

## Plenary Keynote Speech III

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### *Japan's Meiji Revolution in Global History: Searching for some generalizations out of history*

It is my pleasure and honor to give one of the keynote speeches for the fourth congress of AAWH. In this lecture, I would like not only to introduce what the Meiji Revolution was (and coincidentally, just last year was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event), but also to try to extract two useful types of generalizations from this historical event; one is hints for comparative studies of revolutions, and the other is ways to cope with long-term crisis. I hope my speech today will help provide some hints for historians to present their scholarly work in ways that will be more and more meaningful to the future of human beings in general.

#### **Part 1 What was the Meiji Revolution?**

The Meiji Revolution was one of the largest revolutions anywhere in the nineteenth century and occurred in the state with one of the largest populations in the world, possibly as high as sixth. At that time, below China and the Mughal Empire, there were five countries whose populations were all about the same size: Russia, the Ottoman Empire, France, Japan and the US. The Meiji Revolution dissolved the hereditary system of the early modern era and sparked incessant efforts for social reforms in this populous country.

Yet, the Meiji Revolution has been almost invisible in the historiography of modern revolutions. This is because the revolution was different from the model of revolution prevalent during the twentieth century. After the Russian Revolution, revolutions became strongly associated with the overthrow of the monarchy and were expected to feature the intentional use of violence and propaganda. In contrast, Japan's monarchy was actually strengthened by the Meiji Revolution. This is partly because early modern Japan was a double-headed federal state. The Meiji Revolution consolidated the double kingship under a single imperial throne, abolished about 260 daimyo states, and dissolved the hereditary status system of the samurai except for a tiny minority of about 500 houses which consisted of members of the imperial family, former daimyo and court nobility. In the name of the emperor, Japan carried out radical reforms of polity and society.

On the other hand, this revolution led to a smaller sacrifice compared to other revolutions, costing around 30,000 lives. The French Revolution saw a death toll of 1,550,000, about 400,000 in the civil war and another 1,150,000 in international wars. The Russian and Chinese Revolutions in the 20th century, meanwhile, each led to ten million deaths or more. So, the death toll in the Meiji Revolution was smaller, by a factor of 50 to more than 300, than most other major revolutions in modern history.

These differences make the Meiji Revolution useful in widening the concept of revolution. In order to correct social injustice, people are not necessarily obliged to overthrow a monarchy, nor must they resort to large-scale violence. On the other hand, an autocratic polity

often emerges after a monarchy and in the wake of a revolution; it is relatively common to see a period of unceasing violence and civil wars. Thus, reframing the Meiji Revolution in a global context will give us an opportunity to search for and perhaps identify methods of achieving radical reforms without triggering widespread loss of life or causing deep-seated resentment.

## **I . Structural changes during the Meiji Revolution: Japan in 1858 and 1877**

In order to understand the structural changes during the Meiji Revolution, it is useful to compare the state of Japan's polity and society in 1858 and 1877. The year 1858 was the starting point of the collapse of the early modern regime, while the year 1877 saw the beginning of a period of steady development following the end of violent rebellions against the new Meiji state.

1) Changes in polity: from a double-headed federal state with a hereditary status system to a unified nation state under a single emperor.

In 1858, Japan had a very unique polity that consisted of two ruling heads that governed around 260 daimyo states. The basic units of governance were local states headed by daimyo lords who controlled administration, taxation, and justice within their domains. The largest daimyo was the Tokugawa Shogunate, which directly governed one fourth of Japan. Other daimyo had feudal relationships with the Shogunate, which monopolized such supreme powers as command of the national military, diplomacy, the minting of coins and the authority to supervise the imperial court in Kyoto. Around 30 daimyo were large enough to finance their own armies. Yet, they were excluded from national decision-making, regardless of their kinship with the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Each top-level daimyo had about 1,000 to 2,000 registered samurai vassals. Among these vassals, two percent became top administrators and others assumed various offices according to their hereditary status. Their basic role was to go to war every time their master asked. Yet, they assumed the role of civil servants during the prolonged period of peace, over 200 years in a row. Commoners who lived in rural areas and towns had no obligation to go to war instead of paying taxes and providing corvée labor.

Early modern Japan had another political head in Kyoto: the Tennō ("emperor" in English, hereafter). From ancient times, the emperor retained the right to worship national deities and to confer official ranks to court noblemen, the Tokugawa, daimyo and other samurai. In this respect, the emperor's court held a higher status than the Shogunate. Yet, it had no right to make country-wide decisions and was compelled to obey laws set forth by the Shogunate. While people did not question this double-headed monarchy during the first half of the early modern period, by the early nineteenth century intellectuals had begun to promote and disseminate the idea that the emperor in Kyoto was the true sovereign of Japan.

Now let's fast-forward to 1877. By this point, Japan had become a single polity organized under the authority of the Meiji Emperor. The emperor had begun to legitimize governmental policy and law after the imperial restoration coup in 1868. In 1871, the new government had abolished daimyo domains and changed them into prefectures ruled by governmental officials. Moreover, it then proceeded to abolish samurai's status. Based on these drastic polity reforms, the Meiji government began to create a 'nation' through various means: the invitation of men of ability, including commoners, to governmental offices, the abolishment of the hereditary status of the discriminated and the introduction of a compulsory educational system

and a military conscription system. The Meiji Revolution led to a highly centralized political system and brought about a semi-classless government, at least in principle.

## 2) Changes in Society

One of the most remarkable changes during the Meiji Revolution was the abolition of the samurai aristocracy. The Meiji government began its efforts to ease status discrimination from the start. In 1868, The Meiji Emperor announced the integration of court nobility and samurai in his very first decree and then enacted the first constitution (Seitai) that prescribed to invite any person with ability, irrespective of their hereditary status, to contribute to the new government. As a result, non-samurai by birth already accounted for 20% of governmental positions before 1877. Next, the government dared to dissolve the traditional hereditary status system. The samurai class, which amounted to around 6% of the Japanese population, lost their income in exchange for small amounts of public bonds and were forced to eke out a living for themselves. At the same time, the Meiji government incorporated traditionally discriminated groups into the status of commoners. Yet, there was an exception to this official renunciation of status distinction. The government created a new Peerage class, consisting of about 400 families of former court nobility and daimyo lords in addition to the imperial family.

Reform of the taxation system not only improved public finance but also changed social ties among the people. The old system of rice-based agricultural taxes was transformed into a new cash-based land tax, which was collected according to a uniform nationwide standard. This change greatly eased the process of budget-making for the Meiji government. Yet, it is noteworthy that this reform also changed the fundamental nature of people's rights and duties. Before, taxes were imposed on communities, villages or towns, en masse. After the reform, individuals were compelled to pay taxes along with the government's recognition of their right to own property. The tax reform eased the transfer of land ownership, but in the long run it also loosened pre-existing social ties among various groups of people.

The Meiji government also relaxed various regulations that had been previously imposed on the people with regards to travel, habitation, occupation and marriage. Such measures were meant to increase social mobility in order to expand national power. Thus, Meiji leaders combined these measures with plans for enlightenment and industrialization. They made great efforts to acquire Western knowledge, sending students abroad, creating a compulsory education system, and forming state schools and state factories. Such measures encouraged and supported peoples' ambitions for an improved standard of life. The Meiji state thus institutionalized its Westernization efforts.

In short, the Meiji Revolution introduced radical changes in polity and society and created a nation with equal rights, at least as far as males were concerned. These changes mirrored similar developments in the West during the same century.

## 3) Sequential pattern of the transformation

No major revolution is truly over in a day; in fact, they often take many, many years. For example, the French Revolution did not really end in 1792 when the French monarchy was overthrown. Instead, this event set in motion a series of governmental transformations. The new republic changed into Napoleon's imperial rule, Bourbon monarchy, the Second republic, Napoleon III's imperial rule and the Third republic. It took more than 90 years for France to establish a stable order that embodied the ideals of the revolution. As for the Chinese revolution, it also took many years to establish a new order, with about 40 years separating the Xinhai

revolution in 1911 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. And if we add the years for China to achieve a stable society that steadily saw economic development, the duration of its revolution is closer to 70 years.

Compared to these other revolutions, the duration of the Meiji Revolution was somewhat shorter and triggered no reactionary years. It took about 20 years of political turmoil, civil wars and international incidents from 1858 to 1877. The duration extends to 40 years if we begin counting in 1853, with the visit of the US envoy, and keep counting until 1890, when Japan opened its National Diet and launched its full-fledged constitutional monarchy. Although Japan would experience a period of militarism and the suppression of liberty after 1931, the framework of that Meiji-era polity has persisted in many ways to the present day. The turmoil which occurred in Japan during the first half of the twentieth century was not a continuation of the Meiji Revolution.

As for the political turmoil during the Meiji Revolution, its time sequence was quite unique. Changes during the late Tokugawa period occurred very slowly. Tokugawa government managed to maintain their monopoly of supreme power for 10 years despite increasingly spirited political opposition, whose demands for political participation in national politics utilized slogans like 'politics based on public opinion' or 'Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians.' In contrast, the pace of change in the early Meiji period was very fast. Once established, the new government began to appoint officials irrespective of hereditary status in the very first year; within three and a half years, they had abolished daimyo states and integrated discriminated people into commoner status; and in just nine years, they had started to abolish samurai's hereditary stipends in exchange for a small amount in public bonds. So, within a single decade, Japan had transformed into a society where all people, or at least all men, enjoyed egalitarian rights, except for the previously mentioned peerage group.

This acceleration in the speed of change between the late Tokugawa and the early Meiji periods was closely related to the scarcity of systematic political ideologies. In the late Tokugawa era, politicians began political movements simply to correct the mistakes that they thought Shogunate had made. At the beginning, there was few plans for polity reform. Yet, during prolonged complicated political negotiations, they reached a national consensus to establish a central government under imperial rule that would seek the inclusion of any and all political parties, although some parties refused to accept this idea. At the same time, the top leaders of the new government had already found their next goal: to abolish both the daimyo domains and the samurai elite's hereditary status. In short, slow changes toward a certain direction during the late Tokugawa period made it possible for Japan to gain a mature consensus for radical reforms in the next period.

## **Part 2 Raising general questions from Meiji Revolution**

The Meiji Revolution offers several interesting insights for comparative historical studies. Today I will identify two types. First, the Meiji Revolution illuminates several issues for comparative studies of revolutions, and second, if treated as a case study, the Meiji Revolution sheds light on how to cope with an anticipated long-term crisis.

### **1) Comparative Studies of Revolutions**

How does the study of the Meiji Revolution contribute to our understanding of revolutions more generally? Here I will discuss three key issues.

The first is about the initial conditions of revolutions. That is, what kind of political structures tend to invite revolution.

The early modern Japanese regime was comparatively stronger in collecting taxes than China and Korea were at that time. The tax rate during the Qing dynasty was relatively low and taxes were collected only indirectly from rich or powerful members of the community (rather than from everyone directly) throughout its territory. The small states in Japan, by contrast, imposed a direct land tax that was relatively high compared to the rest of East Asia. Taxes amounted to no less than 15% of GDP despite a gradual decline during more than 200 years of continuous peace. And daimyo states did not lose their power even during the political turmoil during 1860s.

Yet, the Japanese regime was weak in its national framework. It was a double headed federation of more than 260 small states. This dispersed structure made it easier for the Japanese polity both to be dissolved and to be re-integrated. China and Korea, on the other hand, had highly centralized, consistent polities. The monarchs there recruited high officials by imperial examination, a process that was justified by Confucianism. The imperial examination system caused severe competition and many applicants never managed to pass at all. Yet it supplied strong legitimacy by promising a high 'equality of opportunity' among men and was designed to reward candidates who could demonstrate they had acquired Confucian virtue. The government carefully watched and excluded any kinds of ideology that might injure this regime. As a result of this system's meritocratic elements and governmental oversight, people never imagined the need for fundamental reforms.

In contrast, the Japanese double kingship became unstable in the 19th century. As nativist scholarship spread countrywide beginning in the latter half of the 18th century, many people began to believe that the emperor in Kyoto was the true king of Japan. Compounding this background, the Shogunate lost legitimacy when it gave in to armed pressure from the West. After the Kyoto emperor criticized the Shogunate's concessions to the West, more and more daimyo and people transferred their faith and trust to the emperor to integrate Japanese sovereignty into the sole body of the emperor. After the imperial restoration, daimyo states also lost their legitimacy. The dissolution of daimyo states resulted in the mass unemployment of their samurai retainers, a blow to the elite samurai status group which in turn enabled the abolition of the hereditary status system.

In short, Japan's dispersed structure facilitated those who wished to dissolve the polity, while double kingship (in which one sovereign, if discredited, can be easily replaced by the other) made Japanese reintegration much easier, since it entailed addressing the discrepancy between the hereditary status system and the actual distribution of talents.

This experience suggests revolution tends to happen if the existing regime has any fundamental inconsistencies. Inconsistencies themselves do not cause revolution, as early modern Japan, despite the inconsistencies in its polity, enjoyed peaceful stability for over 200 years. Yet, if and when the regime faces strong and sudden pressure, those inconsistencies can and do turn into contradictions, which brings self-destruction.

The second issue concerns the death toll. About 30,000 people were killed during the Meiji Revolution. This number is very low compared to other major revolutions. As noted in the introduction, the death tolls in the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions were larger by a factor of 50 to more than 300.

How can we explain this difference? One salient factor was whether foreign wars occurred or not. In Japan, both central governments, first the Shogunate and then the Meiji government, made a concerted effort to avoid war. Only two daimyos dared to engage in gun battles against Western ships but abandoned those efforts very quickly. In contrast, the wars which occurred in the aftermath of the French Revolution, for example, caused about 1,150,000 deaths.

Yet, the difference in the death toll is dramatic even when limited to during the civil war alone. In France, the death toll from the initial civil war was about 400,000. This means that despite having a population that was 20% smaller than Japan's, the civil war in late 18th century France killed thirteen times more people. What could have caused such a wide divergence? One factor was the existence and degree of popular involvement. When the populace begins to participate in the revolution, often they become concerned about blaming and excluding some figures they see as villains instead of creating some policy that might give concrete solutions. Those acting in the name of justice seldom hesitate to appeal to violence.

We can point out another factor: the presence or absence of a confrontation between ideologies. As the Wars of Religion in Europe showed, people tend to become extremely intolerant during religious or ideological confrontations. During the French Revolution, a severe struggle emerged between the secular government and the Catholic Church. In addition, French intellectuals presented a wide variety of competing blueprints for an ideal society. These conditions made it very difficult to reach any compromise or acceptable solution.

Similarly, in the Chinese case, the struggle between the Nationalists and the Communists escalated into a large-scale civil war. In contrast, Japan in the 19th century had little ideological conflict. Even the Shogunate accepted the ultimate authority of the Kyoto emperor. Although there were a variety of religions and religious sects, the majority of them co-existed peacefully together, even when combined in a single person's belief system. These conditions prevented Japan in the 19th century from encountering strong ideological conflicts.

The third issue is how the public sphere feels about violence. The Pen and the Sword emerge simultaneously in revolutions. When political movements demand radical, large scale reforms, they tend to resort to any means. People involved in enthusiastic movements sometimes do not hesitate to resort to violence to punish what they see as injustice or in revenge against the people who are believed to have betrayed the public. This is why revolutions often draw much blood. Yet, if revolutions are to be successful, they must create a new order by refusing to endorse violence no matter how bloody they had been or not. So, we must track how the public sphere breaks with violence.

As for the Meiji Revolution, assassination and armed threat sometimes changed the political climate. Yet, the political actors who demanded 'politics based on public opinion' relied on persuasion and negotiation to form the main stream of political opposition. Just after the small-scale war in which Satsuma and Choshu defeated the army of the former Shogunate, daimyos in Western and Central Japan immediately began supporting the new imperial government. They embraced opportunism and authoritarianism in order to keep the right to rule their domains. Next, the former Shogun himself offered a complete surrender. It is difficult to understand this decision because at that point he retained enough ground and naval forces to resist the imperial government. One might suppose that his fear of possible Western intervention convinced him to avoid exacerbating the civil war. Thus, only the Northeastern daimyos rose to fight against the new government, a fact which kept the death toll and the length of hostilities to a minimum. Syntonic mentality and nationalism against the West combined to keep 19th century Japan from prolonging its civil war or expanding it in scale.

Yet, the civil war was not the final case of political violence. Japan saw little reaction from the losers of the civil war. Yet there came a series of threats from the winners. The military leaders and soldiers among Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa refused to break up after the war ended. Moreover, after failing to find respectable governmental positions, they became anxious to provoke a new civil war. The Tokyo government tried to appease them by appointing them as Imperial guards. Yet, this tactic failed due to the debate over another issue, namely whether to

send a military expedition to Korea over a perceived diplomatic slight; the debate over this issue caused a major split in the highest levels of the government. After losing the debate and being thus unable to invade Korea, the troops of Satsuma and Tosa returned home and developed strong military oppositions. In the end, Satsuma actually rose in revolt and Tosa began to prepare to do so. Yet the Tokyo government managed, if only barely, to block Satsuma's advance. Even before the outcome of the Satsuma Rebellion was clear, Tosa stopped preparing to revolt and decided to switch tactics, opposing Tokyo not on the battlefield but in the public sphere, by speech only.

This experience testifies as to how difficult it can be to control the victorious army when it has contributed to the success of the revolution. And this point is also related to the final question below.

Revolutions fail if the country is unable to reach a cease-fire. In such cases, civil war only ends after completely destroying society. By contrast, revolutions are successful if they succeed in building a new regime. Yet this does not necessarily mean the new regime must embody the ideals that 19th century Europe presented. It is far from certain that the newly established order will become an egalitarian and liberal society. It may be the extent of violence mobilized during the revolution that determines the degree of freedom enjoyed by the resulting society. If armed forces play a greater role in the revolution, the new regime becomes more authoritative, tainted as it is by militaristic culture. Meiji Japan was fortunate to have escaped from this trap, although militarism would gradually infiltrate into Japanese society after the first Sino-Japanese war.

## 2. How shall we cope with an anticipated long-term crisis?

Japan's Meiji Revolution presents another important question for historical studies: how to cope with a long-term crisis? Some in late eighteenth-century Japan predicted a future crisis with Western countries and advocated changes in foreign policy and rearmament. Although their proposal was rejected by the contemporary government, this prescient groundwork contributed much in preparing the Tokugawa government to receive an American envoy sixty years later. The government changed its foreign policy from seclusion to opening its ports and succeeded in adapting to the globalization led by the West. Japan avoided major wars, enacted the Meiji Revolution and started economic and cultural development.

The experience of Japan's neighbors was very different. Qing China, despite its sizable trade with the West since the eighteenth century, fought several wars with foreign countries without making fundamental changes in its polity. Joseon Korea also fought two wars and kept refusing Western civilization. This key difference between Japan and its neighbors, each country's willingness to fight wars with foreign countries, caused a major divergence in the modern history of these countries. One of its pre-condition was whether they had anticipated a future crisis with the West or not beforehand.

In this regard, the Japanese experience during the first half of the nineteenth century can shed valuable light on the question of how to cope with long-term crises.

Most people go through their daily lives without paying any attention to potential future crises. They do so even though crises can and sometimes do occur which can have devastating impact on society at large. For example, the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 was the most powerful earthquake to strike Japan in at least 1000, perhaps 2000 years. And some crises are global in scale: if a large asteroid were to hit the earth, almost all life would perish. On the other hand, there are also non-cyclic, anticipated future crises such as global warming, a decline of resources, dwindling space to dispose of waste, etc. We cannot predict exactly when these sorts of

crisis will emerge as a fatal issue. Yet, both types provoke a similar reaction: people tend to avoid facing the problem, finding it extremely difficult to discover the solution and preferring to hope for the best and let things continue as they have been.

Japan in early nineteenth century faced a similar problem: fear of a future invasion from the West. Sadanobu Matsudaira, prime minister of the Tokugawa government in late eighteenth century, foresaw the possibility of future conflicts with the West. He studied world geography imported via Nagasaki, the only port opened to the Dutch, and paid keen attention to trends in the long-term global expansion of the Western powers. His measures in response were to tighten Japan's seclusion policy and to strengthen coastal defenses.

In 1792, Russian envoy Adam Laxman visited a port in the island now called Hokkaido. Sadanobu at once informed Laxman that Japan was not interested in opening international relations with Russia. Yet, to stave off any immediate confrontation with Russia, he also gave Laxman an official permit to enter Nagasaki port.

After the Russian envoy went back, Sadanobu took action. He launched an effort to reinforce Japan's coastal defense; ordered daimyo to take stock of the state of their own coastal defenses; sounded out the Dutch representatives at Nagasaki about the possibility of arranging the importation of Western ships and crewmen; and personally launched a coastal survey expedition to explore the coasts near Edo, Japan's capital.

What did his foresighted efforts earn him? He was dismissed by the Shogun and his colleagues (other high-level ministers) right after he returned to Edo. And it is easy to understand their decision. Was it proper to prepare for imagined invasions from countries situated on the opposite side of the globe? How much money would it cost to re-arm Japan given its totally unprepared state? Such steps would mean tax increases, and wouldn't any such tax increase potentially provoke popular riots? For politicians with common sense, Sadanobu's ambitious defense plans looked like a dangerous and unnecessary disturbance of Japan's long (then already nearly 200 years) peacetime state.

The Tokugawa government after Sadanobu continued tightening the seclusion policy without strengthening coastal defenses. When the second envoy from Russia arrived at Nagasaki ten years later, the Japanese government refused his demand for trade and forced him to leave Japan without granting a re-entry permit. This rebuff caused Russians to invade some places in northern Japan. Yet, this conflict did not escalate into a war, partly because Russia faced Napoleon's invasion on the European front at that time. In 1821, both governments exchanged prisoners and settled the conflict. Russian ships seldom appeared along the Japanese coast after this point.

After the détente with Russia, the Japanese government concluded that no country on the other side of the globe had the resources to send large numbers of troops to Japan. Consequently, they relaxed coastal defenses while tightening Japan's seclusion policy, issuing a national decree in 1825 to drive off any Western style ships from the coast by any means necessary. The majority of Japanese politicians thought that Japan would be able to maintain its peaceful seclusion from the world indefinitely.

This shortsightedness was what Yukoku Aizawa, the founder of the 'Revere the emperor, Expel barbarians' ideology that would prevail in early 1860s, once described with the phrase 'Summer insects do not know ice.' Because insects are born in spring and die in fall, they cannot imagine the existence of frozen water. Aizawa lamented that ordinary people could not foresee the emergence of future crises and chose to mock him as a madman, obsessed with a groundless fear.



Yet, this did not mean the Japanese returned to an old policy. At this point, they had conceived of—and wrote down—a range of foreign policies: to keep the status quo, to allow partial trade with the West to avoid war, to send Japanese ships abroad for inspection, trade and re-armament, or even to provoke Western ships to attack Japan and use this as an opportunity to start fundamental domestic reforms. The Tokugawa government kept these policies in its library and some cabinet members stored these documents in their own houses as part of their family papers.

This was because in the end of 1830s, the Tokugawa government withdrew the decree to oust Western ships and began re-armament of coastal defense. This step was taken right after governmental leaders heard about the outbreak outcome of the first Opium War in China. This policy change was also rejected when tax increase for reforms aroused many popular uprisings. Yet, it became clear that thought experiments (simulations, so to speak) for about 60 years would prove effective. In the early 1850s, thanks to Dutch news via Nagasaki, the report of a Japanese castaway and also official notification by the Dutch government, the Tokugawa cabinet became aware of the likelihood that a US envoy would visit Japan in the near future. Thus, then-chief minister Masahiro Abe had enough information and a range of foreign policies already prepared when the US envoy visited Japan in 1853.

Abe, having learned that the number and military strength of American ships exceeded Japan's defense capabilities, decided to loosen Japan's seclusion policy. He did so as a temporary measure, opening two minor ports to American ships without beginning trade or diplomatic relations. Then, he began re-armament by introducing Western military technologies, including war ships, and establishing academies to train students in Western languages while mobilizing men of ability to enter them from all over Japan. Next, the Tokugawa government totally altered its foreign policy three years after the first treaty with the US. With gradual steps in mind, Tokugawa cabinet concluded the first treaty of trade with Dutch and Russia in 1857 and eventually concluded an even more open treaty with the US and other Western countries; these steps led to constant diplomatic links with the West.

Because these quick changes meant the total abolition of seclusion policy, which had been in place for over 200 years, a strong opposition movement rose from within Japan. Yet despite this internal pressure, the Tokugawa government steadfastly refused to violate its treaties with the West, right up until it was overthrown. Also, the daimyos who initially advocated a war to expel the foreigners also came to support opening Japan after each tried fighting a short foreign war, an act which motivated and sped up domestic reforms. It was thanks to these conditions that Japan in the mid-nineteenth century was able to avoid major wars with the West. In short, the thought experiments of foreign policy for over 60 years prior to the actual moment of crisis proved to be very useful.

It is difficult for any people to prepare for future crises. It is also difficult to predict exactly when the issue will become serious even if people do anticipate the coming of such a crisis. The Japanese experience in the first half of the nineteenth century seems to offer some lessons: 1) We should not neglect pessimistic predictions, however strange they seem to be; 2) When people face unexpected situations, the minority's opinions will sometimes help them; 3) It is useful to run simulations on how to respond to crises, as the alternatives such early efforts provide can then be adapted according to the changing situation in the present; and 4) If we encounter some strange phenomenon, it is necessary to collect concrete data. Late Tokugawa Japan barely escaped from the threat of Western invasion, using their small store of information about the wider world, but more information would certainly have been better. It would surely have been easier for the Tokugawa government to change its foreign policy in response to the looming crisis if it had earlier taken the step of loosening the seclusion policy to allow



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governmental officials, at the very least, to go abroad, as this would have greatly increased their ability to gather concrete data. It is also likely that, if there had been more information about the world available throughout Japanese society at that time, public opinion to support the opening policy might have emerged before the arrival of the US envoy.

### Conclusion

We historians seldom present generalizations from the particular aspects of history we are studying. Yet we should do so! Our narrow research projects, if seen from the right perspective, can lead to interesting generalization that enrich our understanding of history and human society. These generalizations can offer valuable comparative insights and inform responses to present-day problems as well as help prepare us to deal with future crises. I will be happy if this lecture has contributed something, however elementary, to historical studies on the subject of the comparative study of revolutions and on the handling of long-term crises.



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