

The Stabilization of the Image: The Satsuma Rebellion in 1877 in the Eyes of the Local Anglo-Saxon Press

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Introduction

The present topic, the views of the Anglo-Saxon press in Japan on the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877,¹ is closely connected with the general problem of relations between Japan and the Western world and of interaction between the Japanese and Western cultures. The group of Westerners who probably felt the impact of this interaction most intimately, especially since it impinged on their own interests, was the community actually living in Japan, the views of whom were represented best by the newspapers and magazines published by them.

The present work represents above all an attempt at studying the interpretation given by the papers: what their attitude was to the rebellion and what image they conveyed of Japan and the Japanese, and why. By studying an image one can also form a picture of the creator of that image, the observer or subject, to the extent that an image can tell us at least as much about its creator as about its object.²

The material to be studied here comprises the main foreign English-language newspapers and magazines published in Yokohama and Tokyo: *The Japan Daily Herald* (Yokohama), *The Japan Gazette* (Yokohama), *The Japan Weekly Mail* (Yokohama), *The Tokio Times* (Tokyo), *The Far East* (Yokohama) and the satirical magazine *Japan Punch* (Yokohama).³

1 Based principally on Olavi K. Fält, *The Clash of Interests: The Transformation of Japan in 1861-1881 in the Eyes of the Local Anglo-Saxon Press* (Rovaniemi: Societas Historica Finlandiae Septentrionalis 1990), 223-248.

2 Olavi K. Fält, "Introduction," in *Looking at the Other: Historical Study of Images in Theory and Practise*, eds. Kari Alenius, Olavi K. Fält, and Seija Jalagin, Acta Universitatis Ouluensis. Humaniora B 42 (Oulu: University of Oulu 2002), 7-12. <http://herkules oulu.fi/isbn9514266331/isbn9514266331.pdf> (Last access, March 6, 2017).

3 On the Western press in Japan see Fält, *The Clash of Interests*, 13-23; and the article on the Formosan Expedition in the present volume.

The Rebellion

The Meiji government found itself in the most serious crisis of its existence in 1877, threatened by an uprising led by Saigō Takamori (1828-1877). Saigō had been one of the original leaders of the Meiji Restoration, but had resigned from the government in 1873 on account of its failure to undertake the war on Korea, which he had advocated and had begun to set up private military schools in his own province of Satsuma for frustrated samurai. It is said that he had as many as 20 000 men in training by 1877. Minor revolts by samurai had been occurring in different parts of the country from 1873 onwards, but these were easily quashed. The situation began to look more dangerous for the government in 1876, however, when its actions began to meet with more resistance from the samurai. In March they were deprived of their right to carry swords, the last outward symbol of their status, and in August their allowances were paid off in a single lump sum either in cash or in bonds, which meant a considerable loss of income.⁴

This latter step aroused much ill feeling, and disturbances broke out in many parts of the country, although admittedly not in Satsuma at this stage. The government felt the situation in Satsuma to be highly critical, however, and decided in January 1877 to have the weapons and ammunition depot in the provincial capital Kagoshima moved elsewhere. Saigō's supporters were one move ahead, however, and took possession of the depot, claiming at the same time to have uncovered an attempt on his life being planned in government circles. This virtually forced Saigō to assume command of his supporters and to demand retribution by marching on the capital, a decision, which led to him being officially declared a renegade against the government on 20 February 1877.⁵

Unexpectedly solid resistance by the local government troops restricted the rebellion to the southern part of Kyushu, but even so the government needed all the forces it could muster, about 60 000 men, and a period of over six months to put the revolt down. The incident came to an end in 24 September 1877 with the overthrow of the rebels and Saigō's death, assumed that he was taking his own life on the field of battle. It was only after that that the government was

4 William G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, 3rd revised edition (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982), 117-119; James H. Buck, "The Satsuma Rebellion: From Kagoshima Through the Siege of Kumamoto Castle," *Monumenta Nipponica* 28, no. 4 (1973): 427-446; John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976), 512; Stephen Vlastos, "Opposition Movements in Early Meiji, 1868-1885," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 5: *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Marius B. Jansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 393-402.

5 Ibid.