Chapter 1

"POWERFULLY SENTIMENTAL"

Saigō's Early Years in Satsuma*

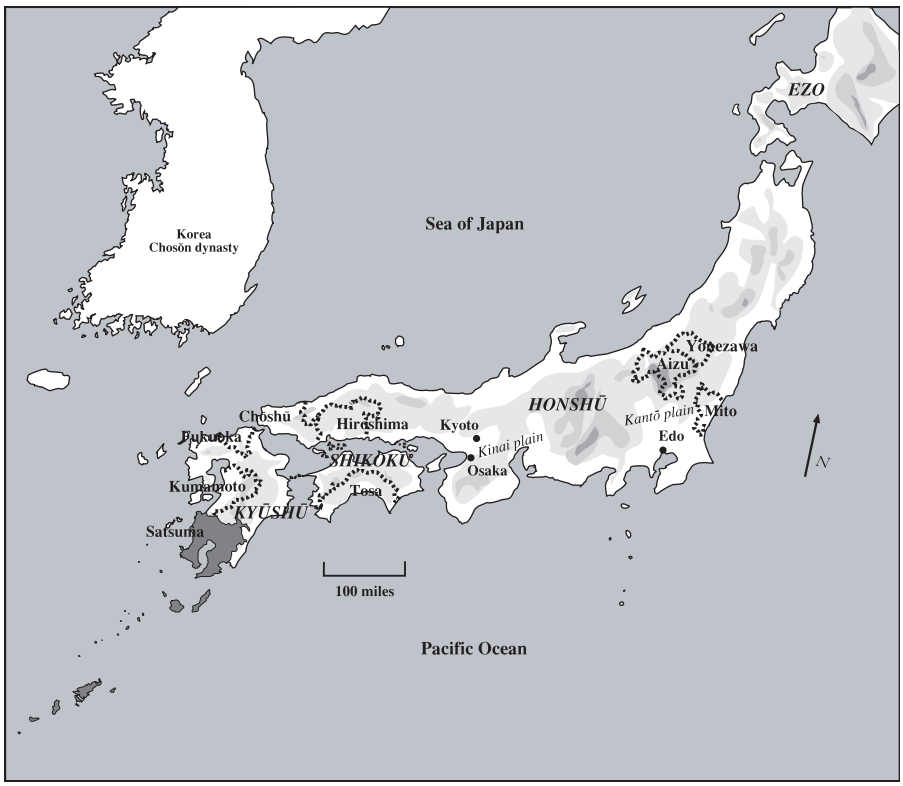
Saigō's Birthplace

Saigō was born in Kagoshima, a castle town and the capital of Satsuma domain. Kagoshima was, depending on one's perspective, a primitive backwater or Japan's gateway to the world. Viewed from the shogun's capital of Edo (now Tokyo) or the imperial capital of Kyoto, Kagoshima was remote in the extreme: it lay at the far southwestern corner of Kyūshū, the southernmost of the four main islands of Japan. Ōsumi, one of the three provinces that comprised Satsuma domain, means "big corner": if Kyoto and Edo were the center of Japan, then Satsuma was at the periphery. The overland route from Edo to Kagoshima was nearly a thousand miles; the speediest couriers took two weeks to bring news from Edo. Natives of Satsuma spoke a dialect of Japanese virtually unintelligible to the rest of Japan. Popular literature reinforced this image of Kagoshima as primitive. In his famous collection of erotic fiction, Ihara Saikaku described Satsuma as "remote and backward."[1]

*This description of Saigō in his youth is from the recollections of Ōkubo Toshimichi. See *STZ* 6:631.

On the other hand, Satsuma was a link to the outside world. Before the 1630s traders coming up from China often made their first stop in Satsuma, and the domain became an entry point for new goods and technologies. The Japanese word for sweet potato, for example, is *satsumaimo,* or "Satsuma potato": the tuber was brought to Japan from China through Satsuma. (In Satsuma, however, term is *karaimo,* or "Chinese potato.")[2] Guns also first arrived in Japan through Satsuma, specifically the island of Tanegashima in 1543. An early Japanese term for matchlock was *tanegashima,* reflecting the weapon's point of arrival. When nineteenth-century students from Satsuma produced one of the first Japanese-English dictionaries, *satsuma jisho,* or "Satsuma dictionary," was briefly a term for Japanese-English dictionary.

Satsuma's extensive contact with the world outside Japan had a political dimension as well as a geographical one. The domain had a special relationship with the kingdom of the Ryukyus, now the Japanese prefecture of



Satsuma and major domains, c. 1850

Okinawa. Satsuma conquered the Ryukyuan capital of Naha in 1609 and thereafter demanded tribute from the Ryukyuan kings as a sign of their subjugation. The daimyo of Satsuma, the Shimazu house, used this relationship to elevate their status within Japan: they were the only daimyo house to receive an oath of fealty from a foreign king. Externally, however, the Shimazu took great pains to conceal their power over the Ryukyus. The great value of the kingdom was as an economic bridge to China. According to Chinese diplomatic protocol, the Ryukyuan king was a Chinese vassal, and Satsuma had no desire to imperil trade by challenging this relationship. Thus Japanese officials in the Ryukyus concealed all signs of their presence before the arrival of Chinese diplomatic personnel: they left the capital, Naha, for a nearby village and ordered the Ryukyuans to hide all records of their presence. Chinese diplomats suspected that something was afoot but never disputed the arrangement.[3] The Shimazu were not alone in handling foreign trade. The Tokugawa shogunate entrusted trade with Japan's trading post in Pusan, Korea, to the Sō house of Tsushima domain, and the Matsumae house of Matsumae domain managed trade with the northern frontier of Ezo. But the Shimazu's position was uniquely prestigious: the shogunate ordered them to "rule" over the Ryukyuan kingdom.[4]

In Kagoshima itself there was a sizable Ryukyuan embassy, known as the Ryukyukan, which handled diplomatic affairs between the governments. The Ryukyuan community was probably never more than a few hundred people, but it had a marked impact on the city. A nineteenth-century visitor from Edo reported that people took no notice of Ryukyuans but greeted travelers from Edo with quiet laughter.[5] Small as it was, the Ryukyukan community was nevertheless one of the largest foreign communities in Japan. In the seventeenth century the Tokugawa shoguns had drastically restricted travel to and from Japan. Japanese who left Japan were barred under penalty of death from ever returning, and oceangoing ships were prohibited. Dutch and Chinese merchants were restricted to Nagasaki.[6]

The Shimazu were distinctive in other ways as well. Not only did they receive foreign ambassadors, but also they were the oldest surviving warrior house in Japan. Few daimyo families could comfortably trace their lineage past the 1500s. Most of the daimyo of the early modern era rose from lower status during the intense civil warfare of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Even the ancestors of the Tokugawa shoguns were but a minor

warrior family in the 1540s. The Shimazu, by contrast, traced their lineage as warlords back to Japan's first shogunate, the Kamakura regime (1185–1333). In 1185 Minamoto Yoritomo, Japan's first shogun, appointed Koremune Tadahisa as a military steward *(geshi)* over Shimazu *shō,* a large investiture in what is now Kagoshima Prefecture. In 1197 he promoted Tadahisa to military governor *(shugo)* of the province, and the following year Tadahisa changed his family name to match his investiture. This is where the Shimazu daimyo began their genealogies. Remarkably, historians have traced the Shimazu back even farther, to an imperial courtier family in the sixth century and, with less certainty, to an émigré noble house from the Korean peninsula. But as daimyo preferred warrior ancestors to courtiers, Tadahisa became the official progenitor of the Shimazu line.[7]

This extraordinary genealogy shaped the thinking of Saigō and his cohort. Satsuma samurai could take unique pride in serving the Shimazu, who had ruled the same territory uninterruptedly for more than six centuries. The Shimazu, in fact, proved more durable than the shoguns who invested them: they developed an independent base of power and survived the collapse of the Kamakura shogunate in the 1330s. The second shogunate, known as the Muromachi or Ashikaga shogunate, confirmed Shimazu authority over Satsuma. After the collapse of the Ashikaga regime in the 1400s, Japan deteriorated into pervasive civil war, and the Shimazu, like many daimyo, expended great effort suppressing obstreperous vassals. Unlike many daimyo, however, the Shimazu emerged victorious, and they consolidated and expanded their territories. In the unification struggles of the late 1500s, the Shimazu opposed Japan's preeminent warlords. The Shimazu fought against Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the 1580s and lost their territorial gains in northern Kyūshū. They also opposed the founder of Japan's third shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu. In the great Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the Shimazu and the Tokugawa fought on opposing sides: Tokugawa Ieyasu led the eastern alliance, while the Shimazu fought with the western alliance. The Tokugawa won. Ieyasu's appointment as shogun in 1603 confirmed his supremacy and inaugurated the 265-year reign of the Tokugawa dynasty, Japan's most durable shogunate. To reward his allies and enhance his own holdings, Ieyasu seized millions of acres of land, taking all or part of his enemies' territory. Remarkably, Ieyasu left Shimazu holdings untouched. Although defeated, the Shimazu were still a formidable enemy, and Ieyasu had reason to avoid a fight. Furthermore, because Kagoshima was nearly a thousand miles from the

shogun's new capital, Edo, the Shimazu were unlikely to attack the shogunate.[8] The result was a compromise. The Shimazu recognized the supremacy of the shogunate and performed the appropriate acts of obeisance, such as signing an oath of loyalty in blood. For his part, Ieyasu confirmed Shimazu control over their traditional lands in southwestern Kyūshū.

The Tokugawa settlement of the early 1600s still affected politics two centuries later. Having opposed the Tokugawa in 1600, the Shimazu were labeled *tozama daimyō,* or "outside" lords. *Tozama* lords were barred from holding posts in the shogun's administration and excluded from decisions in national politics. Most of the great lords of the southwest were tozama lords, as were most of the daimyo with large holdings. Daimyo who had won Ieyasu's trust before 1600 were commonly enfiefed as *fudai daimyō,* or vassal lords. This distinction between fudai and tozama lords became a cornerstone of daimyo politics: even in Saigō's day, key shogunal offices were reserved for fudai.[9] The fact that daimyo with important shogunal posts were far more invested in the strength of the shogunate than were tozama lords shaped Japan's response to imperialism in the 1850s and 1860s. Many tozama lords pushed for a power-sharing arrangement that would give them a voice in international affairs. Fudai lords were far more wedded to traditional power structures and supported the shogun's exclusive authority over diplomatic matters. The Shimazu were arguably the quintessential tozama lords. They did not openly challenge the shogunate until the 1860s, but they were remarkably independent in civil and diplomatic affairs. The Shimazu thought of themselves less as warlord vassals of the Tokugawa than as Tokugawa equals who had lost a key battle. During the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate, the Shimazu grew particularly brazen, sending an independent delegation to the 1867 International Exhibition in Paris that represented not Japan, but the kingdom of Satsuma and the Ryukyus.

Today the Shimazu no longer rule, but they remain a distinct presence in Kagoshima. The Shimazu descendants are active in tourism, including taxis, hotels, and museums, so any visitor to Kagoshima is likely to meet an employee of the Shimazu. The seal of Kagoshima City is clearly derived from the Shimazu family crest. Nowhere else in Japan are the descendants of feudal warlords as visible in contemporary daily life.

Saigō's homeland, the Shimazu family territories, was a huge domain, encompassing not only the province of Satsuma but also the province of Ōsumi and the southwestern part of the province of Hyūga. With these

three provinces, known collectively as Satsuma domain, the Shimazu ruled the entire southern tip of Kyūshū, an area of more than thirty-five hundred square miles. The Shimazu holdings were also among the most populous in early modern Japan: in the 1870s roughly 760,000 people lived in Satsuma domain. Only three domains had larger populations: Kaga, Nagoya, and Hiroshima. The Tokugawa shoguns commonly ranked daimyo by the official rice harvest; by this standard the Shimazu had the second-largest investiture in Japan, smaller only than the Maeda holdings in Kaga.[10]

In the center of Kagoshima City lay Tsurumaru Castle, a strikingly unimpressive fortress built in 1602 as a residence for the daimyo Shimazu Iehisa. Tsurumaru was more a villa than a fortress. The castle had an inner keep *(honmaru)* and outer enceinte *(ni-no-maru),* but nothing in either section was designed to repel a sustained attack. Although the castle originally had steep stone walls and a small moat, it lacked the high, multistory towers common in castles of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shirasagi Castle in Himeiji, for example, now a tourist landmark because of its striking beauty, has a towering six-story keep and three small keeps. Moats, turrets, steep walls, and battlements surround the castle. Routes into Shirasagi are circuitous and deceptive: the inner passages form a maze of blind alleys. By contrast, Tsurumaru's fortifications were both minimal and poorly maintained. A mid-eighteenth-century report on the castle observed, with some exaggeration, "although diagrams of the keep and enceinte show turrets, walls and moats, these do not actually exist." Access to the castle was surprisingly straightforward: a small bridge led directly from Kagoshima City, across the moat, and into the enceinte.[11]

Why did Iehisa build such a simple and poorly defended castle? Today a plaque in front of the castle ruins tells the visitor that the Shimazu did not need an elaborate castle because "the people are their fortress." This is an appealingly populist explanation, but it is seriously misleading. Kagoshima was defended, against both invaders and its own peasants, by a dense network of castles: in Saigō's day more than a hundred small fortresses, called *tojō,* dotted the landscape. Tsurumaru Castle had no defenses because they were not needed: with fortresses throughout the domain, a large central castle would have been redundant. The Shimazu system of rural fortresses was technically a violation of Tokugawa policy, which in 1615 had limited each daimyo to one castle. The Shimazu ignored the order, and the Tokugawa chose not to contest their decision. The Shimazu network of castles meant

Shōkō shūseikan, Kagoshima

Tsurumaru Castle (Tsurumarujō)

that the Satsuma countryside was under constant samurai surveillance. In most domains the vast majority of samurai lived in the daimyo's castle town, and peasant villages enjoyed a margin of self-governance. In Satsuma, however, thousands of low-ranking samurai lived in the countryside, and even the lowliest details of village life were part of samurai rule.[12]

Kagoshima was a sizable city, with a nineteenth-century population of roughly seventy thousand. The vast majority of its residents, perhaps 70 percent, were samurai and their families.[13] Like most warrior capitals, the city of Kagoshima was explicitly hierarchical in its layout. At the center was the daimyo's castle, the political and administrative heart of the domain. Nearest the castle were government offices and the residences of the domain's elite retainers. Next were the residences of lower retainers: the government's middle managers and staff. Last were commoners' residences, which banded the city to the north and south. There lived the artisans and merchants whose activities made urban life possible. In classic castle towns, such as the shogun's capital of Edo, the city's hierarchy resembled a series of concentric rings centered on the lord's castle. Kagoshima resembled this model, but was constrained by a topography that bounded the city to the west by Mount Shiroyama and to the east by Kinkō Bay. The mountain and the sea pressed the standard pattern of rings into a series of bands.

Immediately in front of the castle lay a broad avenue known as Sengoku baba, or, in loose but effective translation, "Millionaire Avenue." Sengoku, or one thousand *koku,* referred to the annual income of the residents. A *koku* was just under five bushels, and one thousand *koku* was, by any measure, a lot of rice. Some residents of Sengoku baba had investitures in excess of ten thousand *koku*. Had these men been direct vassals of the shogun, rather than vassals of the Shimazu, they would have ranked as daimyo in their own right and enjoyed direct audiences with the shogun. The residents of Sengoku baba were the daimyo's senior advisers. They had storied ancestries and privileged access to the daimyo. Some were the lord's distant cousins, descendants of the younger brothers of earlier daimyo, whose residences reflected their wealth and power. The typical residence in Sengoku baba was a large compound surrounded by stone or stucco walls. This housed not only the retainer and his families but also his aides and servants. In Satsuma, as in many domains, the samurai elite was virtually a class unto itself. While Saigō's parents struggled to keep clothes on their growing children, the residents of Sengoku baba agonized over the details of castle protocol and the architecture of their carp ponds.[14]

Just south of this inner district, along the banks of the Kōtsuki River, lay the residences of middle and lower retainers. These were the men who staffed the daimyo's government, drafting correspondence, compiling government edicts, tallying tax receipts, and implementing the policies formulated by their superiors. Lower and middling retainers lived in one of four wards: Arata-machi, Kōrei-machi, Uenosono-machi, and Kajiya-machi. Arata, Kōrei, and Uenosono Wards lay southwest of the Kōtsuki River, while Kajiya-machi lay northeast, tucked away in a river bend. Because Kajiya was on the castle side of the river, it was nominally more prestigious than the other three wards. Kajiya was itself subdivided into two districts: Upper Kajiya (Uenokajiya) and Lower Kajiya (Shitanokajiya). "Upper" in this context meant northwest, or nearer the castle. Lower Kajiya, the less distinguished half of an undistinguished district, was a grouping of roughly eighty residences. The district was crosscut by narrow streets and broad avenues. Colorful street names such as "Cat Shit Alley" (Neko no kuso koro) made it clear that Shitanokajiya was not the high-rent district. The homes were small, single-family residences, with compact gardens and bamboo fences. The district was densely populated, with most plots less than five thousand square feet. On one of the side streets was a slightly larger home,

just over ten thousand square feet, belonging to Saigō Kichibei, father of Saigō Takamori.[15] Nearby were the homes of a remarkable number of future leaders: Ōkubo Toshimichi, Saigō's childhood friend, political ally, and eventually the principal architect of the modern Japanese state; Ōyama Iwao, Saigō's cousin and a future army chief of staff and lord privy seal; and Tōgō Heihachirō, later chief of the naval general staff and Japan's most respected admiral.

From Saigō's home the dominant sight was Sakurajima, or "Cherry Blossom Island." Sakurajima lay roughly three miles east of Kajiya-machi, across Kinkō Bay. Strictly speaking, Sakurajima is no longer an island. A massive eruption in 1914 poured lava and ash into the bay, creating an isthmus. "Cherry Island" became the tip of a promontory extending into Kinkō Bay from the Ōsumi peninsula. Sakurajima erupts with great regularity—an average of several times a week—and dumps a constant layer of ash on the surrounding area. The volcanic ash makes the soil on Sakurajima especially fertile, and in the 1800s thousands of farmers lived on the island. The island was a major source for one of the region's specialties, mandarin oranges.

Saigō never witnessed the havoc Sakurajima could cause, but in his youth people still remembered the volcano's huge eruption of 1779. The eruption began on the evening of the 9/29, when tremors rocked the island. On 10/1, at 11:00 A.M., the volcano began to seethe, turning the surrounding ocean a brilliant purple. That afternoon Sakurajima exploded, producing a plume of gas and volcanic debris more than seven miles high. The volcano rained ash over the island for five days, devastating nearby villages. A thick blanket of ash buried virtually all of the island's farmland. One hundred thirty people were killed, and more than five hundred homes were destroyed. The eruption wiped out the orange crop: more than twenty-one thousand trees were destroyed. The devastation was so severe that the Shimazu were unable to make their traditional year-end gift of oranges to the shogun.[16]

Saigō's Lineage

Saigō traced his lineage to an illustrious warrior family, the Kikuchi clan of Higo Province in central Kyūshū. The Kikuchi lineage was renowned for its valiant service in defense of the emperor and against foreign invaders. The

clan first distinguished itself during the Jürchen invasion of northern Kyūshū in 1019. The family rose to prominence during the Mongol invasion of Japan in 1281, when the heroism of Kikuchi Takefusa (1245–1285) helped drive back the enemy. The family also was active in the Kenmu Restoration (1333–1336), an attempt by the emperor Go-Daigo to reassert imperial authority against the Kamakura shogunate.† The conflict between Go-Daigo and the shogunate centered on succession to the imperial throne. Whereas Go-Daigo demanded the authority to name his own heir, the shogunate insisted on maintaining a thirteenth-century compromise whereby the two rival branches of the imperial line would succeed to the throne in turn. Go-Daigo refused to compromise, and in 1331 he launched a coup against the shogunate. Takefusa's grandson Kikuchi Taketoki (?–1333) joined Go-Daigo's cause. The coup failed, Taketoki was killed, and Go-Daigo was sent into internal exile. Ironically, this failure strengthened the imperial cause: Go-Daigo's supporters, galvanized by his poor treatment, reorganized and destroyed the shogunate in 1333. Once in power, however, Go-Daigo showed strikingly little appreciation for his warrior allies. In the name of imperial rule he sought to strengthen central control at the expense of the regional authority of the warrior class. Although many of his edicts were strikingly innovative, he described his policies as a return to the eighth century, an era before the rise of independent warrior power. In a striking miscalculation he named as shogun his own son, crown prince Morinaga, aggressively slighting the generals who had restored him to the throne. This disregard for warrior privilege alienated Go-Daigo's supporters and undermined his government. In 1335 Ashikaga Takauji, one of Go-Daigo's erstwhile allies, drove him from Kyoto and installed as emperor a member of the rival lineage. Three years later Takauji arranged his own appointment as shogun, founding the Ashikaga shogunate, the second of Japan's three shogunal dynasties. The Kikuchi, however, remained loyal to Go-Daigo. Taketoki's son Takemitsu (?–1373) continued to defend Go-Daigo's line, known as the Southern Court, and fought with Go-Daigo's son Kaneyoshi against the Ashikaga shogunate. The imperial succession

†The English terms "Kenmu Restoration" and "Meiji Restoration" suggest a parallelism that does not exist in Japanese. The original Japanese terms are *Kenmu shinsei* and *Meiji ishin*. *Shinsei* means new government, whereas *ishin* means a renovation or restoration of something old. The terms are similar but not identical.

dispute was resolved in 1392, but the resolution represented a victory for the Northern Court. The two lines again agreed to alternate succession, but in practice the Northern line never relinquished control. The current Japanese emperor descends from the Northern Court. The Southern Court effectively vanished.[17]

Despite its failure, Go-Daigo's cause became a touchstone for imperial loyalism. Ashikaga's attack on Go-Daigo became a symbol of treachery, and the entire Ashikaga shogunate was tainted by its founder's duplicity. Ironically, the Northern lineage had a better genealogical claim on the throne, and this made the issue politically explosive, most recently in the twentieth centruy. By Saigō's day, however, there was a remarkable consensus on Ashikaga Takauji. Whichever side was legitimate in the court dispute, Takauji had betrayed his master, and not only nativist and Shinto scholars but also Confucian intellectuals deemed Takauji a vile usurper, symbolic of everything treacherous.

The symbolism of the Northern and Southern Court dispute took on new meaning in the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate. For Saigō and his cohort this fourteenth-century conflict seemed immediately relevant to their own struggle. In the 1860s, when the imperial court and the Tokugawa shogun clashed openly over foreign policy, the Ashikaga became a metaphor for shogunal arrogance. In 1863/2/22, for example, imperial loyalists broke into Tōji-in Temple in Kyoto and beheaded the statues of three Ashikaga shoguns: Takauji, Yoshiakira, and Yoshimitsu. The heads turned up days later on a stand by the Kamo River, exposed for public display like the heads of executed criminals. A note on the stand read, "since these three traitors did the worst evil, their vile statues have been visited with the vengeance of heaven." For those utterly opaque to historical reference, the vandals posted a helpful note on a public notice board, warning unspecified persons not to repeat the treachery of the Ashikaga. If these unnamed traitors did not "immediately repent" and "return to the ancient practice of assisting the court," then loyal samurai would "punish them for their crimes." The decapitation of the shogunal statues alarmed the Tokugawa shogunate, since no one could miss the symbolism. The vandals had metaphorically assassinated the shogun and were threatening to move beyond metaphor.[18]

There is no hard evidence to link Saigō to the Kikuchi clan, but Saigō himself believed earnestly in this genealogy. When in exile on Amami

Ōshima he began to use the pseudonym Kikuchi Gengo, explicitly linking himself to the fourteenth-century loyalists. His friends honored this, addressing their letters to "great lord Kikuchi" *(Kikuchi taikun)*.[19] Saigō himself explicitly linked his own proimperial activism with the defense of Go-Daigo four centuries earlier. For a man sent into internal exile by his own lord, the legacy of the Kikuchi was particularly comforting. Taketoki and Takemitsu were failures in their own lifetimes but were ultimately redeemed as defenders of justice and honor.[20] Through the Kikuchi genealogy Saigō could blunt the sting of political failure and associate himself with near-legendary heroes. The Kikuchi genealogy also reinforced Saigō's support for the imperial cause and his suspicion of the shogunate. His descent from the Kikuchi made challenging shogunal arrogance a point of family honor.[21]

Saigō's Family

About Saigō's parents we know little. His father, Saigō Kichibei (1807–1852), was a division chief in the domain's office of the exchequer, the agency responsible for taxation. He held the rank of *koshōgumi,* which was eighth in the hierarchy of ten samurai ranks. Men in the two lowest ranks—*yoriki* and *ashigaru*—were generally restricted to menial posts such as guard duty, so Kichibei was, by rank, near the bottom of "white-collar" urban samurai. As a section head he had effectively risen to the top of his station. He had a reputation as hardworking, loyal, and unconcerned with material gain. About Saigō's mother, Masa (?–1852), we know still less. She was the daughter of Shiibara Ken'emon, a local samurai. In later years Saigō remembered her as even-tempered and sympathetic.[22]

Saigō was born on 1827/12/7 as his parents' first child. Following the custom of the day, Saigō changed his given name several times during his lifetime. Names, in premodern Japan, were not absolute markers of one's identity, but relative markers of one's age, status, and position. A samurai's name changed as he aged. An infant, a boy, a married household head, and a retired household head each had different responsibilities, so a change in name was only natural. As an infant Saigō was known as Saigō Kokichi and Saigō Jūroku, but at age seven he took the name Kichinosuke. At adulthood he took the name Takamori. On 1853/2/10, after his father's death, Saigō

filed official papers changing his given name to Zenbei, and on 1858/10/8 he changed his name to Sansuke, but in personal correspondence continued to use Kichinosuke, then Zenbei and Kichibei. Saigō also is commonly referred to by a pen name he adopted during his exile, Saigō Nanshū, or Saigō of the South. Like his contemporaries, Saigō could use several names at once: an official name for work, a colloquial name among friends, and a variety of pen names for poems.[23]

Saigō was the eldest of seven children, four sons and three daughters. The youngest child, Kohei (1847–1877), was nearly twenty years Saigō's junior. The Saigō household also included Kichibei's parents, Saigō Ryūzaemon (?–1852) and his wife (1775–1862), and the family of Kichibei's younger brother Kohei, so at its maximum the family totaled sixteen people. Kichibei's income as a tax official never met his family's needs. The family home in Shitanokajiya was a ramshackle affair, in constant disrepair. Because the family was short of bedding, Saigō slept with his siblings crowded under a single blanket *(futon)*. This was especially onerous because the children were so large: Saigō men commonly reached six feet as adults. In 1855 the family moved across the river to Uenosono, but their new home was equally dilapidated. Saigō's sister-in-law Iwayama Toku recalled that "the house in Uenosono was really a decrepit thing. The floor sagged like a duck's nest."[24]

The Saigō family managed to make ends meet by borrowing and farming. In 1847 and 1848, for example, Saigō Takamori and his father borrowed a total of 200 gold ryō from the Itagaki family, who were wealthy landowners in Mizuhiki district, now a part of Kagoshima City. This was an astonishing sum, equal to several years' income for most samurai or craftsmen. The Saigō family had no collateral save their name and were, in fact, unable to make regular payments. Only in 1872, when Saigō was an imperial councilor *(sangi)* of the Meiji government, was the family able to begin repaying the debt.[25]

With borrowed money the family bought land for farming. The records here are spotty, but we know that the family owned at least one parcel in Nishi beppu, now a part of Kagoshima City. Tax records list the land as owner-cultivated and held by Saigō Kichibei, Saigō's father. Iwayama Toku recalls that Kichijirō, Saigō's younger brother, used to go out to Nishi beppu, collect firewood, bring it back to the samurai quarters on a packhorse, and sell it door to door. It is unclear whether Takamori himself ever

stood in a paddy field and planted rice, but, as eldest son and heir, he was intimately familiar with the finances of family farming.[26]

Even with this extra income, the Saigō family lived frugally. The women of the house did the menial work of cleaning and washing, and Iwayama later recalled being mistaken for a maidservant by a visitor.[27] These strained circumstances shaped young Takamori's personality and philosophy. His father, Kichibei, was formally a full samurai *(shi* or *jōkashi),* and the family should, in theory, have lived off of his stipend. But in practice the Saigō family lived more like *gōshi:* self-sufficient rural warriors. *Gōshi* were descendants of the bottom of the military class and were relegated to the countryside, where they governed and controlled the peasantry. As urban samurai, the Saigō were legally superior to the *gōshi.* The gap between urban, true samurai and *gōshi* was so great that if a samurai felt that a *gōshi* had impugned his honor, he was legally entitled to strike him dead. Because the conflict involved a defense of honor, it was not murder, and the samurai needed only to convince his superiors of the gravity of the affront. While young Takamori, as a full samurai, was a member of this elite, economically he lived more like a *gōshi.* The clash between nominal and practical status was a daily experience for Saigō.[28]

This tension between formal status and daily life instilled in Takamori a deep sense of honor and humility. Saigō could not revel in the perquisites of elite status, but he could ennoble his poverty with stoicism and dignity. In 1872, when he finally repaid part of his twenty-five-year-old loan from the Itagaki, Saigō offered an apology so extensive it all but exalted insolvency.

> I arrived safely yesterday in the retinue of his majesty so kindly overlook [the haste of my note]. Years ago my late father borrowed from you and and in the years since, my brothers and I, having experienced much hardship, did not come visit you at all, and let our debt sit as is. For this I am at a loss for words. . . . Last year, when I went to the capital, I was burdened with a major government office, and I was overwhelmed. This important appointment, for which I am most unworthy, is a result of your lending my father a large amount of money, which enabled my late father to raise many children and which opened this path for me. This my father told me time and time again. Because I sincerely want to repay you, I have sought many ways, but I simply cannot find a way to repay the debt; furthermore, I can

> but pay only one year's interest, and for this, I offer my apologies. I had hoped to make this homecoming an occasion on which to ease my late father's worries, but since we are a landless family with many dependents, even the basic task of repaying all the interest and principal at once is beyond us. I ask your forbearance on this matter.[29]

In some ways the note reveals too well Takamori's attitudes toward money. It is unclear from his letter whether he is repaying the principal, some interest, or both. Only from the Itagaki's response do we know that Saigō enclosed 400 yen: the principal and roughly eight years' interest. The Itagaki, diplomatically, refused to accept the interest and returned 200 yen.[30]

Saigō learned to revel in his privileged but humble circumstances. In later years, when his finances were less strained, he rejected expensive clothes and furnishings. These were not, he argued, things of interest to a samurai. His favorite pastime in adulthood, hunting with his dogs, was something appropriate for a samurai boy of humble means. He would relax by making his own hunting sandals out of straw, or by making his own fishing lures. Saigō's preference for simple, traditional pleasures distinguished him from his colleagues in the Meiji government who used their new wealth and influence to entertain in Western style, hosting, for example, European-style costume balls. For Saigō, such lavish novelties were emblems of a revolution gone bad.[31]

Saigō's Education

Saigō was educated in a two-tiered school system: he attended both a local school and the central domain academy. All samurai boys in the castle town, save a few members of the elite, attended neighborhood schools called *gojū*. The *gojū* were fraternities as much as schools: hazings were a central part of the *gojū* experience, and boys spent much of their time learning the martial arts and preparing for local festivals. Although the *gojū* did provide a solid rudimentary education, the emphasis was on group solidarity and discipline. Boys fourteen and older served as teachers for the younger members, and each *gojū* was expected to function as a military unit in time of war. *Gojū* regulations emphasized honor, courage, honesty, and exclusivity: younger members were not to speak to members of another *gojū*.[32]

The *gojū* had their origins in the 1590s, when the Shimazu, under the orders of the Toyotomi Hideyoshi, mobilized their samurai for the invasion of Korea. After Satsuma dispatched roughly ten thousand men, this left the castle town with thousands of unsupervised samurai boys. To control these rowdy youths, the domain organized the antecedents of the *gojū* system. Boys were assigned to groups based on their neighborhood and directed to uphold standards of good behavior. The domain's edict from 1596 enjoined members from lawbreaking, strong language, and duplicity. Boys were exhorted to be brave and exemplify the way of the warrior.[33]

In the mid-eighteenth century this simple system of social control was adapted to provide a basic education for samurai boys. The castle town was divided into districts called *gojū:* in the early 1800s Kagoshima had eighteen of these districts, but by the 1860s it had more than thirty. *Gojū* were largely self-regulating. Each district had its own leader, its own headquarters, and its own code of conduct. A few districts had special buildings especially for *gojū* activities, but most used private homes. Boys in each district were organized into two main groups: the younger boys, or *chigo,* and the elder boys, or *nise.*[34]

In common practice, boys joined the *gojū* at age five or six, which by Japanese reckoning was around the boy's seventh birthday.‡ A boy's seventh birthday was the first of several occasions marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. In common practice a samurai father gave his son a *wakizashi,* a short sword without a sword guard, and took him to the *gojū* center for presentation to the leader *(nise gashira).* Although acceptance as a *chigo* was virtually automatic, the leader sternly reminded the boy of the importance of the *gojū*.[35]

New members were ranked as junior *chigo* and maintained a strict schedule with a curfew. They were not to leave their homes before 6:00 A.M. or after 6:00 P.M. At 6:00 A.M. they would hurry to the home of a local teacher, who would help them through a reading of the texts for that day, commonly excerpts from the Confucian classics. These lessons emphasized smooth reading and memorization rather than interpretation, and boys were often drilled to the point of tears. The teachers were commonly older

‡In Japanese tradition children are considered one, rather than zero, years old at birth, and turn two on New Year's Day of the following year.

boys, often the *nise* leader. This post was Saigō's first position of authority, and as *nise* leader he drilled several future leaders on the Chinese classics. His students included Ōyama Iwao, Tōgō Heihachirō, and his own brother Tsugumichi.[36] After their morning lessons, the *chigo* were briefly free to eat breakfast, to study on their own, or to help with household chores. At 8:00 A.M. they assembled for sports and exercise led by the senior *chigo.* Morning drill encompassed a wide range of activities, from sumo wrestling to horse driving. Some games, such as *Kōsan iwase,* or "Say uncle," focused as much on machismo as physical prowess: the assembled boys would knock over one player and then pile on top of him until the *chigo* leader called them off. From roughly 10:00 A.M. the boys had a second study period, led by the senior *chigo.* At these sessions boys would be grilled not only on their lessons but also on their behavior. After a midday break, the boys reassembled for further study at 2:00 P.M.[37]

The curriculum for *chigo* was distinctly parochial. The three core texts of *chigo* education—the *Rekidai uta, Iroha uta,* and *Toragari monogatari*—all focused on Satsuma and the Shimazu house. The most basic text, the *Iroha uta* (Alphabet Ode), was attributed to Shimazu Tadayoshi, a great warlord of the 1500s.[38] The ode was a set of forty-six homilies organized in the order of the Japanese syllabary. Its moral precepts were unexceptional: the ode exhorted students to study hard, to avoid vendettas, and to act with propriety. But in Satsuma even basic literacy was linked to the Shimazu house.[39] Other texts were similarly parochial. The *Toragari monogatari* (Tale of a Tiger Hunt), told the story of the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s, but from the perspective of Shimazu forces. The *Rekidai uta* (Ode of the Generations), described the lineage of the Shimazu house, beginning with Shimazu Tadahisa in 1185. The ode duly made note of the imperial house and the various shoguns, but it described the Shimazu lords as monarchs in their own right. Of Shimazu Yoshihisa, who reunified Satsuma after the turmoil of the early 1500s, the ode observed that "he treated the people with virtue and they returned to the ways of humanity." In the language of Confucian discourse this meant that Yoshihisa was more a monarch than a mere warlord. By instilling virtue in the populace he had legitimized his military conquests. This implicitly established the independence of the Shimazu house and construed Tokugawa approval as incidental to the legitimacy of Shimazu rule.[40] In their later years, as *nise,* Shimazu boys studied a more varied curriculum, including the interpretation, rather than mere

recitation, of the Confucian classics. At the core of *gojū* education, however, were the history and traditions of the Shimazu house.

At 4:00 P.M. the boys assembled outdoors for martial arts training led by the *nise.* Unlike the morning exercises, this session included serious training in swordsmanship. The boys practiced with wooden swords, but learned the techniques and tactics of real combat.[41] Swordsmanship in Satsuma was taught according to two schools: the Jigen school, developed by Tōgō Shigekata, and the Yakumaru school, a syncretic tradition developed by a Jigen disciple. The Jigen tradition was among the most traditional and aggressive of the major sword schools. While most schools in the nineteenth century used bamboo swords wrapped in cloth to minimize injuries, the Jigen school used traditional wooden swords. Most schools emphasized a combination of offensive and defensive tactics, the latter designed to exploit an opponent's mistakes. The Jigen school was relentlessly aggressive and emphasized striking a single, deadly blow.[42] The Yakumaru school was still more belligerent and emphasized the attacker's willingness to die. Not surprisingly, the Yakumaru school produced some of the most terrifying assassins of the 1860s. Some secondhand evidence suggests that Saigō was affiliated with the Yakumaru school.[43]

The boys practiced outdoors despite wind and rain, but on days of severe weather they played card games with historical themes. In *Musha karuta* the cards represented warriors famous for their loyalty, while *Daimyō karuta* taught the names, rank, and investitures of Japan's major warlords. The boys trained or played until 6:00 P.M., when they returned home. They were now under curfew and were not to leave their homes until the following day, at 6 A.M.[44]

Boys were eligible for promotion to senior *chigo* at age nine or ten. This promotion involved a formidable hazing. A common practice was to stuff the new initiate into the chest used for *gojū* records, tie the box shut, and roll it around the *gojū* headquarters. Another ritual was to wait until the *gojū* leader summoned the boy and then to jump on him and crush him. Senior *chigo* boys had new duties and responsibilities. Like junior *chigo,* they rose early for their lessons, but they were now teachers as well as students and supervised the junior *chigo*'s midmorning and afternoon lessons. While the junior *chigo* were on midday break, the senior *chigo* had lectures at the domain academy. After fencing practice the junior *chigo* were sent home, but the senior *chigo* continued their studies, supervised by the *nise.* From

about 7:00 P.M. the senior *chigo* were allowed to watch the beginning of the *nise*'s evening conclave. At 8:00 P.M. the *nise* escorted the senior *chigo* home.[45]

At age thirteen or fourteen boys began the formal, public transition to adulthood. This was marked by three major rituals: a *genpuku* ceremony, an audience with the daimyo, and the promotion from *chigo* to *nise*. In a *genpuku* ceremony boys received adult clothing appropriate to their station; chose a new, adult name; and shaved the front of their heads, the forelocks. They grew the rest of their hair long and dressed it in a variety of ponytails, commonly known as topknots. In Saigō's day this hairstyle, originally developed to conform to warrior helmets, was a sign of manhood for both samurai and commoners. A man's hair immediately marked his sexual status. Shaved forelocks marked an adult man who could initiate sexual activity, either with his wife, a concubine, a prostitute, or a young boy. Forelocks, by contrast, marked either asexual youth, or the more passive, junior partner in a homosexual liaison.[46] At roughly the same time as their *genpuku,* boys of appropriate station had their first audience with the daimyo and received their first commissions. These were, in effect, internships during which boys worked from 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. and received the minimal stipend of four *koku* per annum. We can infer that Saigō graduated to *nise* sometime in the early 1840s: he received his *genpuku* in 1841, at age fourteen, and started work at the county office in 1844.[47]

The *nise* were exempted from curfew but kept a strict schedule. The *nise* leader was busy from sunrise teaching the local *chigo.* Other *nise* went to the domain academy for their morning lessons and then to their offices. From roughly 4:00 P.M. until 8:00 P.M. the *nise* taught or trained the older *chigo.* After escorting the *chigo* home, the *nise* were free for their own study and recreation. *Nise* commonly gathered again for further reading—in the Chinese classics, military chronicles, or local history.[48] The *nise* also grilled each other in a form of cross-examination known as *sengi*. The examiners posed hypothetical questions designed to test both mental agility and moral vigor. In a typical question, boys were asked what they would do if, after searching all Japan for their father's murderer, they at last found him out on the open seas. To complicate matters, the pursuer's boat was sinking, and the murderer represented the only possibility of rescue. The "correct" solution to this moral dilemma was to accept rescue, cordially thank the murderer, and then exact vengeance by striking him dead. Participants were grilled

individually in front of the group and badgered until they could produce an adequate answer.[49]

The traditions of the *gojū* system ranged from refined and elegant to brutal and horrific. Samurai boys in Kagoshima, for example, were encouraged to master the *biwa,* a Japanese lute. In most of Japan the biwa was considered an effeminate instrument and was associated with geisha entertainment. In Satsuma, by contrast, the biwa was considered manly and virtuous. This regional difference was due largely to Shimazu Tadayoshi, who, according to legend, was inspired by a local monk's use of biwa music for sutra chanting, and commissioned songs celebrating loyalty, justice, and filial piety. Japanese travelers noted the distinctiveness of the Satsuma tradition. In *Seiyūki,* a popular travelogue written in the 1790s, Tachibana Nankei observed that "all young samurai play the biwa. In the brave and valorous tradition of those provinces, they hike up their trouser skirts, adjust their long swords and night after night stroll and play the biwa. Their playing is correct and their singing is refined. It is utterly unlike the biwa of other regions." It was common for young samurai to spend evenings on the banks of the Kōtsuki River, relaxing to the sounds of the reed flute *(amabuku)* and biwa.[50]

A sharp contrast to the Satsuma tradition of warrior lutists was a terrifying custom known as *hiemontori.* This was a competition for aspiring swordsmen held in the twelfth month of each year. The prize was the right to practice swordsmanship on a human cadaver. Although samurai regularly practiced with wooden swords, they rarely felt a blade cut flesh and bone. The *hiemontori* contest rewarded the bravest samurai with first slice at the body of an executed criminal. In common practice the *nise* would assemble at the domain prison at Seto. The boys waited for the executioner to sever the head of the condemned and then rushed forward to seize the corpse. The first to bite off an ear or finger and show it to his companions was deemed the winner and was awarded the first round of practice on the cadaver. Saigō's loyal compatriot Kirino Toshiaki and future prime minister Yamamoto Gonnohyōe were among the most zealous and successful competitors.[51]

The *gojū* system was an exclusively male institution. Activities celebrated the traditional male virtues of vigor, courage, and solidarity, but contact with women, other than family members, was proscribed. In Saigō's day none of this was unusual, but by the late 1800s Japanese writers were

alarmed by the homoerotic overtones of *gojū* culture. Ballads extolling male beauty, and the close ties between *nise* and *chigo,* were suddenly seen as markers of a culture of homosexuality. By the early twentieth century the association of Satsuma with homosexuality was so widespread that male-male eroticism was described as a "Satsuma habit." In 1899 a major newspaper attributed homosexual conduct in the Japanese navy to the nefarious influence of Yamamoto Gonnohyōe, then naval minister. Even the 1873 conflict between Saigō and Ōkubo Toshimichi that almost toppled the Meiji state was attributed to a long-simmering dispute over a young boy that started when both were members of the same *gojū*.[52]

Was *gojū* culture gay? The question is both intriguing and anachronistic. "Homosexual," as a label for people, did not exist in Saigō's day: sex with men was a practice rather than an identity. Like drinking or fishing, one could enjoy homosexuality regularly, occasionally, or never, according to personal preference. Lacking a biblical story of Sodom, Tokugawa-era Japanese had no concept of sodomy, and Tokugawa-era laws did not criminalize homosexual conduct itself. Legal injunctions against male-male sexuality focused largely on the result of "outrageous" or "provocative" sexual conduct. Like consorting with geisha or drinking, male-male intercourse became a vice rather than a diversion only when taken to extremes. When Yonezawa domain issued regulations on homosexual activity in 1775, for example, it mentioned violence rather than perversion. Any conflict among a handsome young samurai, his father, and his lover could easily lead to drawn swords and mayhem. Homosexuality was a problem only because male lovers' quarrels tended to grow violent and threaten the public order. Defenders of homosexual conduct, however, considered male-male eroticism a natural extension of the bond between warriors. In his treatise on samurai conduct, Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote that to die for one's lover was the highest form of loyalty. The only complication was a potential conflict with one's other obligations. "To lay down one's life for another is the basic principle of homosexuality. . . . However, then you have nothing left to lay down for your master." This contradiction would not arise if one's lover and lord were the same, and homosexual passion was often a part of *junshi,* the tradition of following one's lord into death. In this context of multiple and fluid conceptions of male-male eroticism, homosexuality probably was an incidental and unremarkable part of *gojū* life.[53]

Was Saigō gay? This question is both intriguing and incongruous. Saigō's

letters make no reference to male lovers, and no contemporaneous account of his life mentions homosexual activity. Saigō, however, was remarkably reticent about his personal life, and his letters make only passing mention to his three wives. But more pointedly, Saigō's early letters reveal a man strikingly uninterested in sex of any kind. Saigō's attitudes were shaped largely by a tragic first marriage. He entered an arranged marriage in 1852, but his in-laws annulled it two years later, when Saigō was transferred to Edo. Bitter in the aftermath of his divorce, Saigō expressed his frustrations through sexual self-denial. From his new post in Edo he wrote: "Although I have enjoyed the capital, I have kept a monk's vows as regards women. The wife my parents arranged for me was driven away. . . . Although my marital vows are null and void even now I have no desire to marry again." Although Saigō would eventually remarry twice, father five children, and keep the company of a Kyoto geisha, in 1854 he prided himself on avoiding women entirely. He saw abstinence as empowering rather than constraining: he swore, for example, to keep a monk's vow of celibacy if his lord, Shimazu Nariakira, had a healthy male heir.[54] In his youth Saigō saw sex not as pleasurable dissipation or intimacy but as an impediment to happiness and loyalty.

How else did the *gojū* system influence Saigō? Given the popular image of Saigō as a great warrior, it is striking to realize that he served the *gojū* more as a scholar than as a fighter. The turning point for Saigō was a fateful day in 1839 when, returning home from the domain academy, he got into an altercation with another samurai. Swords were drawn, and Saigō suffered a serious injury on his right arm. The injury impeded his martial arts training and forced him to reassess his goals. From that point Saigō abandoned the martial arts and put his energies into scholarship. As a teacher rather than a fighter, Saigō readily distinguished himself: his selection as instructor for the *gojū* reveals the high regard in which he was held by his peers. Saigō's early experiences as a tutor shaped his adult life: even in his darkest moment Saigō took pleasure in teaching children. In 1858, when in internal exile on the remote island of Amami Ōshima, Saigō treated the locals with ill-concealed disdain but was unable to resist the local children. In a heart-wrenching letter to Ōkubo, he wrote of his crushing depression and isolation but reported, "I was implored by three or so island children and have accepted them [as students]."[55] Saigō found his place on the island as a schoolteacher. His despair gradually lifted and he was able to reconcile himself to internal exile. Three years later, on the tiny island of Okinoerabumajima, while under

house arrest, Saigō taught local children the Confucian classics. His students included Misao Tankei, the son of the district constable.[56]

The *gojū* system was but a part of Saigō's education. Like most castle town samurai, Saigō received his more advanced education in the domain academy: the Zōshikan. Founded in 1773, the Zōshikan sat on roughly three acres near Tsurumaru Castle. The campus included a lecture hall, a library, a dormitory, and several shrines to the Confucian sages. The school had a staff of more than seventy, including a professor, a headmaster, fifteen assistant professors, thirty lecturers and instructors, fifteen tutors, ten scribes, and two guards. The Zōshikan served a variety of functions. A major service was providing classes for senior *chigo* and *nise,* but the school also was open to rural samurai and to commoners. The Zōshikan commonly had four hundred to eight hundred students. The school also served the domain elite. The daimyo and his senior retainers regularly summoned the Zōshikan staff to give private lectures on Confucian thought.[57]

Unlike the *gojū* curriculum, the Zōshikan program was strictly academic and the curriculum centered on the Confucian classics. Students were trained in the core texts of the East Asian tradition, known as "the Four Books and the Five Classics."[58] These texts were remote and inaccessible to laymen. Written in ancient Chinese in a laconic and epigrammatic style, they required extensive explanation and commentary. Only after extensive study of literary Chinese could Japanese students begin to parse their assignments. But this classical education made Saigō and his fellow students part of a great intellectual tradition. The core texts of the Zōshikan were scarcely different from those of a Confucian academy in China, Korea, or Vietnam. Not only was this corpus classicus constant across countries, it also was constant across time. By Saigō's day, "the Four Books and the Five Classics" had been the cornerstone of a humanistic education for centuries. This education gave Saigō his historical models of loyalty, honor, and courage. It also shaped his understanding of self-expression. For much of his life, Saigō regularly composed poetry in classical Chinese. While their artistry is questionable, Saigō poems are littered with references to classical Chinese texts. For Saigō, ancient Chinese history was not foreign: it was the shared cultural heritage of all civilized men.

While Saigō developed an appreciation for ancient Chinese literature at the Zōshikan, he also looked beyond the school's understanding of the classics. The Zōshikan followed an orthodox interpretation of the Chinese classics

known as Zhu Xi thought, a school of Song (Sung) dynasty Confucianism. Zhu Xi (1130–1200) outlined a great synthesis of moral and natural philosophy. There was, he argued, no distinction between the laws governing natural phenomena and the normative or descriptive principles of human society. Everything was governed by a single set of universal, underlying principles. Because there was no distinction between moral and natural philosophy, the study of the natural world was essential to ethical cultivation. Conversely, meditation and ethical cultivation would lead to a better understanding of the natural world. To this end, Zhu Xi advocated a broad-based curriculum including reading, sitting quietly, ritual practice, physical exercise, calligraphy, arithmetic, and empirical observation. Zhu Xi's synthesis can be seen as a Confucian response to Buddhism and Taoism. The idea of a totalizing unity of man and nature was inspired by Taoism, while sitting quietly was a response to Buddhist meditation. By incorporating these ideas and practices, Zhu Xi turned Confucianism from a political and ethical philosophy into a complete religious and metaphysical system.[59]

It is difficult to overstate Zhu Xi's influence on East Asian thought. He helped define the canon of "the Four Books and the Five Classics," and his commentaries became, for many, as important as the original texts. In Japan, Zhu Xi learning dominated most government-sponsored academic institutions by the late 1700s. The original regulations of the Zōshikan prohibited discussion of other doctrines without permission.[60] This ban was part of a broader trend in Japanese intellectual life: in 1790 the shogunate prohibited the teaching of other interpretations in its private academy, the Shōheikō.

Saigō read and mastered Zhu Xi's most famous work, *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Kinshiroku* in Japanese), and was familiar with the fundamentals of Zhu Xi thought. But, like many nineteenth-century Japanese, he felt that Zhu Xi offered, at best, an incomplete approach to learning. In Saigō's day Zhu Xi learning had become associated with narrow scholasticism rather than effective political action. In this context, Saigō began to study Ōyōmei learning, a critique of Zhu Xi studies based on the teachings of Wang Yangming, a Ming dynasty philosopher.[61]

Although Yangming and Zhu Xi drew on the same classical texts, Yangming's philosophy stressed intuition, experience, and action. While Yangming did not deny the importance of scholarship, he believed that the knowledge of good and evil was innate in all people. The task was therefore

to reconnect with this innate knowledge. Whereas Zhu Xi emphasized study and self-reflection, hence his dictum "the investigation of things," Yangming stressed enlightenment and an appreciation of one's a priori moral compass. Yangming also criticized Zhu Xi's dualistic approach to thought and action. The goal of understanding virtue, Yangming argued, was to act on it and thereby to bridge the gap between thought and action. Action based on one's innate sense of good was transcendent: "only when I love my father, the father of others, and the fathers of all men, can my humanity really form one body with my father, the father of others and the fathers of all men. . . . Then the clear virtue of filial piety will be made manifest."[62]

Much of the debate between the Yangming and Zhu Xi schools hinged on fine points of metaphysics. But Yangming's emphasis on action rather than scholarship had radical implications for practical politics. In Japan, the most spectacular uprising of the early 1800s was inspired by Wang Yangming: in 1837 Ōshio Heihachirō, a former Osaka police constable, led an abortive coup against the shogunate. Ōshio had long been appalled by the corruption and incompetence of the Osaka City government but had worked within the system to expose graft and improve governance. Yangming learning offered Ōshio a different path. In the Ōyōmei tradition, the knowledge of good and evil mattered only if one acted on it, and this action mattered more than traditional authority. When the shogunate mishandled a severe rice shortage, Ōshio struck out against the government he had once served. Inspired by Yangming, he exhorted his followers to execute rapacious merchants and "those officials who torment and harass those who are lowly." His coup was a fiasco: many of those who followed his call were opportunists more interested in liberating sake than in smiting despots. Ōshio fled to the countryside and died by his own hand in 1837/3, setting fire to the house where he was hiding so that the government would not be able to mutilate his corpse. His rebellion, although nominally a failure, terrified the ruling elite. What could be more disturbing than a former shogunal servant publicly and violently declaring the shogunate's turpitude and ineptitude? As if to confirm the shogunate's fears, the country was rocked by a spate of small-scale insurrections inspired by Ōshio's failed coup. Ōshio's actions were exceptional, but his coup dramatized the radical potential of Yangming thought. Yangming's emphasis on public action gave a revolutionary edge to the Confucian classics.[63]

Saigō was deeply influenced by Yangming learning but was uneasy with

its more radical implications. Rather than abandon Zhu Xi learning for Yangming intuitionism, Saigō sought a middle ground. The teachers with whom Saigō studied Yangming learning were all syncretists who sought to harmonize Yangming and Zhu Xi thought. Saigō's greatest single influence was Satō Issai, a prominent Tokugawa thinker. Satō was a masterful syncretic thinker. He was inspired by Yangming's writings but also was headmaster at the shogunal academy. Rather than openly confront the shogunate's ban on Yangming learning, Satō finessed it, arguing that he was exploring the common origins of Zhu Xi thought and Yangming thought. This ruse allowed Satō to keep his influential teaching position while writing extensively on Yangming learning. In acknowledgment of his skillful conceit, he was known to his contemporaries as "Zhu Xi on the outside, Yangming on the inside."[64] Saigō found Satō's ideas so inspiring that he turned them into a personal handbook, carefully transcribing 101 of Satō's sayings and keeping the volume at his side for consultation.[65]

In selecting passages from Satō, Saigō was drawn to the notion of man's intuitive knowledge. He transcribed Satō's observation that to "know without knowing [why]" was the path to sincere, virtuous conduct. By contrast, to think, but still not know, was the path to selfish actions grounded in ambition and passion.[66] Saigō also copied Satō's commentary on man's innate virtue: "man's soul is like the sun, but ambition, pride, malice, and covetousness obscure it like low-hanging clouds and it becomes unclear where this spirit lies. Therefore, cultivating sincerity is the best way to dispel the clouds and greet a clear day. It is essential to base one's studies on such a cornerstone of sincerity."[67] Saigō was especially taken with the notion of virtuous action as a means of transcending death. A man's body is but a room, a temporary bequest from heaven, but his innate nature (Japanese *sei*/Chinese *xing*) is a gift from heaven that transcends life and death. A sage makes his innate nature manifest throughout his daily life. He leaves instructions to his heirs not in a will, but through the example of his words and deeds. Because he is drawing on his innate capacity for virtue, he is a part of heaven, and is unconcerned with the minor distinction between life and death. The wise but not sage man fears death and is ashamed of his fear, but he cannot overcome it. He struggles to shape his legacy through written precepts for his heirs, but has difficulty in getting those heirs to listen. He can understand death, but he cannot be at peace with it. Thus, observed Satō, "the sage is at

peace with death, the learned man understands death, and the common man fears death."[68] This sense that virtue can change the meaning of death shaped Saigō's understanding of his fate and his duty.

Saigō's education in Satsuma was both universalistic and parochial. His studies of Zhu Xi and Yangming connected Saigō with a pan-Asian debate on the Confucian classics. At the opposite extreme were his primers, the texts he first memorized and taught his students to memorize. These were odes and stories about Satsuma, with only passing references to the rest of the world. Saigō did read some of the classic works of imperial history, such as Kitabatake Chikafusa's *Jinnō shōtōki.* But his education was remarkably slim on anything resembling Japanese national history. Saigō was educated less as a Japanese subject than as an East Asian gentleman in service to the Shimazu house.[69]

A final component of Saigō's intellectual cultivation was Zen meditation. Saigō learned Zen from Musan (1782–1851), head monk at Fukushōji, the Shimazu family temple. Musan had, intriguingly, studied Ōyōmei learning before becoming a monk in the Sōtō school of Zen.[70] Saigō found Zen intellectually satisfying, but it also fulfilled a deep emotional need. As Ōkubo observed years later, Saigō, who had a quick, fiery temperament, saw Zen as a means of controlling and calming his passions. Meditation, he hoped, would help him detach from worldly concerns. Ōkubo, however, was sharply critical of Zen's effect on Saigō. It did not calm his temperament but perverted it, making him arrogant and overbearing: Ōkubo indirectly blamed his rift with Saigō in 1873 on the pernicious impact of Zen. Ōkubo's assessment of Saigō's Zen experience is uniquely dark, but his description of Saigō as both emotionally effusive and coolly taciturn is incisive. Saigō was nearly six feet tall and built like a wrestler, so his stony silence was thoroughly intimidating. A striking range of witnesses, from his son Kikujirō to the British diplomatic Ernest Satow, have described the terrifying effect of Saigō's taciturn gaze. But Saigō's stoicism cloaked a deep sentimentality. Years later acquaintances would recall Saigō's reaction when, after the restoration, he was taken to the theater by the Mitsui Company. This was a last-minute change of plan, after sumo wrestling had been canceled because of rain. His hosts were astonished to see Saigō, a famous general and elder statesman, crying openly at the sentimental drama.[71]

Saigō at Work

In 1844 Saigō began work as assistant clerk in the county office. His duties included inspecting farm villages, supervising village officials, encouraging agricultural production, and collecting taxes. His post was neither powerful nor demanding, and it certainly was not a position that foreshadowed national political leadership. As a clerk, Saigō had virtually no authority, and much of his work was repetitive and mundane. But Saigō's experience in the county office had a lasting impact on his political views. However tedious his daily routine, Saigō's work made him deeply aware of a systemic problem in Satsuma politics: the domain's crippling tax levies.[72]

Satsuma had one of Japan's most underdeveloped systems of agriculture and was known throughout the country for its oppressive taxation. The domain's levies were so onerous that farmers regularly deserted their fields and fled to neighboring domains rather than struggle to meet their tax obligations.[73] Although generations of reformers wrestled with this problem, it was an all but inherent part of Satsuma's political economy: the domain had too many samurai and not enough farmers. In Saigō's youth, roughly 170,000 of Satsuma's 650,000 people were samurai or their families.[74] Since in theory, samurai ruled rather than farmed, this meant that some 480,000 farmers were supposed to feed 170,000 warriors. This was completely untenable. Even Japan's most productive farmers could not have fed that many extra mouths. Satsuma met this problem by paying its samurai badly; like Saigō, most retainers received stipends inadequate to their basic needs. Even so, the demands of such a large samurai population mandated heavy taxes. Demography meant that Satsuma was compelled to tax its commoners too much and pay its samurai too little.[75]

Satsuma's chronic need for revenue led to a variety of novel undertakings. The domain sought to promote and tax an astonishing range of products, including shiitake mushrooms, leather, sesame, rapeseed, indigo, cotton cloth, silk cloth, coal, sulfur, bonito flakes *(katsuo bushi),* and pottery. Many of these endeavors failed miserably. The domain commonly forced farmers to sell to government agents, but these agents often paid so little that farmers could not cover their costs. Rather than lose money, the farmers stopped production.[76]

The severity of the Satsuma tax system was dramatized for Saigō during the farm crisis of 1849. Unseasonable weather had resulted in a harvest

shortfall, and the director of the tax office, Sakoda Toshinari, began a survey to assess the need for tax relief. To Sakoda's dismay, however, he learned from his superiors that the survey was pointless. The domain was not prepared to order any tax relief despite the poor harvest. Sakoda was outraged and resigned his post rather than participate in such a disingenuous exercise. According to several biographers, Sakoda's principled resignation had a lasting impact on Saigō. This is difficult to substantiate, but Saigō's thinking about agriculture throughout his lifetime was grounded in moral rather than pragmatic concerns.

In 1852 Saigō suffered a series of losses and disappointments. At the behest of his family he married Ijūin Suga, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a Kagoshima samurai household. The union was essentially a contractual affair. It was arranged by the couple's parents, produced no children, and was later dissolved by Suga's family. Saigō's only reference to the marriage in all his surviving letters is a complaint about the divorce. Soon after his marriage Saigō lost both his parents. When his father died in 1852/9, and his mother two months later, Saigō assumed the family headship, taking on the responsibility for supporting, on a meager stipend, a family of twelve with two unmarried sisters and three small children.[77] The burdens of family headship and the loss of his parents pained Saigō. In later years he reflected that 1852 was the saddest year of his life. He treated his difficulties with mordant humor, however. After seeing his brother Kichijirō sell firewood to help the family make ends meet, Saigō remarked that they might starve, but they would at least all starve together.[78]

Beyond these hardships, Saigō's early years in Satsuma were thoroughly unremarkable. Although generations of biographers have searched for signs of nascent leadership, Saigō did little to distinguish himself before the late 1850s. Saigō was certainly a keen student, and his childhood in Kagoshima was intellectually rich. He read widely in Japanese history and philosophy. He developed a mastery of literary Chinese and studied the ancient classics. He practiced Zen meditation. But Saigō would soon discover huge gaps in his knowledge, and it is striking what he did not study before his departure for Edo in 1854. Little of Saigō's education emphasized the emperor, and nothing in his studies in Kagoshima prepared him for Mito learning, the imperial loyalist movement critical to the Restoration. Saigō understood the ancient origins of the imperial line but could not conceive of a state based solely on imperial sovereignty and legitimacy. Nor did he have more than an

inkling of the technological superiority of the West. The Zhu Xi orthodoxy of the Zōshikan discouraged the study of such "novelties." Saigō would learn of Western technology and military strength through his historic meetings with Hashimoto Sanai in Edo. This would be a shocking experience. For the rest of his life Saigō would struggle to integrate his respect for Japanese tradition, his appreciation for Western society and technology, his loyalty to the Shimazu house, and his loyalty to the emperor. At work, Saigō was diligent and sought in earnest to ameliorate conditions for the peasantry. But he had little to say that had not been said before. When he assumed headship of his family in 1852, Saigō was exceptionally well equipped to follow in his father's footsteps as division chief in a tax office. But he was strangely unprepared for where fate would soon take him: to the shogun's capital and the center of a fierce contest for national power.