

# Marius B. Jansen *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* (1961)



Tōru Haga



Marius B. Jansen. (Source: Shōichi Saeki & Tōru Haga, Eds., *Gaikokujin ni yoru Nihonron no meicho - Goncharov kara Pinguet made*, Chuokoron-Shinsha Inc., 1987, p. 227)

Marius B. Jansen was born on April 11, 1922, in the Netherlands. His family emigrated to the U.S. and Jansen studied at Princeton University. Although initially intending to study the history of medieval European thought, he received special training in Japanese as a language specialist during World War II, and was stationed in Japan after its conclusion. In 1950, he received a PhD in history from Harvard University which was published as *The Japanese and Sun-Yat-sen*, (Harvard UP, 1954). After serving as professor of history at the University of Washington (Seattle), he became professor of history at Princeton University in 1959. In 1961, he wrote *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* (Princeton UP), which established

---

Tōru Haga passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

Chapter author affiliation as of March 1995.

---

T. Haga (✉)

International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

© The Author(s) 2023

S. Saeki, T. Haga (eds.), *Masterpieces on Japan by Foreign Authors*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9853-9\\_34](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9853-9_34)

his position as a leader in the field of modern Japanese history in the United States. In the 1960s, he was active in organizing the Conference on Modern Japan and editing its series of essay collections. Among his other publications and translations are *Japan and China: from War to Peace 1894–1972* (Nihon to Chūgoku, Rand McNally, 1975), and *Japan and Its World, Two Centuries of Change* (Nihon, Nihyakunen no Henbō, Japanese Translation: Katō Mikio, Iwanami, 1982). He remained in Princeton until his death in 2000, reading “The Complete Works of Huizinga” in Dutch, and playing Chopin and Mozart beautifully on the piano. Marius Berthus Jansen passed away in 2000.

Why is it that one of the great works of Japanology is such a specialized book on the history of the Meiji Restoration? If what we call “Japanology” is a comprehensive discussion of the characteristics of Japanese society and culture from several angles, the topic of “Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration” may be a little too specific.

As far as this book is concerned, however, such concerns are completely unwarranted. This book, by one of the leading American scholars of Japanese history, is, above all, truly readable. Anyone with even a passing interest in Ryōma or the history of the Meiji Restoration will immediately be captivated by this lively and incisive account of a fascinating man and era. Truly unputdownable, it keeps the reader breathless till the end. I myself have a vivid recollection of reading all 423 pages of the English text over three or four nights in the summer of 1961, immediately after its publication. When I open the book now, I find that there are markings on almost every page, underlines and exclamation points in red pencil, and notes in tiny letters here and there.

The book closely traces the development of the thoughts and actions of Sakamoto Ryōma (1838–67), a patriot or a man of high purpose during the Bakumatsu period (1853–68), within a broad comparative historical framework of “Japan’s response to the challenge of the Western world” (also the title of this volume’s second chapter) in the nineteenth century. In doing so, the book naturally becomes a nuanced and yet substantive portrait of the Japanese, or at least of the modern Japanese, through the investigation of the real Ryōma, one of the country’s most popular heroes. In general, when discourses on Japan that lump together Bashō, advanced technology, Zen, and corporate management methods are thrown about, we may consider the arguments “clever,” but seldom feel truly satisfied with them. This book, however, is an empirical and concrete study of the behavior and psychology of Ryōma, a key individual in a turbulent period of Japan’s history; through its detailed analysis, it presents a vivid and assured exemplar of the modern Japanese.

In Chapter 1, “Ryōma’s Japan,” and Chapter 2, “Response to the West,” Professor Jansen skillfully uses historical documents from Japan and abroad, including the memoirs of Germain Felix Meijlan, chief of the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki, to gradually narrowing his focus from Tokugawa Japan, then the Tosa domain, and onto Sakamoto Ryōma, thereby detailing the social and psychological situation of Japan from the early nineteenth century up to the great shock of Commodore Perry’s arrival in Japan in 1853. The reform of domain governments in response to this shock, which had also begun in Tosa, was undertaken through the responsible

planning of the realist Yoshida Tōyō. However, it is Sakamoto Ryōma, a local samurai, who appears on the scene in opposition to the Yoshida faction's intellectual line, and begins his career in Chapter 3, "The Loyalist Years."

At the time, Ryōma had no objective knowledge of the capabilities of the "barbarians," and was merely a swordsman practicing his martial arts at Chiba Shūsaku's dōjō (swordsmanship school) in Edo, excited over the thought of "taking some foreign heads and returning home (to Tosa)." This is what the author calls the first stage of Ryōma's spiritual development. His swordsman-like zeal for expelling the barbarians eventually developed into a kind of religious ideology as Ryōma went back to Edo for further training (1856) and met other young men of the same age and disposition, including some from the Mito domain. There, he came to know Takechi Zuizan, an "emperor-loving" senior samurai from Tosa, and eventually joined Takechi's "Tosa Kinnō-tō (Tosa Emperor Loyalty Party)" finding there his *raison d'être*—respect for the emperor and protection of the nation.

This simple and unambiguous radical exclusionism appealed strongly to the younger samurai of the time, not only in Tosa, but in Chōshū and Satsuma as well. By emphasizing the "national crisis," they justified their deviation from the old feudal order. With slogans like "justice is with us," and "we will carry out the divine will," these men held an almost euphoric confidence in their own moral superiority, their intellectual innocence demanding simple solutions to complex problems. As such, they accused Yoshida Tōyō and other senior bureaucrats who did not listen to them of being "incompetent philistines," subjecting them to the same kind of "divine punishment" as was meted out to Ii Naosuke, the assassinated chief minister of the shogunate. Then, one by one, they broke away from their domains and broadened the scope of their contacts and exchanges, including those with the court nobility. In doing so, their evolved their individual activist work into an anti-shogunate exclusionist movement with a national perspective.

Professor Jansen describes the "Loyalist Years" following 1860 as the second stage of the "response to the West" on the part of Sakamoto Ryōma and Japanese of that generation who modeled themselves on him, but this chapter is also a fascinating study of a particular Japanese archetype: the "man of high purpose." According to the preface and the notes at the end of the book, Sun Yat-sen, the subject of Jansen's Ph.D. thesis (*The Japanese and Sun-Yat-sen*, published in 1954), and his "China rōnin" (Japanese activists in China) friends often likened themselves to the heroes of Bakumatsu Japan, and this was one of the factors that led him to this research on Sakamoto.

Based on this long-held conception of the subject matter, and using such works as the memoirs of Sasaki Takayuki (Sasaki Rōkō Sekijitsudan), he skillfully depicts and analyzes the rebellious and adventurous spirit of a Takeichi, Sakamoto, Nakaoka Shintarō, and other "children of the storm," who had no direct responsibility to their families, domains, or the national government. The sharpness and vivacity of his writing stands out not only in the literature on Ryōma and the Restoration but is something rarely seen in Japanese scholars' studies of the history of modern Japanese thought. Rather, it has a strong persuasive appeal that could only come from a foreign historian of Japan who, in all likelihood, had a strong grasp of

methodology of historical studies including Erik Erikson's historical psychology. "Eyes fixed the sunbeam of the extreme, hearts as pure as their shining blades..." This was the romantic image that these brave and brutal fanatics had created for themselves. Jansen calls them "revolutionaries without a blueprint or successors," and "experts in disrupting the status quo without possessing any alternative plan." In describing the Bakumatsu imperial loyalists' way of life, the professor, who once worked on the section on Shōwa ultranationalists in *Source of the Japanese Tradition* (Genten ni Yoru Nihon no Dentō, Columbia. U. P., 1958), must have had in mind not only Sun Yat-sen and the "continental rōnin," but also the assassins in military uniform in 1930s Japan. Rather, it was the allusions and implied analogies to these groups that gave an unusually earnest tone to this study, broadening the perspective of the research.

The author emphasizes, however, that the Bakumatsu imperial loyalists did not remain in their initial stage of "paroxysmic" reaction to the West. This is where they differed from the fanatics of the Shōwa period. Both Sakamoto and Nakaoka, as rōnin who had broken away from their domains and were preoccupied with national affairs, eventually came to realize the "complexity of the problem" and discovered an intelligent way to respond to the "barbarians," the way which they were able to adopt decisively. This shift from the emotionalism and anti-intellectualism of resentment to a rational and concrete attitude toward the outside world, and from direct action with swords held aloft to an indirect strategy of "using the barbarians to defeat the barbarians"—this is what Jansen considers the third stage of their "response to the West" (Chapter 4, "Service with Katsu").

In Ryōma's case, he was persuaded by Katsu Rintarō, the former captain of the shogunate's Western steamship, the Kanrin-maru, whom he had originally intended to kill, to free himself overnight from the single-minded obsession of the Takechi school. This represented a dramatic and remarkable transformation in his consciousness and methods. Jansen interprets this change of course to be due to the fact that Ryōma's mind had been almost completely blank in terms of rational and intellectual thinking, and that he had the unlikely good fortune to find himself one-on-one with the "second-to-none military scholar" (from Ryōma's Letters) in the form of Katsu. The charm of this book lies in the fact that this kind of responsible and humanistic insights into historical figures can be found throughout, which, as I have said over and over again, are not to be found in the prim and austere works of Japanese historians.

His efforts to build the Hyōgo Naval Training Center, missions to the Fukui domain and other open-minded domains, the *taisei hōkan* (the abdication of the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu), and his embrace of a council of lords, were crisis measures counted among Ryōma's eight-point plan for national reform. The new experiences that Ryōma gained under Katsu's guidance gave him a new zest for life and sense of pride. A vivid illustration of these is given in Ryōma's letters to his sister Otome (when we read the letters, translated into English by Jansen, in the context of this book, the image of Ryōma formed by a heroic storyteller that has been stuck in our minds gradually peels away and is replaced by the dashing manner of the activist Sakamoto, as if he were speaking loudly on the campus of Berkeley or the

streets of New York City. It is a truly interesting experience). Likewise, his comrade Nakaoka Shintarō broadened his perspective through the various dangers, travel experiences, and contact with Chōshū figures such as Kusaka Genzui, and deepened his historical understanding of the current situation through acquiring information about the Opium War and reading Fukuzawa Yukichi's *Things Western* (*Seiyō Jijō*).

This led to a shift to a very clear and proactive policy, the process of which is also traced in detail through Nakaoka's diaries and letters. Although obviously either of them remained "quite somebody," experience had curbed their arrogance and impulsiveness. With sober composure and a stronger sense of responsibility, they faced a new phase of domestic and international politics. Professor Jansen observes that, as such, these "men of high purpose" grew "sophisticated," becoming "statesmen" who valued tolerance and farsightedness (Chapter 5, "The Satsuma-Chōshū Alliance").

It is here that what is interesting about this historian's reading of history can be found. I won't go into detail as to whether the English word "sophistication" is often used in this sense in historical accounts. However, the use of this term here has the effect of, at a stroke, universalizing the Japanese archetype of the Bakumatsu "man of high purpose" to the level of world history. Simultaneously, it also works to satirize the (dangerous) purity of desire that is still latent in the Japanese people today. This is one of the reasons why this book is not just a plain account of the history of the Meiji Restoration at the end of the Edo period, or a chapter in the annoying discourse on Japan's modernization, nor an old ideological debate about whether the Meiji Restoration was a bourgeois revolution or an absolutist revolution, but a history of the humanities that recognizes the role of human values in history, and also a superb discourse on Japanese cultural history.

Indeed, the sense of crisis among Ryōma and his contemporaries was no longer just psychological. Rather, it was backed by an awareness that they were living through a great transformation, and a love for their country in a global perspective. They realized that individual acts of heroism would only add to the complications that Japan was currently facing, and would not contribute in any way to their resolution. There is no need here to go into the remarkable developments in the years leading up to Ryōma's assassination in 1867, such as his activities as commander of the Tosa Kaientai in Nagasaki (Chapter 6) or the eight-point "*senchū hassaku*," a national policy reform proposal along the lines of the *kōbu gattai* (the union of imperial and shogunate rule) that he formulated with his subordinates Nagaoka Kenkichi and Mutsu Munemitsu (Chapter 7). Ryōma's idea of building a bridge between the shogunate and the Satsuma-Chōshū alliance was defeated, and the Restoration proceeded rapidly in the direction of Satsuma-Chōshū oligarchic rule. It is also pointed out at the end of the book that "Hanron" (On Domains), which is considered to be Ryōma's last expression of political thought, already had content that foretold the Tosa Freedom and People's Rights Movement of later years (Chapters 8 and 9).

The book is centered on the complicated psyche, growth of awareness, and development of thoughts of one "man of high purpose," Sakamoto Ryōma. It beautifully captures and describes the dynamics of the old Tokugawa regime's collapse and those of modernization under the pressure of the pressing Western

powers. The book is also interspersed with incisive portraits of the thoughts, character, and temperament of a succession of characters, including Yamauchi Yōdō, Yoshida Tōyō, Takeichi Zuizan, Gotō Shōjirō, Iwasaki Yatarō, and Iwakura Tomomi. This book will be widely read for many years to come, not only as a work of history that discusses the Meiji Restoration with a density of life and astute insight that borders on a work of art, but also as a thesis on the Japanese people as understood in the context of history.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

