How Did Saigō Takamori Become a National Hero After His Death? 
The Political Uses of Saigō’s Figure and the Interpretation of Seikanron

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INTRODUCTION

Since Saigō Takamori is a relatively well-known historical figure both in Japan and elsewhere, there seem to be several ways of representing Saigō, especially in a non-academic field. First of all, anyone who has lived in Japan for any length of time but without necessarily being well versed in Meiji history, knows about Saigō’s popularity in Japan. Simply by taking, for example, the large number of books about Saigō written for the general public (young and the old alike), we can readily appreciate that many Japanese are familiar with his name. Similarly, his name appears in the guidelines for history education at primary school level, in which forty-two Japanese personalities are listed requiring in-depth study because of their contributions to Japanese history. Also, what makes Saigō the most familiar of all great Japanese men and women is probably his statue erected at the entrance of Ueno Park, not far from Ueno Zoo, a popular place for families. It is not surprising that such a regular and frequent presence of Saigō in daily life has made him a national ‘hero’.

The second portrayal often used to pay tribute to this personality seems to present him, as the title of a Hollywood blockbuster does, as being one of the ‘last samurai’ at the dawn of Japan’s modern era. This type of representation is largely diffused overseas among foreign fans of the way of the samurai and it has to be said that there is a perceptible gap between Japanese and foreign opinion, i.e. the praise of the traditional samurai world overseas on the one hand, and the relative detachment of the Japanese public from this world on the other. Nonetheless, things
are changing: Western fascination for the samurai, recently brought to Japanese attention by the above-mentioned blockbuster, triggered a boom for what we call *bushidō*, the way of the samurai, at least among Japanese publishers. It is important to note that this boom cannot be understood without taking into account the recent context of the re-evaluation of the Meiji Restoration.

Another approach for the fans of Saigō is to emphasize his human and moral qualities such as uprightness, generosity, frugality, faithfulness, and patriotism – qualities embodying, for his fans, the ideal of a Japanese political leader. The advocates of such a perception are novelists, economic leaders and writers close to the traditional right. They like to refer to Saigō's personality in order to draw public attention to the current situation of Japanese society.

Lastly, unlike part-time historians, academics endeavour to adopt a more rigorous approach to the examination of Saigō's life. Historians have drawn special attention to the interpretation of the great crisis of 1873, as a result of which not only Saigō, but also Itagaki Taisuke and Eto Shinpei, left the government. Depending on the interpretation of the crisis that a historian proposes, the perception of Saigō varies considerably from one to another and that is why a close investigation into the crisis is indispensable in order to shed new light on Saigō's role as well as on the form of 'modernity' resulting from the crisis. The direct cause of the crisis is as follows: Saigō wished to be sent to Korea as an ambassador plenipotentiary of Japan and this trip was planned to take place after Saigō obtained the imperial authorization. Nonetheless, those who came back from their journey to the United States and Europe with the Iwakura Mission, especially Ōkubo Toshimichi, disagreed with Saigō's trip and ended up in cancelling the project. It was this violent conflict between the two parties that caused Saigō and the others to finally leave the government.

As to the interpretation of the crisis of 1873, historians are not unanimous. The debates on Saigō's real motivations for the negotiations with Korea do not seem to have come to an end. Until now, many have readily associated Saigō's position with the expression *seikanron*, an opinion which favoured the adoption of a hard-line policy towards Korea at the time of the crisis (literally meaning 'Argument for a Conquest of Korea'). We must remember that the assessment of Saigō's ideas and actions by historians largely relies on the interpretation of Saigō's genuine motives.

Indeed, Saigō's case provides us with a good example of the subtle relationships between memory and history. We can reasonably present an hypothesis that the writing of an 'official history' – a narrative chosen by Japanese history textbooks – might be influenced not only by a 'collective memory' – which may not necessarily be singular and may be constructed by the historians close to the State – but also by the balance of power between several ideological forces willing to impose each point of view.

This chapter aims at exploring the process of interaction between