

Saigo Takamori



Kagoshima is the birthplace of many key figures who contributed greatly to the modernisation of Japan, and the most prominent of all is none other than Saigo Takamori, who is also dubbed the Last Samurai of Japan. The locals of Kagoshima adore this omnipresent figure, whose image appears everywhere from city tram advertisements to food product packaging. A bronze statue of Saigo was also erected at the entrance of Ueno Park in Tokyo. So, who is Saigo and why does he enjoy such popularity?

Saigo Takamori was born in the domain of Satsuma (present day Kagoshima) in 1828, as the eldest son of a low-ranking samurai. He worked as a clerk in the local tax office but even together with his father's income, they barely had enough to support a large family of ten.

In 1854, Saigo rose through the ranks and eventually became the most trusted adviser of Shimadzu Nariakira, the lord of Satsuma, but his humble beginnings instilled in him a deep sense of honour and humility. In the later years, he became one of the top officials in the new Meiji government, and drew a better salary, but he still preferred a frugal lifestyle, engaging in his favourite pastime of making his own straw sandals, fishing lure, and hunting with his dog, over lavish Western style clothing, furnishings and entertainment.

Domestic Unrest and Foreign Aggression

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed into Tokyo Bay and forced Japan to open for trade. Not knowing how best to respond to the Americans, the Edo Bakufu¹ sought the council of all the lords in the realm. The differing opinions of the lords, and their attempt to lobby for support to forward their political views, had caused much domestic unrest, which, together with pressure from the Americans and other European powers, had caused the Bakufu to quickly lose its power. This convinced Saigo that



¹ Also known as the Tokugawa government, the Edo Bakufu is helmed by the Shogun (Barbarian Quelling Generalissimo) and ruled over Japan as the de facto government since the 17th century.

for the future of Japan, it was best to foster a strong nation centred around the Emperor instead of the Bakufu.

The Satcho Alliance and Boshin War

In 1866, Saigo led Satsuma to forge a military alliance with the domain of Choshu (present day Yamaguchi), known as the Satcho Alliance, and together with the domains of Tosa (present day Kochi) and Hizen (present day Saga), they formed an anti-Bakufu coalition.

On 27 January 1868, the Boshin War broke out and the anti-Bakufu coalition forces clashed with the Bakufu forces at Toba-Fushimi in Kyoto. The war did not end until the surrender of the last Bakufu naval units in Hokkaido in the spring of 1869. Saigo served as field commander of the anti-Bakufu coalition forces during the war and he earned the respect of many samurai who served under him.

Meiji Restoration and the Iwakura Mission

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Meiji government sought to strengthen the foundations of the new nation state by acquiring wisdom throughout the world. Almost the whole government, with about close to fifty high officials, was being sent on the Iwakura Mission - a study trip to the Western world, from 1871 to 1873. In their absence, things have been left to an absentee government whose principal members included Saigo and a few others.



After the departure of the Iwakura delegation, the absentee government engaged in various reforms, such as the education system, land reformation, and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, etc. However, by 1873, Saigo found himself in growing disagreement with his colleagues who returned from the Iwakura Mission. He was particularly upset with the trimming of the legal and social privileges of the samurai class and the rapid pace of Westernisation. Unable to resolve their differences, the restoration coalition finally broke up, with the indignant Saigo resigning from his

post of the Army General, and returning to his hometown in Kagoshima, together with his closest followers in September 1873.

Seinan War - The Last Civil War in Japan and The Last Samurai

After returning to Kagoshima in November 1873, Saigo remained politically inactive and spent his time hunting and relaxing in hot springs. During that time, there were many jobless, hot-blooded youths in Kagoshima, and Saigo felt it was important to guide them properly to prevent them from taking the wrong path in life. He gathered supporters and founded the Shigakko school, which focused on educating young samurai.

Meanwhile, the Meiji government continued to enact new laws that aimed at stripping samurai privileges, such as outlawing the carrying of swords and army conscription, resulting in discontentment among the samurai class throughout Japan.

In fear of a potential samurai revolt in Kagoshima, from late 1876 to January 1877, the Meiji government ordered the removal of gunpowder from an ammunition store in Kagoshima, as well as attempted to close Saigo's Shigakko school. In response to such provocations by the Meiji government, a group of young samurai from the Shigakko school attacked the ammunition store, and this led to the outbreak of the Seinan War.

Although the Satsuma army fought bravely during the war, they had less resources and ammunition, and were seriously outnumbered. Finally, they withdrew to Mount Shiroyama (Kagoshima city) and were encircled by the government troops. On 24 September 1877, the government forces launched an all-out attack on Mount Shiroyama. During the battle, Saigo was shot in the waist and injured. Knowing all is lost, he committed suicide the traditional samurai way, and the last Japanese civil war ended with Saigo's honourable sacrifice. He died at the age of 51. Seen as the embodiment of the samurai spirit, he was remembered by many as the last samurai.

