



# Restoration, Revolution or Reform? — The Unexpected Fortune of Winners and Tenacious Efforts of Losers

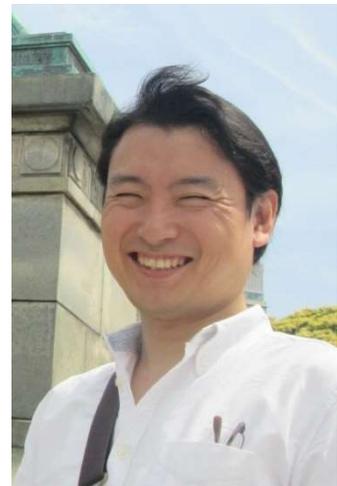
Influential politicians in modern Japan such as Hara Takashi, Goto Shinpei and Hirata Tosuke rose to prominence as individuals from “rebel” parts of Japan that had opposed the new Meiji government established in 1868. The key to the Meiji government’s success was a flexible, forward-looking plan for recruiting human talent for higher positions.

Shimizu Yuichiro, Professor, Keio University

**H**ow has the Japanese term “Meiji Ishin” been translated into English? For a long time, the generally accepted English translation for this phrase has been the “Meiji Restoration.” The translation appears to correspond to the idea of “a restoration of imperial rule,” but something may have been lost in translation. What about the “Meiji Revolution” as an alternative translation? There was certainly a distinction between the pro-imperial Ishin army and the pro-shogunate “rebels,” but the author is somewhat at a loss when asked whether or not the Meiji Ishin changed the social structure of Japan to the extent that it could be called a “revolution.”

There has been much debate over the pros and cons of the Meiji Ishin. However, I think there is no question as to its innovative nature. Thus, it may be appropriate to translate it into English as the “Meiji Renovation,” if not the “Meiji Innovation.”

What was renovated through the Meiji Ishin? I believe that the management of human talent was most significant. The transition from the Edo period, in which social status and lineage determined lifeways, to the Meiji period, in which the freedom to choose occupations existed, was innovative beyond any doubt. Furthermore, while the transition unleashed the vigor depicted in Shiba Ryotaro’s historical novel *Saka-no ue-no kumo* (*Clouds above the Hill*), it did not produce the tempestuousness that often accompanies revolutions. This was the case because the people involved in the Meiji Ishin had a clear idea about putting a limited supply of human talent to effective use, along with a forward-looking plan for fostering the next generation of talented leaders.



Shimizu Yuichiro, Professor,  
Keio University

## Meiji Ishin as a Revolution in Selecting Suitable Persons for Higher Positions

These ideas were evident from the beginning of the Meiji Ishin. The Decree for the Restoration of Imperial Rule, a declaration for the establishment of a new government, identified the selection of suitable persons for higher positions as the new administration's most pressing need and proposed a policy of proactively recruiting capable individuals for public service.

This process unfolded as a matter of course. The Ishin coalition consisting of the local governments of Satsuma and Choshu and the Imperial Court with its ancient practices was not able to run the national government by itself. The improvised government would soon collapse if its administration was shaky. The government needed to gather persons with knowledge, experience and vision. So the new Meiji government set its sights on talent in the respective feudal domains.

This was a major problem for the feudal domains. In the midst of the upheaval, the domains could not endure if the new central government absorbed their limited human resources. The domains also did not know whether or not the new government would last. The governments of the feudal domains prevented their talent from leaving, preaching about the strength of lord and vassal relationships and the disloyalty of leaving families behind (see Sasaki Suguru, *Shishi-to kanryo (Royalists and Bureaucrats)*, Kodansha, Ltd.). However, at this stage a few young men like Yuri Kimimasa (from Echizen domain, also known as Mitsuoka Hachiro), Ito Shunsuke (Choshu domain, also known as Ito Hirobumi) and Okuma Hachitaro (Hizen domain, also known as Okuma Shigenobu), managed to leave their home domains and devote themselves to the Meiji Ishin. They assembled in the new government, driven by their zeal and ambition.

The situation changed completely when a successful eastward march undertaken by an expeditionary force led by Prince Arisugawa Taruhito portended a national regime change. On March 14, 1868, the new Meiji government promulgated the Gokajo-no Goseimon (the Charter Oath of Emperor Meiji Consisting of Five Articles), which reads as follows:

1. Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established, and all matters shall be decided by open discussions.
2. All classes, high and low, shall be united in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state.
3. The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall all be allowed to pursue their own calling so that there will be no discontent.
4. Evil customs of the past shall be broken off, and everything shall be based upon the just laws of Nature.
5. Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule.

Arguably the best known of these five points is Article 1, which describes what a political system should be like. However, it is the articles that follow which deserve our attention. In Article 2, the Charter Oath advocates national development through the unity of the entire nation. In Article 3, it promotes the ideal of creating a society where everyone can pursue their dreams in order to fulfill those national objectives. The Charter Oath also urges the Japanese people to break away from old customs (Article 4) and seek knowledge in the outside world (in Article 5) for the national good.

At the time the Charter Oath was issued, talks between Katsu Kaishu and Saigo Takamori to arrange for the bloodless surrender of the shogunate stronghold of Edo Castle were in full swing. The Charter Oath symbolized a decisive era shift from a Tokugawa regime defined by a restrictive status system, to a new government that respected common people's freedom and efforts. Furthermore it was a fascinating statement that people who had lived under the old order were now allowed to embrace their dreams.

### **Former Vassals of the Shogun Sought by the New Government**

In other words, the aim of the Charter Oath was to encourage all talented individuals in Japan to take part in the new government.

In reality, pro-Ishin activists from influential feudal domains such as Satsuma and Choshu were highly ambitious, but they did not have sufficient specialized education. Many of them were competent swordsmen trained in Edo (present-day Tokyo), but only a few of them had studied at schools such as Shoheizaka Gakumonjo for the study of the Chinese classics or Kaiseijo for the study of Western science. Above all, while they had experience in administration at the domain level, they had never run a national government. Governance is impossible without people equipped with the practical knowledge of and experience in relevant fields.

The former vassals of the deposed shogun were the only people who were ready to fulfill these tasks. The Tokugawa House allowed the former vassals to enter the service of the new government after the last shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu entered seclusion. As many as 5,000 of them chose to become courtiers in the new government instead of accompanying the Tokugawa family as it withdrew to its diminished territory in Shizuoka. (see Kadomatsu Hideki, *Meiji Ishin-to bakushin (The Meiji Restoration and the Former Vassals of the Shogun)*, Chuokoron Shinsha, Inc.)

However, at this stage there were also many former vassals of the shogun who declined invitations from the new government. They were too proud to change their position. They were also anxious about the future of the Tokugawa head family. Above all, even when they signaled their submission to the new government, some former vassals could not begin to think about serving in it while they still had comrades who continued to resist the new government's forces in the Tohoku region.

Former shogunal vassals entered the service of the new government on a larger scale after the conclusive Battle of Hakodate in 1869. The government asked Shibusawa Eiichi to enter its service in October of that year. On an institutional level, the Tokugawa shogunate had ceded jurisdiction over its land and people to the Emperor Meiji four months earlier. However, the new government cautiously chose to invite Shibusawa to join its service through the mediation of the feudal domain of Shizuoka. The clan persuaded Shibusawa, telling him not to provoke the new government's displeasure by refusing to enter its service. Shibusawa ultimately had no means or obligation to resist.

After joining the Ministry of Finance, Shibusawa proposed that the new government proactively recruit the former vassals of the shogun, citing the lack of persons capable of building new governmental systems. Through the good offices of Shibusawa, prominent figures such as Maejima Hisoka (a professor at Kaiseijo, and later the superintendent-general of the postal service at the Home Ministry and the so-called father of the postal service in Japan), Akamatsu Noriyoshi (the so-called father of shipbuilding in Japan who visited the United States on the warship *Kanrin Maru*, studied in the Netherlands and later became a vice admiral) and Sugiura Yuzuru (who traveled to France, served the shogunate as the feudal chief commissioner of foreign affairs and later became the director general of the bureau of geography in the Home Ministry), successively entered the new government (see Higuchi Takehiko, *Kyu bakushin-no Meiji Ishin (The Meiji Restoration for the Former Vassals of the Shogun)*, Yoshikawa Kobunkan Co., Ltd.).

In reality, life was hard for the re-employed former vassals of the shogun, who were forced to live on a total stipend of 700,000 *koku* in rice. The end of the Boshin War between the imperial and shogunate forces was an opportune time for them to swallow their pride and embrace the new reality. Furthermore, they would once again be able to make the most of their talents serving in the central government. There was little to keep their spirits from rising.

How did they feel about the new era? Maejima Hisoka, who joined the Ministry of Popular Affairs, had been a top official in the feudal domain of Shizuoka, but the new government employed him as a ninth-rank bureaucrat. Maejima viewed this this treatment as unfair.

However, the first ministry council Maejima attended swept his dissatisfaction away. Maejima found that he was an upper-level official in his bureau. Shibusawa was the only former vassal of the shogun who occupied a higher position than him.

Above all, Maejima was struck by the fact that officials such as Director General Date Munenari (the former lord of the feudal clan of Uwajima) and top leaders Okuma Shigenobu and Ito Hirobumi, discussed matters in a free and open manner, without any regard to their differences in birth. For Maejima, who had grown up under the restrictive Tokugawa status system, a previously unthinkable new world had opened before his eyes.

### A Clear Path for Cultivating Human Resources

The new government treated the former vassals of the shogun well because of the need for continuity in governance. Meanwhile people who had joined the Ouetsu Reppan Domei (Alliance of the Domains of Mutsu, Dewa and Echigo), which continued to resist the new government, endured hard times. With the exception of the members of the armed forces, those “rebel” regions produced no notable members of the new government in the first half of the Meiji period.

Yet the new government gave these people hope by opening a wide path for cultivating human resources. More precisely, it was an opportunity created by a young man born in the land of rebels. That young man was Hirata Tosuke, a former member of the feudal clan of Yonezawa who subsequently became known as the right-hand man of Yamagata Aritomo (a former member of the feudal clan of Choshu).

After its defeat in the Boshin War, the feudal clan of Yonezawa sought to change its fortunes through governance reforms and the promotion of Western science. The feudal clan sent Hirata, who had been known as a talented student at a domain school, to Daigaku Nanko (the successor of the Kaiseijo) with the hopes that he would pioneer these efforts. Young people from certain powerful feudal clans dominated Daigaku Nanko. One student interacted extensively with the hard-working Hirata. This was Ogura Shohei from the feudal domain of Hyuga Obi.

Hirata was from a rebel domain and Ogura was from a small, minor domain. The two criticized the favorable treatment of people from particular clans at Daigaku Nanko, saying



Hirata Tosuke (1849-1925)  
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that the existing situation did not allow the school to live up to the Charter Oath's proclamation that common people to each pursue their own calling. Indeed, by this measure Daigaku Nanko failed to meet the standard of the widely-accessible Shoheizaka Gakumonjo in the Edo period (see Maeda Tsutomu, *Edo-no dokushokai (Reading Clubs in Edo)*, Heibonsha, Ltd.). Hirata and Ogura advocated equal educational opportunities and submitted an opinion piece stating that talent from all of the domains throughout Japan should be utilized. The government accepted this proposal.

The highest institution of learning opened its doors. Subsequently, the new government established a range of schools, including a school of law affiliated with the Ministry of Justice. In 1886 the government consolidated these schools into an Imperial University, which paved the way for the children of both the imperial and the rebel forces to enter government service if they studied hard and passed the examinations. The Constitution of the Empire of Japan promulgated in 1890 declared in Article 19 that "All citizens of Japan are equally eligible to enter civil, military and other public institutions in accordance with the qualifications stipulated in laws and regulations." Ito Hirobumi, the drafter of the Constitution, praised this declaration as an excellent result of reforms in the name of the Meiji Ishin (see Shimizu Yuichiro, *Kindai Nihon-no kanryo (Bureaucrats in Modern Japan)*, Chuokoron Shinsha, Inc.).

The establishment of the Imperial University changed the landscape of Tokyo as well. Many schools opened in the neighborhood of Kanda, which was invigorated by students gathered from all over Japan. These students had cups of coffee, browsed stores around the neighborhood and had free-flowing discussions. At times they went home after going out to drink wine. Dormitories affiliated with various domains were built in the Hongo area. The students studied hard, fueled by pride in the localities they had left behind.

In his book *Gakumon-no susume (An Encouragement of Learning)*, Fukuzawa Yukichi, who had established himself as a vassal of the shogun, states that only those who study on their own volition will be saved. In this spirit, children from rebel domains who had no social connections studied single-mindedly to carve out their careers. Supported by the innovations described above, their efforts bore fruit.

### **Three Individuals Born in Rebel Lands Who Went on to Change Japan**

These students who carved out their careers through learning distinguished themselves in the era of opportunity known as Meiji. Some went beyond being bureaucrats and became politicians. At this point, the author would like to take a look at three individuals who ultimately shaped Japan as ministers of state.

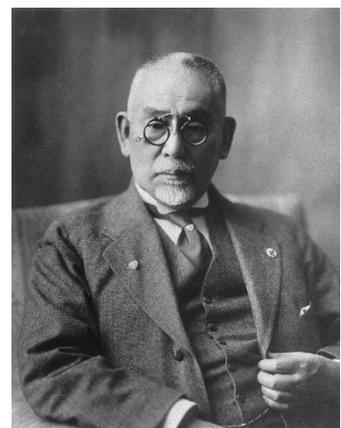
Born into the family of a painter who enjoyed shogunate patronage, Takahashi Korekiyo was soon adopted into a family of a Sendai domain retainer. Takahashi's life was one of a self-made man. Under an order from his clan, Takahashi went to the United States to study after taking lessons at Hebon Juku (the Hepburn School) in Yokohama. He became the victim of an embezzlement scheme in the United States, where he was sold into an apprenticeship. As a result, Takahashi spent one year as an apprentice in Oakland, California.

Takahashi was like a *daruma* doll that does not fall over easily. After returning to Japan, he leveraged his functional English skills to become a teacher employed in the Ministry of Culture and various schools. He exerted his talents as the first chief of the Japan Patent Office at a time when intellectual property rights emerged as an issue in Japan's diplomatic relations. Later, Takahashi fell victim to fraud as the result of investing his money in a mining project in Peru. He then made a comeback through an opportunity to play an active role in administering the Bank of Japan. As the deputy governor of the Bank of Japan, Takahashi ran about to raise funds for military expenditures in the Russo-Japanese War. After serving as the governor of the Bank of Japan, he assumed the post of the Minister of Finance in 1913. Takahashi was the first Minister of Finance who had come from the land of the rebel forces.

Born in Mizusawa, a town in the same feudal domain of Sendai, Goto Shinpei rose in the world by virtue of his strong temperament and specialized knowledge. At an early stage his potential was recognized by Yasuba Yasukazu (a native of the feudal domain of Kumamoto), who went to Mizusawa to take up a new position. Goto studied medical science through the good offices of Yasuba. He moved to Aichi Igakko (Aichi Medical School) when Yasuba became the governor of Aichi Prefecture. Goto later assumed the position of the principal at the school. While in that position, he was once called to medically examine the political leader Itagaki Taisuke (a native of the feudal domain of Tosa), who had an emergency in Gifu. This became a famous episode. Subsequently Goto continued his steady rise as a bureaucrat specializing in public health administration.



Takahashi Korekiyo (1854-1936,  
20th Prime Minister)  
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Goto Shinpei (1857-1929)  
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At one point, Goto faced the hardship of unemployment. However, Kodama Gentaro from the feudal domain of Choshu was impressed by quarantine inspections that Goto had performed on demobilized soldiers who had served in the Sino-Japanese War. When Kodama became the Governor-General of Taiwan, Goto accompanied him and helped administer Japan's first full-fledged colony as its public welfare director. Goto went on to serve as the first president of South Manchuria Railway Company and then the Minister of Communications and the president of the Institute of Railways in the second Katsura Cabinet.

Hara Takashi is probably the most remarkable example of a political figure from a former “rebel” territory. Born as the second son in the family of a high-ranking warrior in the feudal clan of Morioka, Hara experienced his clan's defeat in the Boshin War at the age of 12. After running out of money to attend a domain school, Hara redoubled his efforts. He entered a school of law affiliated with the Ministry of Justice by way of a Catholic theological school, but left the law school before long after a confrontation with its principal. Hara then turned to the world of newspaper journalism where his talent attracted the attention of government leaders Inoue Kaoru (a native of the feudal domain of Choshu) and later, Mutsu Munemitsu (a native of the feudal domain of Kishu). As a civil servant, Hara demonstrated his abilities by helping carry out reforms in the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Hara Takashi (1856-1921, 19th Prime Minister)  
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Soon afterward, Hara turned to the world of politics. A major factor behind this shift is said to have been a statement by Mutsu that career bureaucrats from former rebel domains could only rise to the rank of vice minister. After another stint in journalism, Hara took part in the formation of the Rikken Seiyukai (Constitutional Party of Political Friends) in 1900, following his mentor Ito Hirobumi. He won a seat in the House of Representatives on the Seiyukai ticket. Many ex-bureaucrat politicians subsequently gave up on the Rikken Seiyukai, but Hara stayed with the party. He served as the Minister of Home Affairs twice in cabinets led by Saionji Kinmochi (a court noble).

Hara inaugurated his own cabinet in September 1918. This signified the ascent of a prime minister with origins in a former rebel area 50 years after the Meiji Ishin. Takahashi Korekiyo took up the post of the Minister of Finance in the Hara Cabinet. Goto Shinpei was appointed to govern the city of Tokyo. The era when persons from rebel domains could only hope to rise to the position of vice minister only came to an end at this point.

Young people from feudal domains on the winning side of the Meiji Ishin were said to have been under significant pressure to pass civil service examinations. The people around them viewed their success in these examinations as a matter of course. However, the examinations were actually fair and rigorous. The people back home in the local areas they came from had very high hopes for them. These youngsters were forced to cope with unimaginable levels of anxiety.

Does being a winner bring unexpected good fortune? Does being a loser lead to persistent effort? I believe that the modernization of Japan “succeeded” in one way or other because the new Meiji government kept its doors open to both political winners and losers and continued to encourage the two groups to compete with each other.

Hara Takashi recalled: “The Boshin War was merely a matter of differences in political views. In those days, there was a popular song that said history is written by the that might is right and losers are always in the wrong. It told the truth about the War. This is a fact that is now clear to the entire country. Everyone should be at ease.”

*Translated from “Fukko ka, kakumei ka, kakushin ka — Shosha no gyoko to haisha no funto (Restoration, Revolution or Reform? — The Unexpected Fortune of Winners and Tenacious Efforts of Losers),” Tokyojin, February 2018, pp. 30-33. (Courtesy of Toshi Shuppan) [February 2017]*

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## **SHIMIZU Yuichiro**

**Professor, Keio University**

Born in Nagano Prefecture in 1974, Shimizu Yuichiro is a political scientist and professor at Keio University. He completed the requirements for his Ph. D. at Keio University’s Graduate School of Law in 2003. Shimizu specializes in theories of Japanese politics and diplomacy. He assumed his present position in 2017 after serving in posts including that of associate professor at Keio University. He has written numerous books, including *Kindai Nihon-no kanryo (Bureaucrats in Modern Japan)* and *Seito-to kanryo-no kindai (Modern Times for Political Parties and Bureaucrats)*.