

Yoshida Shoin: His Changing Image and Perspective of Humanity

By Tanaka Akira

Yoshida Shoin's Path through Life

Yoshida Shoin (a.k.a. Torajiro) was born in 1830 as the second son of Sugi Yurinosuke, a lower-ranking samurai in the Choshu domain, which is the present-day Yamaguchi Prefecture in the western region of Japan's main island of Honshu. In the following year, Choshu was shaken by a serious uprising that reflected the contradictions of the era, and mounting pressure for change in the feudalistic policies of the Tokugawa shogunate.

At the age of five, Shoin was adopted by his uncle and became a member of the Yoshida family, hereditary instructors in the military arts of the Yamaga school. Even at such a tender age, Shoin proved to be a keen student, and by the age of 10, was winning praise from the Lord of Choshu for his recitals of military classics. This was at a time when the Opium War (1840-1842) erupted between Britain and China, and European powers were increasingly seeking to bend the nations of East Asia to their wills. Such events prompted Shoin to take an interest in coastal defense, and in 1850, he traveled around Kyushu to the west to assimilate all the information he could find about overseas developments. In the following year, he also traveled to Edo (present-day Tokyo), and beyond to Tohoku, the northern region of Japan's main island of Honshu, before returning to Choshu.

Granted permission by his domain, in 1853 Shoin once again traveled to Edo and other parts of Japan, and he was in Edo in 1853 when Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794-1858) arrived with his warships to demand that Japan open up its ports to trade, a sight that convinced Shoin that the Tokugawa shogunate's days were num-

bered. When Perry returned the following year, Shoin defied the shogunate's longstanding ban on contact with foreigners by boarding one of Perry's ships at Shimoda with a follower in an attempt to persuade the Commodore to take them to America. On being turned down by Perry, Shoin gave himself up to the shogunate authorities, and was imprisoned in Edo's Temmachi Prison. He was later transferred to Noyama Prison in the town of Hagi in Choshu, from where he returned under house arrest to the Sugi household that he was born into. It was here that in 1857 he established his Shoka Sonjuku (Village School Under the Pines) to teach his ideas to a growing number of young disciples. During this brief period before Shoin's death in 1859, about 80 youngsters studied under him, including Takasugi Shinsaku, Kusaka Genzui, Shinagawa Yajiro, Yamagata Aritomo, Ito Hirobumi, Yamada Akiyoshi, Kido Takayoshi and others who went on to play leading roles in the Meiji Restoration.

In 1858 Ii Naosuke, the Tokugawa Regent, signed a commercial treaty with the United States without obtaining the sanction of the Emperor, an action that enraged Shoin, impelling him to do a complete about-face in his political stance, and call for "*Sonno Joi*" (Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians). As his disgust with the Tokugawa shogunate mounted, he became increasingly confrontational, hatching a number of plots that were all, however, to end in failure. He arrived eventually at the conclusion that opening up the path to a new era required nothing short of an organized revolution led by like-minded individuals among lower-ranking samurai, intellectuals and the wealthy farmer class, and fueled by the growing anti-feudal

sentiments of the populace.

Shoin's radical views once more landed him in prison, firstly in Choshu, and then Edo, where in 1859, 10 years before the launch of the Meiji Restoration, he was eventually executed on the Regent's orders. It was Shoin's disciples who took up where he left off, leading the resistance movement that eventually resulted in the toppling of the shogunate and the much-needed reforms and other accomplishments of the Meiji Restoration.

Though existing portraits of Shoin by his followers make him look more like an aging sage, he was, like many others who paid with their lives for their opposition to the shogunate and desire for change, still a young man when he succumbed to the executioner's sword.

Let us now take a look at the way Shoin has been portrayed in succeeding eras.

In a biography of Shoin published in the middle of the Meiji era in 1893, Tokutomi Soho, perhaps the most prominent writer and opinion leader of the age, portrays his subject as a "revolutionary." Tokutomi was at the time critical of the Meiji government, suggesting that another round of reforms was in order, and proposing that another "revolutionary" like Shoin was needed to effect such change. However Tokutomi began to change his tune when Japan, emboldened by victories against China (1894-1895) and Russia (1904-1905), stepped up the scale of its imperialistic ambitions, and Shoin came to be seen more as a "reformer" than as a "revolutionary." And the more that Tokutomi himself came to be regarded as an ideologue of the Meiji government, and the youngsters who had studied under Shoin came to assume positions of leadership in the Meiji government, the more that Shoin

was claimed by them as a hero of the age, a strategy that also enabled them to bask in the reflected glory of their teacher.

In the Taisho era (1912-1926), later labeled the "Taisho democracy" for the air of liberalism that seemed to waft through Japanese society at the time, Shoin was portrayed as a defender of the common people.

For example in 1918, Oba Kageaki (pen name Kako), writing in a regular column for the *Asahi Shimbun* (a leading daily newspaper), likened Shoin to one of the key figures of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerenskii (1881-1970), as a "nationalist" and "champion of the people," while Takasugi Shinsaku was equated with Vladimir Il'ich Lenin (1870-1924).

Shoin is also described by Oba as cosmopolitan for the way he sought to visit foreign shores. Oba himself was a newspaper reporter with cosmopolitan leanings – a Russia expert whose writings contained a strong nationalistic streak in earlier days, but became increasingly socialistic later in life. (He went to Moscow after the Russian Revolution, and was never heard of again.)

In the early Showa era, which started in 1926, Shoin came to be regarded as an educator, largely as a result of Kumura Toshio's influential 1922 biography of Shoin. Kumura edited Shoin's collected works, and set out to write the definitive work about him based on an exhaustive review of all the material available. This image, together with that of the Shoka Sonjuku, has cast a strong influence to this day.

As Japan became increasingly militaristic in the 1930s, Shoin was portrayed, in school textbooks, as a model patriot, someone who revered the Emperor and devoted himself to the cause of protecting the motherland from the barbarians threatening its



A portrait of Yoshida Shoin (1830-1859)

shores by educating some of the most impressive future leaders of Japan at his Shoka Sonjuku in Hagi, a little country town in Choshu far from the nation's political center. No mention whatsoever is made in the accounts of his life written in this period of his imprisonment for breaking the ban on contacts with foreigners.

Also during World War II, Shoin was celebrated as a model to which the youth of Japan should aspire. They were encouraged to emulate his reverence for the Emperor and dedicate their lives as Shoin did to the defense of the Emperor's nation.

Defeat in 1945 however had the effect of instantly erasing this image, and for several years, all mention of Shoin was avoided.

His personage once more saw the light of day, however, with the publication in 1951 of a biography by Naramoto Tatsuya, who depicted him as a thinker who acted on his political principles, but met with failure.

Naramoto drew parallels between Shoin's failures and the circumstances that Japan found itself in after defeat in World War II, and presented Shoin in a significantly different light from the flattering images of previous biographers.

Since then, Shoin has been depicted again as an educator, political activist, thinker and revolutionary, the various interpretations seemingly matching the postwar diversification of values in Japanese society. Even now, he is a figure whose image is difficult to pin down.

In recent years the number of elementary and junior high school tours to the preserved Shoka Sonjuku has declined, only to be replaced by an increasing number of owners of small businesses apparently seeking inspiration from Shoin's example for the education of their employees.

This too is another reflection of the changing image of Yoshida Shoin. One thing that can be said with certainty, however, is that Shoin has never been rejected outright, and in the decades since his death, someone has always found something deserving in the example he set.

Shoin as Seen by Foreigners

How, then, has Shoin been viewed by foreigners?

The following quote, from *Narrative of The Expedition of An American Squadron to China and Japan* (Washington, 1856) by Francis L. Hawks, suggests that Shoin and his companion created a good impression when they attempted to persuade the Americans to take them aboard during Perry's visit:

They were educated men, and wrote the mandarin Chinese with fluency and apparent elegance, and their manners were courteous and

Photo : Shoin Shrine



In Shoka Sonjuku, Shoin taught his ideas to a number of young disciples

highly refined. The Commodore, on learning the purpose of their visit, sent word that he regretted that he was unable to receive them, as he would like very much to take some Japanese to America with him.

The famed British author, Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), also wrote a chapter on Shoin, titled "YOSHIDA-TORAJIRO," in a work titled *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*. He based this essay on the account of Shoin provided by Masaki Taizo during the latter's stay as a student in the United Kingdom, and pulls out punches in his descriptions:

He was ugly and laughably disfigured with the smallpox; and while nature had been so niggardly with him from the first, his personal habits were even sluttish. His clothes were wretched; when he ate or washed he wiped his hands upon his sleeves; and as his hair was not tied more than once in the two months, it was often disgusting to behold.

But here, he provides a glimpse of Shoin's human side that receives virtually no mention in Japanese accounts:

... once when a merchant brought him his son to educate, and added, as was customary, a little private sweetener, Yoshida dashed the money in the giver's face, and launched into such an outbreak of indignation as made the matter public in the school.

Shoin was clearly a young man who wore his emotions on his sleeve.

Shoin and Takasu Hisako

At the time that Shoin was confined there, Hagi's Noyama Prison also held a single female inmate, Takasu Hisako. Her dead husband had been a samurai of some standing in Choshu. She had two daughters, the elder of which, who was about 13 at the time, was betrothed to the 14 year-old son of another Choshu samurai. This lad had been adopted by Hisako's husband, but was still attending the clan school from his parent's home, and as a result Hisako's

household was completely female, consisting of herself, her two daughters and her mother.

Hisako was a cheerful type who also loved playing the *shamisen* (a three-stringed Japanese instrument). As her passion for the instrument grew, she took to inviting a couple of young *shamisen* players to her house in turn. Only members of the "outsider class" could live by this kind of entertainment work, and Hisako was breaking all the bounds of acceptable behavior at the time by inviting them in, and even occasionally wining and dining them, and letting them stay until dawn.

It was such rash acts that landed Hisako in jail when relatives got to hear of them. When interrogated by the authorities, she admitted that her behavior might have been imprudent, but insisted that she had not disgraced herself physically, and had merely extended civil treatment to those who suffered undeservedly from social discrimination. She appears to have argued that all people deserved to be treated in the same way irrespective of family or occupation.

Hisako was already in prison when Shoin arrived, and as they got to know each other, Shoin developed a fondness for Hisako, and a respect for her ideas on society. The two inmates passed the time composing poems for mutual enjoyment, and perusal of those poems shows them to be increasingly peppered with expressions of the growing love that Shoin and Hisako felt for each other. There is nothing particularly surprising about the fact that Shoin, then in his late 20s, and Hisako, in her 30s, should have fallen in love with each other, but one can't help feeling that Shoin was particularly attracted by Hisako's treatment of all people as equals, and her refusal to discriminate against anyone on any basis.

When Shoin traveled around Tohoku in 1851-52, he had witnessed the ruthless contempt with which merchants treated the indigenous Ainu people of the region, and he later criticized them scathingly, arguing that the Ainu and Japanese were after all the same human beings. He also drafted a prison reform proposal based on the idea that people who commit crimes are not inherently evil, but have been driven to do so by circumstances, and as such can be rehabilitated to lead normal lives, just as illnesses can be overcome. In short, he was arguing a causal theory of crime grounded in the concept that humans are all fundamentally equal, and discrimination is accordingly indefensible.

The way that Shoin treated all who attended his school in the same way, irrespective of their family status, is also a reflection of his belief in egalitarian principles.

Among Shoin's writings is an essay titled "Tozoku Shimatsu" (Dealing with Bandits), about Towa, a married woman from the untouchable class, who seeks to revenge the murder of her father and brother by a thief, and the serious injuries he inflicted on her husband. Towa searches far and wide for the culprit, from Tohoku to the western reaches of Honshu and the island of Shikoku, suffering various trials and tribulations along the way before she finally traces her quarry and exacts her revenge. The local authorities in

Choshu were implementing various political reforms at the time, and in accordance with those reforms, decided that Towa's brave actions deserved commendation rather than condemnation, and she was also awarded ordinary citizen status. The authorities had asked Shoin, despite the fact that he was in prison, to compose the words to be inscribed on a monument to commemorate her bravery. Shoin was allowed temporary parole to return to the Sugi household, where he devoted himself totally to writing Towa's story, turning away all his followers during this time. He took the manuscript with him when he returned to prison, and I suspect he did so because he wanted Hisako to read it. I feel that this action was motivated by Shoin's desire to see Hisako liberated in the same way that Towa was, and that here too, he shows himself to be a firm believer in the equality of all mankind.

Shoin and His Brother, Toshisaburo

What was it, however, that first prompted Shoin to adopt this view of mankind? This is a question that has occupied my mind for a long time.

Shoin had a younger brother, 15 years his junior, who was a deaf-mute from birth. Shoin had always got on well with his brothers and sisters, and he was much saddened by Toshisaburo's disability. He and his parents tried various means of remedying Toshisaburo's affliction, but the fact is that there was little that could be done apart from praying to the gods. When he traveled to Kyushu in 1850, Shoin accordingly took himself to the tomb of Kato Kiyomasa (a famous vassal of the Azuchi-Momoyama Period [1573-1600] warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who united Japan's warring states), and prayed fervently for Toshisaburo. He later tried to explain this act to those advocating "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians," but failed to obtain their understanding. Shoin couldn't help likening this failure to the difficulties that his deaf and dumb younger brother faced in making himself understood, and was prompted

to write that to the gods above, all human beings are the same. In short, it was the presence of Toshisaburo in his family that made Shoin realize that in the end, both able and disabled people were essentially the same human beings. Close association with disabled persons forces people to ponder that most fundamental of questions – what exactly is humanity? I feel that the more Shoin pondered this question, the more understanding and consideration he came to feel for those not as fortunate as himself, and the more he came to see things from the perspective of the disadvantaged and downtrodden. Through observing his brother, Toshisaburo, he came to sense the pain and suffering that the weakest and least fortunate members of society feel. (I intend to look in more depth at the relationship between his view of humanity and his world view at a later date.)

When looking at historical figures, it is important to go beyond such narrow value judgments as "hero" or "sage," and interpret their actions from a less lofty perspective. Only through doing so will one be able to develop a true understanding of the human condition, and the adoption of such a perspective should bring historical figures into more vivid focus, enhancing the appreciation of history, and enriching its contents. JTI

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