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# REVOLUTION AND REFORM IN MEIJI RESTORATION

By *Hideichi Horie*

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No one will deny that the political upheaval commonly known as the Meiji Restoration was a revolutionary change in the history of the Japanese people. The Meiji restoration was the return of power to *Tennō*, the Emperor after a period of more than 600 years of feudal control under the feudal lords. It was the overthrow of the decentralised rule of the feudal lords and the setting up of a strong centralised government with the Emperor as its head. The Meiji Restoration abolished the feudalistic system of land rent payment in produce to land rent payment in money. It served to establish western capitalism firmly in Japan. Altho the Meiji Restoration was an important turning point in Japanese history, there have been various opposing opinions concerning this historic transition. The opinion that it was a bourgeois revolution has predominated, and many still hold this to be true. But from about 1930, this opinion has undergone a change to consider it a form of absolutism in the nature of the *ancien regime*. Capitalism in Japan developed out of a privileged factory similar to the privileged manufacture under the absolute monarchs of France. It differed greatly from the capitalism in France, England or America where chartered manufacture was being done away with. In Japan, under the absolute rule of the Emperor, privileged factory became the basis of capitalistic expansion. The rapid rise of the factory system, the growth in strength of the proletariat together with the timidity of the bourgeois proved to be important factors in sustaining the power of the Emperor to this day.

In the present paper, I have tried to answer the question, "Who brought about the Meiji Restoration?"...I have tried to make clear the class stratification involved in founding the *Tennō* system, the absolute Emperor system. I regret to say that I must leave to some future time the explanation of economic development, which made this political change inevitable.

## I

The inevitable decline of the feudal system under the Tokugawa regime was clearly shown in the increase in number and force of

the agrarian revolts. In 1937, the late Dr. Iwao Kokusho published a table showing the number of agrarian uprisings from 1603 to 1867. The revolts continued to increase in rapid succession altho the latest figures have not been published.<sup>1)</sup> According to the incomplete figures shown in Dr. Kokusho's table, during the 265 years under the control of the Tokugawa government, not less than 1240 farmer insurrections broke out. Altho there was a constant rise and fall in the number of revolts, it is to be noted that there was a steady rise in their number. The following will show the average yearly number of farmer revolts from 1713 to 1867: 1713-1722 4.2, 1783-1792 10.6, 1833-1842 11.7, 1863-1867 11.3. In 1866, the year preceding the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate, there were as many as 35 farmer revolts.

Table 1: Agrarian Revolts of Tokugawa Era

Year	number	Annual average	Year	number	Annual average
1603-1612	15	1.5	1763-1772	51	5.1
1613-1622	21	2.1	1773-1782	40	4.1
1623-1632	9	0.9	1783-1792	106	10.6
1633-1642	16	1.6	1793-1802	48	4.8
1643-1652	8	0.8	1803-1812	55	5.5
1653-1662	12	1.2	1813-1822	60	6.0
1663-1672	21	2.1	1823-1832	77	7.7
1673-1682	27	2.7	1833-1842	117	11.7
1683-1692	17	1.7	1834-1852	38	3.3
1693-1702	19	1.9	1853-1862	69	6.9
1703-1812	29	2.9	1863-1867	67	11.3
1713-1722	42	4.2	n.d.	97	
1723-1732	37	3.7	Total	1240	4.68
1733-1742	38	3.8			
1743-1752	53	5.3			
1753-1762	51	5.1			

With these uprisings increasing in number, it became necessary for the heads of the provincial clans to lay plans against these rebellious factions fighting against the monopolistic control of the feudal regime. From 1713 to 1722, the Yoshimune Tokugawa, the *Shogun*-the *Taikun* tried to carry out the *Kyoho reforms* and in 1783 to 1792 Sadanobu Matsudaira passed the *Kansei reforms* and against the aggressive farmers in 1833-42 Tadakuni Mizuno tried to accomplish the *Tempo reforms* in order to reenforce the power of the Tokugawa regime, but the rise

1) *Keizai Shi Kenkyu* (Economic History Research): Vol. 17, No. 3.

of the farmers and the poor urban population against the feudal government finally resulted in the overthrow of the government and the restoration of power to the Emperor. The moving force which brought about the Meiji Restoration was the anti-feudal activity and opposition among the farmers and the poor urban population.

Did the rule of the Emperor rest with the farmers and the poor urban population which fought for power? Needless to say, this was not true, but it was nothing but the absolute monarchical control which oppressed the agrarian population and the poor urban people. To make this point clear, various steps will be required, but first, I shall try to show the classes involved in the agrarian revolts which furnished the creative energy for the Meiji Restoration.

The farmer revolts of the Tokugawa era were uprisings against the oppressive control of the *daimyo* or feudal government and altho there was some difference in the direct or indirect actions taken, they served to make the opposition of all farmers. The officials of the *Shogun* on Nov. 12, 1863 made the following statement. "The wealthy desire independence, the poor have become robbers and those who diligently tilled the soil have become, few these conditions are reflected in the national uprisings." The Tokugawa government could trust neither the wealthy farmers nor the poor farmers. The farmer revolts of the Tokugawa period show the tendency of all rural population to fight against the feudal system. But those in control of the feudal government knew that this involved internal conflict. The verdict given in the words "The wealthy desire independence, the poor have become robbers" shows it.<sup>2)</sup>

Altho most wealthy farmers were usually village officials, they were also against the feudal control. The farmers were forced to pawn their land or to give it up in payment for loans from the money-lenders. The landowners let out these seized lands to tenant farmer and received the rent from them. But the landowners had but a small residue after due tribute was paid the feudal lords. The parasitic form of land ownership which became common from the Meiji period had already began and because of heavy payment required the wealthy farmers by the feudal lords they could not give up their own farming. In 1830, with Osaka as the center of the mercantile economy the parasitic form of land ownership became quite common. But in the Tokyo area and other parts this form was not established until 1880. It was in 1879 that the second largest land owner in Japan, the Saito family of Miyagi

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2) Shikitaro Oyama, Peasant Soldiers.

Prefecture gave up their own farming. The heavy tribute paid to the *Daimyo* and feudal regime prevented the wealthy farmers from accumulating land. These farmers also became small manufacturers and merchants and tried to compete against the merchants within the castle walls, but the feudal government and the *daimyo* from the beginning of the 18th century tried to protect the city merchants and workers by giving the sole rights of the guild and oppressed the farm population and small merchants. Also the *daimyo* made a monopoly of the goods of his domain and by buying them and cheaply selling them in Osaka and Tokyo. And also they bought the goods outside their domain and sold them at exorbitant prices in order to overcome the fiscal crises. The wealthy farmers who organised the mercantile economy of the farming classes were opposed by the guilds and monopolies and demanded free trade and in 1830 the feudal government was obliged to give in to their demands. The poor farmers were not only opposed to the guilds and monopolies, but they gradually lost their lands to the wealthy farmers, becoming tenant farmers or hired labourers and often left their native provinces. They also demanded the return of the land which they were forced to pawn or had lost in payment as security for loans. The feudal government firmly defended the wealthy farmers. In 1868 the poor farmers of Aizu demanded exemption from this yearly rice payment, the abolishment of monopolies, interest free pawn system and the democratic election of village officials and thereby assailed the wealthy farmers.<sup>3)</sup>

In this way, agrarian revolts which were anti-feudalistic disturbances at first, later became movements against the wealthy farmers who held strong economic control over the agricultural field. Agrarian revolts developed into "*Yonaoshi ikki*" or "world levelling revolts". The uprisings grew in number and important changes in their character became apparent. The nature and number of these agrarian uprisings determined the characteristic factors in the Meiji Restoration.

## II

From 1830, the feudal system under the Tokugawa rule and the *daimyo* faced a crisis. The agrarian uprising of the Tempo era (1830-1843) rose in number and in violence. The number of uprisings were as follows: 1830-10, 1831-11, 1832-8, 1833-29, 1834-7, 1835-6, 1836-26, 1837-20, 1838-13, 1839-0, 1840-1, 1841-4, 1842-11, 1843-5. The anti-feudalistic movement among the farm population made the wealthy

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3) Eitaro Tamura: Japanese agrarian movement in Tokugawa period. Chap. 1. and *Tohoku Keizai* Vol. IV. (Tohoku Economics).

farmers resort to new tactics. The wealthy farmers tried to retain their control over the poor farmers by forcing them to fight against the feudal lords. The wealthy farmers could find no other way out of their plight. The vigorous opposition of the poor farmers against the feudal system forced the feudal government and the *daimyo* to face this crisis.

In 1839, the head of the Mito clan, Nariaki Tokugawa, fearing the rapidly rising number and strength of the farmer revolts, recognised them as a sign of the times. The critical situation and unrest among the ruling military class began to show divisions within their ranks. A cleavage had appeared between the upper military class and the lower strata of fighting men. The upper class military wished to uphold their position while those of the lower class hoped to reform their positions, thus causing the divisions. Thus, by pitting the poor farming class against the feudal lords, the wealthy farming class succeeded in securing control over the poverty-stricken agrarian population. This led to the inevitable joining of forces of the wealthy farmers and the reformist lower military class. This became the leading factor in the political developments which ensued. From 1830, this united front began to play its part on the historical stage.

The farmer revolts caused two armed rebellions in 1837, namely the uprising led by Oshio in Osaka and the Ikuta revolt in Kashiwazaki against the feudal regime. These two uprisings gave evidence that the unity mentioned above had been achieved. Those who were connected with the Oshio riots are given in the following table<sup>4)</sup>

Table II. Social Position of Oshio Disciples

	Shogunate officials	Clansmen	farmers	doctors	merchants and handicraftsmen	unknown
Number	16	8	17	6	2	11
Percentage	27	13	28	10	3	19

The leading members of the armed rebellion numbering 300 were Oshio's disciples and were composed of the lowest class military men and the farming class. This revolt was planned and carried out by wealthy farmers such as: Chubei Hashimoto, Genemon Kashiwaoka, Denhichi Kashiwaoka, village officials of Hanya-mura, and Koemon Shirai, who owned a pawn shop in Moriguchi and his relative, Gijiro Shirai and Saijiro Fukao. The Oshio revolts were based upon the joint action of the wealthy farmers and the lower class military men.<sup>5)</sup>

4) Makoto Abe, : Advance of Agriculture and Philosophy: Research, (*Kenkyu*) 1951, Dec.

5) Naritomo Kōda; Biography of Heihachiro Ōsio. pp. 160 and following.

Table II. Special Position of Oshio Revolt Participants

	farmers					
	disciples	cocks	Coolie	Hunts man	Homeless	total
those punished	13	1	2	1	1	18
Participants in revolt	9	1	0	1	0	11
Associates in plan	11	0	0	0	0	11
	Shogunate official	retainers	doctors	others	total	
those punished	6	3	2	3	32	
Participants in revolt	5	3	1	2	22	
Associates in plan	10	0	1	1	23	

It was in the area around Osaka where the Oshio revolts broke out, that mercantile economy had its earliest start in Japan. Class stratifications were strong among the farming classes and already in 1830 the parasitic ownership of land was well established. And moreover, the merchants of Osaka, which was the foremost trade center of the period in Japan began to exert a firm, guild-like control under the patronage of the feudal government. This caused severe conflict with the producers and merchants in the farming area. Conditions leading to the rapid formation of reformists fractions were present at this time in Osaka. The wealthy farmers escaped being attacked, while the city merchants and guild controlled merchants bore the brunt of the attacks. The feudal government as well as the *daimyo* who suffered from the rising tide of farmers insurrections, were forced to carry out political reforms, abolish monopolies, or alleviate them. But they did not try to prevent the class cleavage among the farming population, but tended to protect the wealthy farming classes. Thus thru this political change, with the members of the lowest strata among the clans of Kagoshima, Yamaguchi, Kochi and others, the reformist factions began to arise, and their alliance with the wealthy farming classes began to grow.

In 1853, when Commodore Perry forced open the gates of Japan, her self-imposed isolation came to an end. With the signing of the Treaty of Commerce and Trade in 1858, the senior Minister, Lord Naosuke Ii tried to place Iemochi as the successor to the *shogun*, while the opposing group led by Nariaki Tokugawa who wished to place Keiki in the position came into open conflict. In 1859, Lord Ii tried to suppress the opposing faction. In 1860, Lord Ii was finally assassinated by the retainers of the Mito clan, supporters of Nariaki's faction. The opening of the ports caused a rise in prices and brought much suffering to the

lower classes.

In 1859, 20,000 silk weavers of Kiryiu went directly to Lord Ii and Lord Manabe and declared that they would attack the silk merchants of Kiryiu who were selling their raw silk to Yokohama<sup>6)</sup> In 1866, the silk weavers of Chichibu attacked the dwellings and property of the silk merchants.<sup>7)</sup> The lower classes which gained little from the treaty complained and opposed to the unfair treaty. The alliance mentioned above, served to turn this feeling of dissatisfaction among the Japanese people towards the feudal regime. The measures attacking the feudal government were taken and "exclusion of foreigners" became the slogan which later led to the downfall of the *shogunate*. As the result of this campaign, the alliance became an powerful power in Japan. The Tenchugumi rebellion of 1863 in Nara Prefecture and the Ikuno uprising in Hyogo Prefecture came at the height of the campaigns of the alliance, but they also marked the gradual decline and effect of the manoeuvres. In explaining the nature of these revolts, I shall to make clear the character of the alliance.

The Tenchugumi uprising held that "exclusionism" and anti-*shogun* tactics and had the Emperor Komei make an Imperial tour to Yamato (Nara Pref.) to pray for alien exclusion. The Tenchugumi tried to establish a government in Yamato with the Emperor as the head and gathered an army to fight against the *Shogun*, with Tadimitsu Nakayama as their leader. The Tenchugumi rebellion was carried out by a little over a thousand men. The social position of the leaders of the Tenchugumi is shown in the following table <sup>8)</sup>

Table IV Social Position of Tenchugumi Rebels

samurais		farmers		merchants	priests	doctors	augurs	unknown	total
clansmen	country samurai	village officials	farmers						
24	18	5	5	1	2	3	1	16	75

The men of the Tenchugumi belonged to various classes such as: clansmen, country *samurais* and farmers. These country *samurais* remained in the villages and engaged in agriculture. These placed together with village officials and *syoya* swill shows that the Tenchugumi was divided as follows: *Hanshis* (clansmen) 24, *Goshi* (Country *samurai*) and *Shoya* (village chiefs) 23 as the leaders. The Tenchugumi had as leading figures, Keido Matsumoto of Aichi Prefecture, Tetseki Fujimoto,

6) Kikiu Wearing History, Vol. 2. p. 90.

7) Fumio Ebukuro; Chichibu Rebellion. p. 5.

8) Heizo Hara; Tenchugumi Rebellion. Historical Society Annals (*Shigaku Zasshi*) Vol. 45, No. 9 and 10.

clansman of Tsuyama and Torataro Yoshimura, former *shoya* of Kochi who was the chief organiser of the campaigns. It was an alliance of lower class *samurai* from various clans, country *samurai* of Kochi and Nara Prefectures with Zenemon Nigori of Kawachi as their leader. As the Tenchugumi broke up, the poor farmers pursued and attacked them. This alliance showed the same characteristics as the Ikuno revolts. Although this brought the opposing factions together against the feudal government, it did not represent the poor farmers. The Ikuno uprising broke out with Taroemon Nakajima, a *shoya* as the leader, but was soon puelled in a few days. The revolting farmers not only pursued, attacked and killed the members of the alliance, but broke into the homes and destroyed property. Casualties consisted of 14 wounded including, 4 *shoyas*, 2 brewers, 1 doctor, 2 rice dealers, 2 shopkeepers and drapers, 2 wealthy farmers, 1 unknown-all leaders in the village life.<sup>9)</sup> It came to pass that the village leaders as well as the lower class *samurai* were attacked by the poor farm population. This alliance was formed as a result of the farm revolts, but it became very oppressive towards the agrarian class as a whole. The Oshio riot and the Tenchugumi disturbance as well as the Ikuno rebellion were like the Jack Cade rebellion of 1450 during the War of the Roses in England. The alliance of the wealthy farmers and the lower class *samurais* showed the need for united defense.

### III

The Oshio revolt, the Tenchugumi uprising and the Ikuno revolt were armed rebellions which occurred in 1830 and after in the dominion of the *shogun* around Kyoto. The failure of the Tenchugumi revolt in 1863 and also that of the Ikuno rebellion made it necessary to change to "one clan loyalty". Izumi Maki and the Loyalist, Hanpeita Takeichi of Kochi opposed these uprisings and advocated a coup d'etat of the feudal clan powers. When on August 14, 1863, the power of the alliance was broken at the court at Kyoto, the loyalists gradually abandoned a hope of the insurgents in the region around Kyoto where separate disturbances had been so common.

The reformist alliance and other opposition groups of upper class against the alliance caused internal conflicts. In 1862, Hisamitsu Shimazu of the Kagoshima clan, attacked and punished the reformists who met at Teradya hotel in Fushimi and Toyo Yoshida who held the clan political power was assassinated by the loyalists of the Kochi clan. The reformist group in Yamaguchi which held the political power

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9) Shenichi Sawa and Shigeru Mochizuki; Ikuno Revellion. pp. 521-523.

in 1863, bombarded the foreign vessels at Shimonoseki. The political unrest in Kyoto mentioned above was the concentration of the internal conflicts within the clan governments. The failure of the alliance in August 1863 meant the victory of the upper class *samurai*. In the following year, the first Yamaguchi expedition marked the height of the power of the upper class *Samurai* against the reformist alliance. In 1864, the opposition between the *Shogun* government and the alliance grew into an armed conflict between the powerful clan and *Shogun* government. "single clan loyalty" became the strongest factor in the ensuing battles.

As can be seen by the foregoing, the alliance made by the wealthy farmers and the lower class military were among such powerful clans such as the Yamaguchi, Kagoshima and Kochi clans of the southwest. On the other hand, the clans of the East-Northern area, especially the Sendai, Wakamatsu retainers stood in steady opposition as the peerless defenders of the feudal regime. The Meiji Restoration was led by the power of the southwestern clans. The Restoration took the form of civil war between the forces of the northwest against the southwestern armies, but in reality it was the battle between the alliance of the wealthy farmers with the lower class *samurai* against the upper class *samurai*, the supporters of the feudal government. What were the chief causes of this state of affairs? This I hope to clarify at some other time when I shall take up the economic factors involved. I shall state only briefly the chief point at this time. The alliance of the wealthy farmers and the lower class *samurai* was evidence of the effort among the wealthy farmers to turn the energy of the poor farmers from the attack against their own to the attack against the feudal regime.

In the eastnorthern (Tohoku) area where mercantile economy had not yet advanced, the reformists did not grow among the peasant revolts. Through out the Tokugawa era, there were in Yamaguchi Prefecture 35 farmers uprisings and among them more than one third or 11 were rebellions against monopolistic control. Thus, the status of the wealthy farmers can be understood. About 1830 Seifū Murata of Yamaguchi, Kahei Mabuchi of the Okoze group of Kochi and Hirosato Zusho of Kagoshima joined hands with the wealthy farmers.<sup>10)</sup> The clans which produced these men became the leaders in the movement for the union of the wealthy farmers and the lower class military, and thus union tried to lead the anti-feudal movement of peasants. After 1848, the

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10) Tatsuya Naramoto; Feudal Society of Tokugawa Era. Kiyoshi Haraguchi; Political rivalry in the end of Tokugawa Era, Historical Research (*Rekishi gaku Kenkyu*) No. 142.

Yamaguchi clan which had more than 35 uprisings in the Tokugawa era had not even one. In Kochi the number of uprisings fell to 2. Thus the great clans of southwest thru the alliances were freed from the critical situation. About 1863 the alliances planned new manoeuvres.

It was thru Shinsaku Takasugi that the work of unifying the wealthy farmers and the poor led by them not as temporary measure but into a regular army was begun. In 1638 when they were preparing to bombard Shimonoseki, volunteers were enlisted as non-regular troops (*Kiheitai*) from the lower class *samurai*, farmers, merchants differing from the regular army. It might be said that these forces were like the Ikuno and Tenchugumi insurgents framed into permanent army. In 1864, after the first Yamaguchi expedition and the transfer of power to conservatives, upper class *samurai*, Takasugi again led a coup d'état with this troops and seized the power back for the reformist. This troops broke the second Yamaguchi expeditionary forces in 1866. Thru Takasugi, the army was entirely changed.

It was not only the Yamaguchi clan that enlisted the farming classes, but many other clans took this step much sooner toward the end of the *Shogunate*. As has been stated above, the officials of the *Shogun* government reported that, the rich desired independence, the poor became robbers and those who tilled the soil with diligence became few". And so, the upper class *samurai* with fear of the farming class organized common people's army under the control of their own. It did not try to alleviate the conflicts among the farming classes. The volunteer armies not only failed but new uprisings were planned. In October 1868, farmers in Yamanashi Prefecture began to plan an uprising, dissatisfied with the policy of the *Shogun* government mustering a common peoples army.<sup>11)</sup> The army in Yamaguchi, based on the alliance of the wealthy farmers and the lower class *samurai* had the backing of the farmers as a whole. In the Miharū clan and the Shibata clan, the wealthy farmers organised a common peoples army to fight against the *Shogun* government.<sup>12)</sup>

The Yamaguchi clan alliance which failed in the bombardment of Shimonoseki changed from "exclusionism" to anti-*Shogun* slogans. The Kagoshima clan which failed in its attack against the British warships in Kagoshima harbour gave up their exclusionist attacks. As 1864 as the dividing line, the alliance had the strong backing of the British and France gave her support to the *Shogun* government. The Yamaguchi

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11) Eitaro Tamura; op. cit. p. 415.

12) Bibliography of Banshu Kōno. Sogoro Tanaka; Men of The Meiji Restoration. p. 52.

alliance defeated the second expedition with her new army. In January 1866, Ryuma Sakamoto and Shintaro Nakaoka of Kochi arranged a meeting between Takamori Saigo of Kagoshima and Koin Kido of Yamaguchi, and Kagoshima clan and Yamaguchi form the defensive alliance against *Shogun* government. The military strength of both clans was brought together. The *daimyo* and the upper class *samurai* could no longer resist the alliance. The outcom of the Meiji Restoration of 1867-68 was made clear.

I have tried to show the steps thru which the wealthy farmers formed an alliance with the reformist lower class *samurai*—growing out of anti-feudal activity of the farming class and finally to the popular army which was organised to fight against the *Shogun* regime and taking away the power of the feudal clans from the upper class *samurai*. Taisuke Itagaki, an upper class *samurai* of Kochi clan who later became the leader in the democratic movement in Japan, demanded in 1874 a parliamentry form of government composed of *samurai* and wealthy farmers and marchants. Those who later received a posthumous court rank after the restoration were samurais, country *Samurais*, as well as village officials, priest and doctors.<sup>13)</sup>

samurais	676	merchants and handicraftsrmen	60
country samurais and unemployed samurais}	62	others	163
farmers	107	total	1070
(village officials and large land owners 74)			

The absolute govenment of the Meiji era was thought as a compromise government in the general opinion of the times, but this compromise government was not established by the old feudal class, but by the newly growing classes, i.e. the union of the wealthy farmers and the lower class *samurais*.

The parasitic land ownership which was typical after the Meiji Restoration was in itself of a feudal nature. During the Tokugawa period, the powerful nobles who ownded the land livied taxes upon the tenants of their domain. But the landowners after the Meiji Restoration did not have the legal right to force the tenant farmers to be bound to the land. The tenant farmers could leave the land and become members of the proletariat. The parasitic landownership system broke down the limitations in the labour field for the capitalistic industry and the landowners after the Meiji Restoration were given backing by a stronger centralized government than the feudal system. The

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13) Shigeki Toyama; The Meiji Restoration. p. 43.

wealthy farmers and the lower class *samurai* alliance brought about a strengthening of landownership among the farming classes and the proletariat.

The reformist alliance emerged from the anti-feudal movements of the farming classes. But the reformist alliance did not become the leader of those opposed to the feudal regime. The reformists did not join the struggle of the lower classes against the wealthy farmers, but turned their revolutionary energies against the *Shogunate* and the *Daimyo* system and in the end, served to oppress and crush them. As the farming classes were not yet politically mature enough to realise the significance of the reformist movement, they were therefore betrayed. The farmers thus appealed to the *Tenno* much as the peasants of King Richard's time had shouted, "King Richard and the Commons" in 1381 in England. The Emperor of Japan like King Richard II of England promised to aid the farmers, but later suppressed them. Untill 1880, the betrayed refarmers arose in revolts numbering 250 and attacked the government with armed forces. Here, the historical significance of the part taken by the reformist forces becomes clear. The farmers were betrayed, but the inevitability of the Meiji Restoration was due to the revolutionary energy of the farming classes.