

Prince Saionji Kinmochi and His Autobiography

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The main goal of this essay is to draw a sketch of one of the most prominent politicians and statesmen of Japan before World War II and at the same to acquaint readers with an interesting source on modern Japanese history—Saionji's autobiography.

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was unquestionably a crucial period for the making of modern Japan, and those years saw the rise of a large number of outstanding political leaders. And yet the political development of Japan from late Meiji to early Shōwa, let alone specific personalities, has hardly ever been a serious focus of study in the Russian historiography of those years. Possibly this neglect can be explained by the virtual absence of primary sources on the period, either translated into Russian or obtainable in the original language in Russian libraries. As for scholars writing in other Western languages, although they have given serious attention to the period as a whole, they have scarcely begun to consider Saionji as an object for independent research.

Saionji Kinmochi was born in 1849 into the Tokudaiji family, one of the noblest in Japan, and was adopted in 1851 as the heir to another aristocratic clan, the Saionjis. He started his political career in the turbulent days of the Meiji Restoration of 1867–68, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, he had entered the ranks of key statesmen of Japan. He remained one of the pillars of the state until his death in 1940. He served prime minister twice and was the one of the closest advisers to three emperors—Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa. What was unique about Saionji's position was that he stayed at the center of Japanese politics for an unprecedented seventy-odd years, and was an active participant in as well as an acute witness of the main developments of that era.

Because of his longevity and his centrality, his autobiography, *Saionji Kinmochi jiden* (hereafter, *Autobiography* or *Jiden*), first published in 1949, has a double value, both as a source on the modern history of Japan and as a means of acquainting oneself with the author, perhaps Japan's most outstanding leader. Strictly speaking, the *Autobiography* was not written by Saionji himself. Initially planned as a series of sketches, the book in fact presents a collection of loosely connected memoirs and essays by Saionji in which he recalls certain stages or events of his life and discourses on various topics—from current diplomatic trends to his artistic preferences. These essays and memoirs were written down in the 1920 and '30s by Saionji's confidant Koizumi Sakutarō, one of the leaders of the Seiyūkai political party, which Saionji once headed.



Fig. 1. Prime Minister Saionji Kinmochi in 1906.

Koizumi had been contemplating such a series of reminiscences since mid-1920s, and the first records of his conversations with Saionji were made in 1926. Because of numerous interruptions due to Saionji's activities or poor health, and even due to opposition to the project within Saionji's own household, this work was not completed until 1933. The style of the memoirs had also undergone certain changes over the period: from free conversations—or more precisely transcripts of monologues delivered by Saionji without any definite topic—they had gradually evolved into thematic interviews.

In total there are ten chapters in the Autobiography, but neither the chapters nor the book have any rigid structure. Saionji arbitrarily switches from subject to subject, and never dwells on a certain topic longer than one or two paragraphs. And one more interesting detail: rather than analyzing crucial and epochal political developments, Saionji tends more to recollect all kinds of curious facts or private happenings involving leading politicians, members of the court and even the imperial family. But it is exactly to this randomness and casual quality of the narration that the Autobiography owes its main value.

Although there are quite a number of sources on Saionji, primarily the biographies written by his contemporaries, colleagues, or admirers, inevitably these all present images of Saionji that reflect the general attitude of their authors. In most cases this means they end up praising the great “*senpai*.” Biographies by Takekoshi Yosaburo¹ and Omura Bunji² exemplify this tendency very clearly. No matter how rich they may be in fact and anecdote, these works fail to show the real person, but rather produce an image of an infallible and superhuman hero. The famous diaries of Saionji's close ally, Hara Takashi, present another extreme: most of Hara's com-

ments on Saionji have a negative coloring, as if it was hard for Hara to hide either his jealousy or his desire to prove that he was ultimately right in those instances when he had disputed with Saionji.³

In his autobiographical essays, absolutely free in structure, content, and style, Saionji appears exactly the man he was. Being unrestricted by any specific genre Saionji could fully reveal his humour, intellect, and liberal manner of thinking. He could also offer very acute commentary on the characteristics of the leading figures of his age.

For many years, records of those conversations between Saionji and Koizumi, entitled "Saionji kō zuihitsu," remained part of the private archive of Koizumi. They were published as a book only nine years after Saionji passed away. In 1949, the centennial year of Saionji's birth, these memoirs were unified, systemized chronologically and thematically, and divided into chapters by the historian Kimura Tsuyoshi. Thus, we can say that Saionji's Autobiography is in fact the result of efforts of three men: Saionji, Koizumi, and Kimura.

Having touched upon the text of the Autobiography, let us return to its author and hero. In the beginning we have already mentioned some of the titles that Saionji held. Perhaps it would be worth adding that Saionji is also famous as the last of the *genrō*, or senior statesmen, confidants and lifelong advisers of the emperor, which was the highest step in a political career that a mortal could reach. Saionji was both the last person to be granted this informal but prestigious title and the last man to take this title to grave, having served as the sole *genrō* for sixteen years. Even judging by mere results one can see that Saionji really was a pivotal figure for pre-World War II Japan.

But it would be a mistake to limit oneself to simple recitation of Saionji's numerous titles, appointments, and career steps. Detailed information of this kind can easily be obtained from almost any encyclopedia, *Kokushi daijiten*, for instance. But what encyclopedias and historical dictionaries fail to show is the scale of Saionji's personality, the personality that attracts and charms even out of the context of his high position as a statesman. In this essay I would prefer to concentrate mostly on those features of Saionji's personality that allow us to single him out from a series of brilliant and successful politicians of his age and appreciate him as a unique phenomenon in modern Japanese history.

So saying, I by no means mean to try to exaggerate the achievements of Saionji as a political or state leader. Neither do I intend to attribute to him any exclusive political role. Among Saionji's contemporaries we can find men who were more politically skillful and energetic, such as Hara Takashi, and men who could boast greater achievements as statesmen, such as Itō Hirobumi or Yamagata Aritomo. Or those who had more political will, shrewdness, and courage, like Saionji's partner and rival Katsura Tarō.

And still, reading the Autobiography one cannot help being impressed by Saionji's high intellect and philosophical perception of things, by his broad interests

stretching from foreign languages to ancient Chinese classics, by his wide range of acquaintances that included leading artists, politicians, and even revolutionists of his age, by his liberal and progressive mindset, clearly revealed in his *Jiden*. Given all that, Saionji remains, probably, the most vivid leader of his age. And the most controversial one, for Saionji combines in himself incompatible, at first sight, features.

First of all, Saionji presents a remarkable composition of Japanese culture and the most advanced western education, sharing the love for artistic and academic traditions of Japan with open interest and deep understanding of the Western culture. Being a descendant of one of the oldest families in Japan, inferior in nobility perhaps only to the Royal family, Saionji received splendid classical education at the court. The level of this education, together with the high intellectual abilities of the young man, allowed him to open a private academy in Kyoto at the age of twenty—the Ritsumeikan academy (the forerunner of the present Ritsumeikan University). “I managed to gather together the best Confucian scholars of Kyoto,” he recalled many years later, “so my Academy gained very high reputation and many students from various domains came to study there.”⁴

As we can see from the Autobiography, Saionji was much more than an amateur in many traditional Japanese and Chinese arts, not only in “customary” calligraphy or poetry, but even in such sophisticated genres like seal carving, the art of *bonsai* dwarf trees, and many others. Even specialists often admitted his superiority in artistic matters. Saionji recounts one situation that took place during his stay in Paris:

Once, a merchant who sold different kinds of works of art asked me to look at a certain painting. “Oh, this must be a Kohōgen!” I exclaimed. [Kohōgen is a posthumous name for Kanō Motonobu (1476–1559), one of the founders of the Kanō school of painting—N.O.] This made a strong impression on him, for a painting by Kohōgen it was indeed. . . . The man kept asking me how I managed to identify the scroll so quickly and started to show me different art objects, treating me like a true expert, so eventually it was I who was perplexed.⁵

Not only was he a connoisseur of Japanese things, but from an early age, Saionji showed even greater interest in the Western civilization. More than once Saionji shocked the xenophobic and conservative court by open expression of his views. Appearing at court in Western dress was only one instance of his matching overt behavior with his iconoclastic spirit.

In 1870, a long-cherished dream came true and Saionji was sent to study in France, where he spent ten years, dividing his time equally, as he confessed, between study and pleasure. In the latter sphere, he testified, he learned things that “one



Fig. 2. Young Saionji in Paris.

cannot learn in class.”⁶ He graduated from the Sorbonne University, having attended the lectures of the liberal, not to say leftist, professor of justice Emile Acolas, and he became a close friend of the future President of France, George Clemenceau. After completing his university studies, Saionji spent nearly as much time in Europe as minister to different European states, and established a reputation as one of the most enlightened men of his country.

In 1894, Saionji became a member of the cabinet for the first time, becoming Minister of Education. His first impulse was to implement changes based on Western values into the Japanese education system, to make it more modern and progressive. He even made a bold, yet unsuccessful, attempt to revise the Imperial Rescript on Education, which was saturated with Confucian morality and conservative ideas, for he believed that “the current ordinance was not enough and the education policy should be carried out in a more liberal manner.”⁷

The second unusual thing about Saionji’s personality is the seeming contradiction of his political interests. He is well known as the most loyal of monarchists, and had risked his life for this principle in the Restoration War of 1868, personally leading troops that suppressed the resistance of pro-shogunal forces in the southwestern province of Tamba and later in the northeastern domain of Echigo. Greatly respected by all three emperors he served, he was connected with the Meiji emperor with close ties of friendship. “I used to call on His Majesty simply to inquire about his well-being, and quite often he would beckon me, saying, ‘Will you come for a second?’ so that we could chat freely.”⁸

And at the same time, Saionji was acknowledged to be a convinced liberal. Some even considered him a dangerous radical. Saionji openly admitted his sympathies for the “left flank,” as he called it.⁹ In one passage of the Autobiography he even puts forward the following idea: “If we do not exercise a certain control over the rightist tendencies that are also present in the society, it will bring about a dangerous misbalance, so we should try to find the golden mean.”¹⁰ It was during his prime ministership in 1906 that the formation of the Japanese Socialist Party was first permitted. Saionji welcomed in his house not only people like Nakae Chōmin, who was called the “Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the Orient,” but also some of the socialists who ended up being convicted and executed in the so-called High Treason Incident in 1911—an unproved attempt to kill the emperor.

Although Saionji firmly believed that the imperial family should be the ultimate center of the entire political system, he also thought it necessary to liberalize the court and make the monarch more accessible both to ministers and state bureaucracy and the people. Saionji recalls a conversation with Hirata Tōsuke, a close associate of Yamagata Aritomo who served in many government posts and was renowned for his conservatism, who once stated that “life at court should be properly covered with clouds.” Saionji objected: “We should by no means do so. Clouds will bring about darkness, so we should drive them away to let in the light.”¹¹

Such polarity of political beliefs to a large extent determined the unusualness

of the political and state career of Saionji. It may sound paradoxical, but Saionji was considered an ally by both the state oligarchy, the so-called *hanbatsu*, and the political parties that opposed them.

Saionji, in fact, was one of the first to support the democratic and antigovernment Movement for Freedom and People's Rights. In 1880, right after his return from Paris, he became president of the *Tōyō jiyū shinbun*, perhaps the most progressive newspaper of that time in Japan. This caused much confusion among the government leaders; it was unprecedented for someone of Saionji's pedigree and influence to join what was clearly an opposition movement. In 1900, Saionji took an active part in the formation of the Seiyūkai, the largest and the most influential political party in Japan. Three years later he became president of the party, and he retained that post for ten years, during which the Seiyūkai became a leading political force and political parties in general made a decisive step towards the establishment of parliament-centered governments.

And yet this clear siding with political rivals of the state bureaucracy and Meiji oligarchy did not alienate Saionji from *hanbatsu* leaders. The possible cause was that even in the midst of his party activities, Saionji never really gave up the idea of transcendent, i.e., non-party, rule by the narrow elite and state bureaucracy. Indeed, soon after Saionji was made a *genrō* in 1913—solidifying his standing as part of that narrow elite—he began to distance himself from the party movement. But even at this stage he did not sever his ties with the political parties completely. As is well known, the first pure party government, the cabinet formed by Hara Takashi in 1918, to a large extent owes its emergence to Saionji's firm support.

The third contradiction in Saionji's life, perhaps the most striking of all, is his attitude to politics and his own place in it. On the one hand, he was a man who occupied nearly all the possible positions in state institutions, from minister to lifelong adviser to the emperor. On the other hand, he was a person who, according to both his own words and the observations of his contemporaries, had virtually no political ambitions or interest in politics and a state career at all.

Unlike his colleague Hara, who was burning with political ambition, or unlike the renown master of intrigue Katsura, who was said to like politics more than rice, and contrary to Itō, who was sometimes subjected to derision as ridiculous in his hunger for fame and honour, and many others, Saionji was much more concerned with personal intellectual and artistic development than with compiling a distinguished state career. He preferred a quiet and leisurely lifestyle to political battles. An illustration of this can be found after 1906, after he became prime minister (January 1906–July 1908). He attended with incomparable enthusiasm not to cabinet affairs, which he obviously found tiresome, but to the literary circle that gathered regularly in his residence and became a notable phenomenon in the artistic life of the country.

He did not even try to hide that being party president or prime minister was but a heavy burden that he unwillingly agreed to put on his shoulders. Contrary to Katsura or Hara, Saionji seemed not to treasure his tenure in power at all, and sought

every chance to relieve him of the tedious obligations as head of state.

Recalling the collapse of his second cabinet (August 1911-September 1912), the result of resignation of the army minister and the refusal of the army to provide a successor, he remarked, "Surely, if I had done my best, I would have been able to resolve the crisis in my cabinet's favor. But whatever I do, I prefer to leave some space for maneuver, so I chose not to persist and retired."¹²

As for his presidency of the Seiyūkai, he frankly confessed that it was a matter of almost no concern to him. "Ito Hirobumi ordered me to take over the party, so I had no choice but to obey. But after I became party president, I transferred all the business to Hara and Matsuda."¹³ The same was the case with his retirement from the party. "The Seiyūkai could go on successfully without me, or perhaps even better than with me. . . . There is a lazy side in me. When I see that something is to my benefit I am eager to pursue it, but if I see that it is not, and besides somebody else could do the same job equally well, I prefer to step aside. So I decided that it was the right time for Hara to take over. . . . And anyhow, things had become rather tedious."¹⁴

To a certain degree, we can attribute this political ambiguity of Saionji to his aristocratic origin. Secure in his high birth, being closely related both to the throne and to one of the richest financial clans, the Sumitomo, Saionji had no particular reason to fight for his place among the elite, unlike, for instance, Hara Takashi, an outsider from the Northeast. More than that, his character, which was truly summed up by Oka Yoshitake as "highly aristocratic,"¹⁵ made him despise the inevitable plots and conflicts of politics, and thus he tended to delegate daily political routine to his colleagues.

This attitude to politics perplexed both Saionji's allies and enemies alike. If the former lamented his languid political style, the latter sneered at it. For example, the popular and prominent journalist and historian Tokutomi Sohō summed up Saionji's character with three words: "Intellect, indolence, indifference."¹⁶ And Hara Takashi more than once in the pages of his diaries deplored Saionji's inexplicable, to Hara's mind, behaviour: "I have always come to Saionji's rescue, and in fact it is to my power that he owes most of the successes that are attributed to him . . . but he simply lacks stamina and will for power. He has never exerted himself to the full for the sake of anything. And at the same time he seems not to notice my efforts at all. This is just ridiculous!"¹⁷

In the Autobiography Saionji fully affirms his contemporaries' criticism:

When I returned to Japan after 10 years in France, I saw that some kind of apathy had taken sway in Japan. And although I was disappointed and even angered by it, I perceived it as a natural trend of that era, and I felt no ambition, or should I say desire, or should I say courage to try and change this trend and inspire the former energy into people's hearts. I am much the same today. I watch the flow of time, observe its tendencies. . . . I lack the superhuman effort



Fig. 3. Genrō Saionji in 1928

required to turn the tide of time and reverse the trends. Someone might say that Saionji is cold. But I do not think this is so. I do not oppose the trends of time, but neither do I follow them.¹⁸

Saionji's aristocratic aloofness reveals itself frequently in the Autobiography. Probably he was sincere when he said that "unwillingness to undertake serious efforts or sacrifice myself for any high ideas was and remains my main principle."¹⁹

In this short essay it is impossible to give an exhaustive explanation of Saionji's political attitude, which seems paradoxical for a statesman of his standing. Neither can we analyze fully the reasons and motivations that kept Saionji at the

center of political life for some many decades. We can, however, offer some tentative observations. Partly, he was driven by the want of new impressions that one could get only by being in the front line of social and political life. Recollecting the episode of his entering the *Tōyō jiyū shinbun*, Saionji admitted with full sincerity: "My entering the newspaper did not mean my strong devotion either to the human rights cause or to the newspaper business. It was all a bit of fun for me, not more than a chance to buy myself a moment of pleasure."²⁰

Partly, Saionji's conduct was dominated by his love of eccentric gestures. His outspoken intention to spend some time in the company of a French prostitute who in past had been convicted of murdering a Japanese national and imprisoned, or his attempts to marry a girl from the untouchable *eta* family are vivid examples of this side of Saionji's character. He seemed to enjoy the confusion his outrageous behavior caused.

To a large extent Saionji must have been motivated in his political career by the sense of duty to the monarch and "foundation fathers" of the Meiji state—Iwakura Tomomi, Ōkubo Toshimichi, Saigō Takamori, Kido Takayoshi, and others. One can find many entries in the Autobiography in which Saionji expresses his admiration and loyalty towards the sovereign and the leaders of the Meiji Restoration. But whatever the case, we can see how dramatically Saionji differs from the "classic model" of a politician and how big a mistake it would be to neglect a figure of his scale.

So far we have dwelled mostly on Saionji's personality, but his Autobiography also provides a splendid insight into the "inner circle" of Japanese power and poli-

tics. The pages of *Jiden* are full of colorful descriptions of leading figures of that era and various situations involving them. What is most precious is that Saionji avoids detailed analysis of events of his past and focuses rather on some unknown details of certain personalities or episodes that involved them, describing situations that might seem minor at first sight but which made a strong impression on him personally. For example, there is this amusing entry in the Autobiography:

Emperor Meiji was very word-bound, but sometimes he succeeded in producing remarkable expressions. Once, depicting Itō and Yamagata, he said: “Itō is always unhealthily strong but Yamagata is strongly unhealthy.” And another phrase of His Majesty’s: “When listening to Itō, one feels himself as if at a lecture on Chinese classics.” In these true words lay the essence of His Majesty’s lively and natural humor.²¹



Fig. 4. Saionji late in life. Photograph taken at his private villa Zagyosō around the time Koizumi conducted his interviews.

It is worth citing one more entry that is a splendid illustration of the character of the man who was, perhaps, the most tragic hero of the Meiji Restoration, Saigō Takamori.

One day the Meiji emperor told me about the following occasion. When His Majesty fell off horse during a riding lesson and complained of pain Saigō, who stood nearby, said: “Whatever happens you must never complain and speak of pain.” The emperor was

very young those days and probably could not comprehend fully the magnificence of Saigō's personality but His Majesty must have certainly felt the enormous authority and dignity of Saigō.²²

Of course, the randomness of such entries makes it hard for us to restore the historic process or a portrait of this or that politician as a whole. And in this respect the Autobiography is inferior to more rigid and scrupulously written diaries of Hara Takashi or another politician, Matsumoto Gōkichi.²³ But this Autobiography, written in an informal and lively manner, helps us to look from a different angle at plain facts. What we can derive from it is different from what we find in more academic sources. Saionji's genuine humour and keenness gives us a wonderful glimpse at the peculiarities of political process, relations and decision-making in Japanese establishment. In other words, through the exciting, sometimes touching, and always true to life pages of Saionji's Autobiography, even at a distance of a hundred years, we can feel the "soul" of that vibrant age.

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NOTES

- 1 Takekoshi 1933.
- 2 Omura 1938.
- 3 *Hara Takashi nikki*.
- 4 *Saionji Kinmochi jiden*, p. 49.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 139–40.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 15 Oka, 1986, p.181
- 16 Najita, 1967, p. 18.
- 17 *Hara Takashi nikki*, vol. 3, p. 155.
- 18 *Saionji Kinmochi jiden*, p. 73–74.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 23 Matsumoto, 1959.