with hostility before warming to him and being taken under his wing. Convinced by Kaishu of the value of European military technologies, even for his own insurrectionary project, he helped found Kameyama Shachu (better known as Kaientai), a private trading company playing a key role in acquiring and selling weapons, particularly European and American ones. Meanwhile, his closeness to influential figures in Choshu and Satsuma, the country's richest and most influential provinces outside Edo, made him an ideal intermediary. Although Satsuma initially cooperated with the Bakufu, the latter's lack of recognition and obsession with suppressing any threat to central power pushed it into alliance with Choshu. It is the prominent role

1. The Convention of Kanagawa (1854) ended the isolation policy (sakoku) by opening two ports for provisioning foreign ships and establishing diplomatic relations. Strictly speaking, the treaties truly described as 'unequal', involving extraterritoriality and unilaterally imposed tariffs, were the Ansei treaties of 1858, signed notably under Ii Naosuke's authority. The Convention of Kanagawa nevertheless directly paved the way for them.

2. Sonno Joi, 'Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians', was a particularly influential political movement, mainly supported by low-ranking samurai (and some more senior dignitaries from provinces at odds with the shogunate). It sought to return the emperor to the centre of power and fiercely criticised shogunal inaction and complacency towards Western pressure, of which the Convention of Kanagawa was among the most striking symbols.

allegedly played by Sakamoto in this alliance, which brought down the Bakufu and restored the emperor in 1868, that still secures his special place in Japan's national narrative and people's hearts. Progressive at times and a seasoned campaigner for Japanese renewal, Sakamoto nevertheless never saw the Meiji era begin: he was assassinated in 1867, nearly two years after the agreement that made his reputation, probably by members of the Mimawarigumi, another pro-shogunal militia long confused with the initially suspected Shinsengumi.

Despite the controversies, he thus remains, for Japanese people, the embodiment of a patriotic, forward-looking youth working for national unity amid the world's great transformations.

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