

Lost in History: Aizu and the Meiji Restoration

John E. Van Sant

University of Alabama-Birmingham

On a hillside overlooking Gold Trail Elementary School in an area of Coloma, California, known as Gold Hill, there is a solitary grave of a young woman who died nearly 130 years ago. One side of the headstone reads, "In Memory of OKEI, Died 1871. Aged 19 years. (A Japanese Girl)." The other side is written in Japanese: [*nihon kokoku meiji shinen, gappi bossu, OKEI no haka, gyonen jukyusai*]

Okei was a member of what is known as the Wakamatsu Colony; a group of more than twenty Japanese who arrived in northern California in the summer of 1869. Lasting for two years, the Wakamatsu colonists built a tea and silk farm which was initially successful but ultimately failed due to a lack of water and a lack of money. Most of the colonists then left the area, and the fates of only three are known in any detail. Okei was one of three Japanese who remained in Coloma.¹ Tragically, she died – perhaps from malaria – soon after the breakup of the colony.

As the Wakamatsu Colony existed two decades before Japanese immigration to the United States was even a trickle, why did this group of Japanese leave their familiar home in Aizu and embark on a perilous journey overseas?² The

short answer is that they were from Wakamatsu, the castle town of Aizu domain, and were subjects of Aizu's daimyo, Matsudaira Katamori—a prominent opponent of the Satsuma and Choshu-led movement that ultimately overthrew the shogun and the bakufu government. The Wakamatsu colonists were on the losing side of the Meiji Restoration; and like many people who end up on the losing side of political upheaval, they left their country as refugees in search of a new life.

This paper does not directly explore the issue of how these early Japanese immigrants struggled to survive in a strange land.³ It explores the issue of why they fled Japan for a strange land. Moreover, this paper challenges Japan's national narrative, a narrative that asserts a relatively peaceful transfer of power from the Tokugawa bakufu to the samurai leaders from Satsuma and Choshu who claimed their *tōbaku* (anti-bakufu) movement in the name of the Emperor.

Matsudaira Katamori, Aizu and Civil War

When United States Navy Commodore Matthew Perry and his fleet of "black ships" appeared in Uruga Bay near Edo in 1853, Japan was thrown into a state of confusion about how to deal with the threat from the West. Two and a

¹Sakurai Matsunosuke worked as a farmhand and lived the remainder of his life in Coloma, where he died and was buried in 1901. It was Sakurai who had the headstone made for Okei's grave. Masumizu Kuninosuke lived in Coloma for more than ten years before moving to Sacramento, and then on to Colusa where he died in 1915. While in Coloma, Masumizu married Carrie Wilson, a woman of Indian and African-American descent, and they had at least three children who survived infancy. Masumizu's descendants are the only known descendants of the Japanese who left Aizu and came to California as part of the Wakamatsu Colony. See Note 4 for sources on the Wakamatsu Colony.

²According to Ninth Census of the United States, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States [1870]*, Volume 1, Washington: Government Print-

ing Office, 1872, p. 8, pp. 15-16, and pp. 90-91, there were 55 Japanese in the United States. Thirty-three were in California; of these 22 were in El Dorado County, all at Gold Hill in Coloma. The 1870 federal census is the first that lists Japanese residents in the United States. The unpublished manuscript schedules of the 1870 Census, State of California, El Dorado County contain the names of 22 Japanese at Coloma Township.

³For a fuller account of these Japanese colonists in California, see John E. Van Sant, *Pacific Pioneers: Japanese Journeys to America and Hawaii, 1850-1880*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000, chapter 6; Henry Taketa, "1969-The Centennial Year," *Pacific Historian*, Vol. 13, No. 1; Ki Kimura, "The Japanese Mayflower," *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, No. 3; and Ichiyo Yamamoto, *Wakamatsu koroni no ato wo tazunete*, Aizu-Wakamatsu: Northern Japan Publishers, 1985.

half centuries after the West had been kicked out of Japan (with the exception of the handful of Dutch allowed on Deshima Island in Nagasaki Bay), they were back. Unlike two and a half centuries earlier, the Western powers—even a middling power such as the United States—were now far more powerful than Japan, both economically and militarily. The Tokugawa shoguns had no practical alternative except to sign lopsided agreements on trade, extraterritoriality, and other matters. The *baku-han* system, upon which the legitimacy and hegemony of the Tokugawa bakufu depended, had been unraveling for many years. And then Perry's arrival and the subsequent "unequal treaties" ripped wide open a Pandora's Box of long-simmering grievances among daimyo, their samurai vassals, and the Tokugawa bakufu. A few *tozama* domains with large numbers of samurai and the all-but-forgotten imperial house grabbed this golden opportunity of Western-induced commotion to challenge the legitimacy of Tokugawa bakufu rule.

Matsudaira Katamori (1835-1893) did not fit into the two major categories of daimyo: *fudai* (hereditary vassal of the Tokugawa shogunate) and *tozama* (outside lord).⁴ He was one of a small number of *kamon* daimyo, a division of *shimpan* daimyo, who were related to the ruling Tokugawa family.⁵ Hoshina Masayuki (1611-1672), considered the founder of Aizu domain, was a son of Tokugawa Hidetada, the second Tokugawa shogun. Because Hoshina's biological mother was one of Hidetada's concu-

binas, Hidetada's wife insisted that their son Iemitsu succeed Hidetada as shogun. Nevertheless, Hoshina and all Aizu daimyo who succeeded him were close advisors to the Tokugawa shogunate.

In 1862, with Kyoto fast becoming the headquarters for the anti-bakufu movement, the shogun appointed twenty-six year-old Matsudaira Katamori of Aizu as *shugoshoku* ("defender") of the imperial capital. In this hazardous position, Matsudaira carefully navigated between the disparate anti-bakufu forces who demanded Japan's return to the national seclusion policy and the expulsion of all foreigners, and the bakufu which contended that increased, regulated contact and trade with the West was regrettable but inevitable.⁶ In a message to the bakufu in late 1862, Matsudaira criticized the shogun's government for treating foreigners "with consideration," leading to "a truly grievous state of affairs."⁷ Yet, he also disparaged the idea of returning to the policy of national seclusion because Japan would then "have no means of understanding foreign conditions and adopting their ways where they are good."⁸ By this Matsudaira meant that Westerners "built great ships and guns" which he believed would help strengthen Japan's own military forces.⁹ Such views may appear contradictory, but they demonstrate Matsudaira's belief in Sakuma Shozan's "Eastern ethics, West-

⁴A useful, though somewhat romanticized biography of Matsudaira Katamori is Ryoichi Hoshi, *Matsudaira Katamori to sono jidai*, Aizu-Wakamatsu: Rekishi Shubunsha, Northern Japan Publishers, 1984. For another account of Aizu, Matsudaira Katamori, and the Boshin War see Teruko Craig, "Introduction" in Goro Shiba, *Remembering Aizu: The Testament of Shiba Goro*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.

⁵Another way to delineate the difference is that *sanke* daimyo (from the Tokugawa domains of Mito, Owari, and Kii) were the senior *shimpan* while the *kamon* were the junior *shimpan*. This difference among *shimpan* daimyo, however, was not always clear.

⁶Dating from the early 17th century, the national seclusion policy (*sakoku*) was originally designed to limit trade and contact with the West. The national seclusion policy did not include Japan's East Asian neighbors, nor was it universally enforced. See Naohiro Asao, *Sakoku*, Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1975; Ronald Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 2nd edition; and Brett Walker, "Reappraising the Sakoku Paradigm: The Ezo Trade and the Extension of Tokugawa Political Space Into Hokkaido," *Journal of Asian History* Vol. 30, No. 2 (1996).

⁷Matsudaira Katamori to bakufu, November 8, 1862, in W.G. Beasley, ed. and trans., *Select Documents On Japanese Foreign Policy, 1853-1868*, London: Oxford University Press, 1955, pp. 225-26.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁹*Ibid.*

ern science” philosophy that many samurai adopted during the turbulent *bakumatsu* era. Furthermore, as Harold Bolitho writes of Matsudaira during this period, he “managed to tread a very distinct path which, while leaving him on reasonably good terms with both bakufu and Court also helped him avoid anything like a total commitment to either of them.”¹⁰ Evidence of this can be found in the November 1862 message to the bakufu cited above, in which Matsudaira identified himself as an advocate of *kōbu gattai* (court-bakufu harmony); a vague, middle-of-the-road policy promoted by a handful of daimyo and court nobles.

Relations between Matsudaira and the samurai of Satsuma, Choshu, and other anti-bakufu proponents in Kyoto were anything but harmonious. Political intrigue, assassinations, and sporadic fighting typified the fractious relationship among these anti-bakufu groups and Matsudaira’s forces throughout the 1860s. Satsuma officials challenged Aizu by trying to have their own daimyo, Shimazu Hisamitsu, replace Matsudaira as defender of Kyoto immediately after the Aizu daimyo took up his post. Samurai from Choshu, generally considered more radical and belligerent than those from Satsuma, were quick to defy bakufu policies and constantly antagonized the Aizu daimyo and his samurai in Kyoto. In 1864, Matsudaira wanted to battle Choshu samurai encamped just outside of the imperial city, but the shogun demurred. The following year, Matsudaira helped lead the first bakufu campaign against Choshu domain, which ended when Choshu officials pledged their allegiance to the shogun. In 1866, he became furious with the bakufu for calling off the second campaign against Choshu.¹¹ In essence, while Matsudaira promoted the fence-riding policy of court-bakufu harmony, his military policy was staunchly oriented against Satsuma and Choshu.

Soon after Tokugawa Yoshinobu resigned his post as *shogun* in late 1867, the imperial court

dismissed Matsudaira and his Aizu samurai from guarding the palace in Kyoto.¹² They were replaced by Satsuma and Choshu samurai, who had gained control of the imperial court and the fifteen year-old Emperor. In late January 1868, the forces of Aizu and Kuwana (the domain of Matsudaira’s brother, Sadaaki), along with bakufu samurai from other Tokugawa domains, were defeated in fierce battles with Satsuma, Choshu and other newly-designated “imperial forces” at Toba and Fushimi outside Kyoto. Won by the imperial forces, these military encounters marked the end of 268 years of Tokugawa bakufu control of Japan, and the beginning of the Meiji Era. They also represented the beginning of a civil war, known as the Boshin War, that raged throughout most of 1868.

The imperial forces marched to Edo and took control of the shogun’s capital, of nearby Yokohama, and of the central government after a few days of fighting against Tokugawa loyalists. The new government, consisting primarily of samurai from Satsuma and Choshu, issued an imperial proclamation declaring that Matsudaira and the Aizu domain were “traitors” fighting in the “rebellion.”¹³ Tokugawa Yoshinobu gave up all his powers to the Emperor and quietly returned to his home domain of Mito. Matsudaira and his samurai returned to Aizu in northern Japan and prepared for war.

Matsudaira refused to capitulate because the new imperial forces had yet to prove that they actually controlled Japan. Japan had over 250 semi-autonomous domains and it would be an enormous burden to centralize and control such an unwieldy conglomeration of mini-states. Moreover, Matsudaira and some other northern daimyo considered the “imperial restoration” as little more than a coup by their hated southern rivals, a coup that might not succeed if decisively challenged. In 1868, no one knew that the Satsuma/Choshu coup would ultimately succeed and

¹⁰Harold Bolitho, “Aizu, 1853-1868,” *Proceedings of the British Association for Japanese Studies* Vol. 2, 1977, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Conrad Totman, *The Collapse of the Tokugawa Bakufu, 1862-1868*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980, p. 288-89.

¹² The *shogun* presumed he was to exercise his powers until a general council of daimyo reached a decision.

¹³This “Proclamation By the Mikado” was issued to foreign legations on February 8, 1868, and can be found in FRUS 1867-68, pp. 714-15. See also Totman, p. 442.

the result would be the Meiji Restoration.

Matsudaira may not have realized that among his supporters were Americans living in Japan. A United States Navy doctor stationed in Yokohama gleefully wrote in his diary on May 26, 1868, that "Aidzu has flogged the troops of Satsuma in every engagement. From all accounts the cause of Aidzu is not a bad one. We are all anxious to see him win the day...."¹⁴ The next day he wrote, "Everyone is an Aidzu man now."¹⁵ Matsudaira probably received such unsolicited support because American officials presumed he was fighting on behalf of the shogun, whom they credited with "observing the treaties, and of strengthening the friendly relations with other countries, especially the United States"¹⁶ Robert Van Valkenberg, the American minister to Japan, maintained formal neutrality during Japan's civil war; but his messages to the State Department throughout 1868 clearly indicated his support for Matsudaira and Shogun Yoshinobu.¹⁷ He even allowed the shogun and some of his bakufu officials safe haven aboard the United States Navy's *Iroquois* anchored in Osaka Bay after the battles at Toba and Fushimi.¹⁸ In comparison with the constant anti-foreign rhetoric of the anti-bakufu forces and the danger posed by anti-foreign *rōnin*, the shogun and Matsudaira appeared supportive of American interests to American diplomats.

After battling other northern domains in the summer of 1868, the imperial forces marched

into Aizu in September.¹⁹ The single most famous, tragic, and romanticized event in Aizu's long history took place during this war when twenty teenaged boys of the *Byakkotai* ("White Tiger Brigade") committed mass suicide because they mistakenly thought Tsuruga Castle in Wakamatsu--Matsudaira's headquarters--was burning down.²⁰

An estimated 30,000 troops besieged Tsuruga Castle. Inside the castle were 3,000 samurai and 2,000 dependents. The imperial armies plundered and burned much of the city of Wakamatsu. Many of the elderly, women, and children living in the city committed suicide during this violent rampage by soldiers from Satsuma and Choshu.²¹ The invading forces then sealed off the entrances to the castle and began a massive bombardment. Out of food, with many of his samurai dead or dying, Matsudaira realized the futility of further resistance and surrendered on November 5, 1868. Aizu lost nearly 3,000 samurai from the beginning of 1868 to Matsudaira's surrender in November. This was more than twice as many as any other domain resisting the "imperial" armies. Satsuma and Choshu, Bolitho writes, "gambled and won, earning for themselves positions of national eminence and responsibility."²² Matsudaira and Aizu gambled and lost, earning the opprobrium of being stubborn opponents of the new imperial order.

Satsuma and Choshu had condemned Matsudaira to death before the battles and Toba and Fushimi.²³ Yet, surprisingly he was spared the death sentence despite his prominent role in the civil war. He and Tokugawa Yoshinobu were

¹⁴ Elinor and James Barnes, eds., *Naval Surgeon--Revolt In Japan 1868-1869: The Diary of Samuel Pellman Boyer*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963, p. 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁶ FRUS 1867-68, Pt. 1, Van Valkenberg to Seward, January 16, 1868, p. 619.

¹⁷ Numerous messages from Van Valkenberg to Secretary of State William H. Seward in the 1867-1869 volumes of FRUS and Despatches attest to his support for the shogun and Matsudaira.

¹⁸ FRUS 1867-68, Pt. 1, Van Valkenberg to Seward, February 3, 1868, p. 636. According to this message, the shogun was aboard the *Iroquois* for two hours while waiting for his own ship to arrive and take him back to Edo.

¹⁹ For a personal account, see Goro Shiba, *Remembering Aizu: The Testament of Shiba Goro Mahito Ishimitsu*.

²⁰ Aizu no Rekishi, Aizu-Wakamatsu: Aizu Bukeyashiki, 1989, pp. 123-24.

²¹ For example, Shiba Goro's grandmother, mother, two sisters, and one sister-in-law committed suicide during the destruction of Wakamatsu. See Shiba, pp. 54-59. The number of people who committed suicide during the Boshin War in Aizu is unknown, but it was certainly in the hundreds.

²² Harold Bolitho, "The Echigo War, 1868," *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 34, No. 3, 1979, p. 277.

²³ Bolitho, "Aizu," p. 6.

formally pardoned in a decree issued the following year.²⁴ Charles De Long, who replaced Van Valkenberg as the United States' Minister to Japan, believed that the new government, well-aware of its precarious control over Japan, decided not to execute the Aizu daimyo because it feared that his death by execution or ritual suicide would have the "inevitable consequences" of elevating him to martyrdom and act as a unifying symbol to daimyo still incensed at the new Satsuma/Choshu-dominated government.²⁵ After a brief period of imprisonment, Matsudaira became a Shinto priest and eventually served for many years as the chief priest at Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate.

The people of Aizu faced a bitter winter in 1868-1869. The wartime destruction of Wakamatsu and the surrounding areas led to impending starvation and *yonaoshi* ("world rectification") uprisings throughout Aizu.²⁶ The new imperial government took direct charge of the domain's affairs and, writes Marius Jansen, "no other domain was treated as harshly" as Aizu in the aftermath of the civil war.²⁷ Disillusioned, destitute, and branded as traitors, thousands of Aizu's people migrated to northern Tohoku and Hokkaido in search of food, refuge, and a new life in post-Tokugawa Japan. Many of those who left Aizu were forced by the imperial government to move to a newly created, dreary domain on the Shimokita Peninsula in the northernmost corner of Honshu.²⁸ The destruction of Aizu, resulting from the political transformation from Tokugawa to Meiji, also pushed a handful of these refugees to seek a new life by establishing a tea and silk

colony in a strange, overseas land they may have heard of but certainly knew almost nothing about: the California frontier.

Lost In History

Aizu's prominent position in the history of the Meiji Restoration has been noted in a few specialist works (especially by Harold Bolitho), and the Boshin War is often noted—albeit briefly—in Japanese language narratives of modern Japanese history. Yet, in most survey narratives of Japan history by Western or Japanese scholars, Aizu's role in the Meiji Restoration is at most only briefly mentioned despite Matsudaira Katamori and Aizu's prominence as the most active opponents of the Satsuma and Choshu-dominated "imperial" coalition. Why has Aizu been lost in this extremely important and influential event of Japan's history? There are, I believe three interrelated reasons.

First is that the loser's version of history is rarely the dominant national narrative—and Aizu was clearly on the losing side of the Meiji Restoration.

Second is that the nineteenth century was, in addition to being a century of industrialization, a century of nationalist emphasis. France, Britain, Germany, the United States, and then Japan created national symbols and emphasized national traditions, including the promotion of national narratives. In Japan, nationalism was increasingly emphasized from the 1868 Meiji Restoration onwards as a method of creating unity among a historically diverse people whose primary political and social loyalties were to their villages and domains.²⁹

Third, the once semi-autonomous, semi-independent domains of the Tokugawa era were transformed into fewer prefectures, which were

²⁴*Dispatches*, Vol. 13, "Letter Accompanying Pardon Decree, Signed By Daijokwan," and "Decree."

²⁵*Ibid.*, De Long to Fish, November 26, 1869.

²⁶Stephen Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan*, pp. 142-53.

²⁷Marius B. Jansen, "The Meiji Restoration," in *The Cambridge History of Japan: Volume 5, The Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 359. Bolitho makes similar judgments in "Aizu," pp. 3-6.

²⁸*Aizu no Rekishi*, pp. 127-28. The population of the city of Wakamatsu dropped from 70,000 before the civil war to around 16,000 afterwards.

²⁹See Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; and Daikichi Irokawa, *Meiji no bunka*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970, published in English as *The Culture of the Meiji Period*, trans. ed. Marius Jansen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

were increasingly controlled by a central government creating and promoting a nationalist ideology. In other words, disparate regional areas of Japan were turned into peripheries of the nation, and the core of the nation was the newly re-named capital of Tokyo, which would be controlled for more than two generations by the former samurai of Satsuma and Choshu (and to a lesser extent by their former allies from Tosa and Hizen). These former samurai controlled not only the nation but also the nation's history, which taught that there had not been a violent transfer of political power from the old regime to the new regime as was common among other nations. According to this national history, there had been a peaceful transfer from the shogun to the Emperor because from the dawn of time Japanese had always been unique, united, and virtuous.

During the twilight of the Tokugawa Era and the dawn of the Meiji Era, Japan underwent a momentous political transformation, a transformation that in many ways charted the course of Japan's history in the 19th and 20th centuries. Aizu was caught in the midst of this political transformation. Worldwide nationalism and nationalization of Japan left little room in the historical narrative for those who had challenged the new rulers and the new political order of the Meiji Restoration.

Epilogue

In the 1960s, local historians in Aizu and northern California managed to get the Japanese American Citizens League and the California State government to designate 1969 as the centennial year of Japanese immigration to the United States because of the arrival of the Wakamatsu colonists in 1869. Governor Ronald Reagan and Japanese Consul General Shima Seiichi came to Coloma on June 7, 1969 and dedicated a state historical plaque at the former site of the Wakamatsu Colony. One of the sponsors of the centennial year and the dedication ceremony was the Bank of Tokyo of California, whose chairman was Matsudaira Ichiro, the grandson of Matsudaira Katamori. Every year in Aizu there is a ceremony on Mt. Iimori to honor the memory of those who sacrificed their lives during the Boshin War. This solemn

ceremony is always attended by descendants of Matsudaira Katamori. The memory of Aizu's history may have been conveniently and deliberately forgotten by the national narrative, but the people of Aizu have continued to remember those who sacrificed and struggled on behalf of Aizu's challenge to the Tokugawa-Meiji transformation of Japan.

