

Mito and the Making of Modern Japan

Book Proposal

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15 May 2018

Abstract:

This study of the role of Mito in the Meiji Restoration will shift the popular focus on key players from western Japan (such as Satsuma and Choshu domains, and events in Kyoto) to the city of Mito, which played a crucial but often understated role as the source of the ideologies, political beliefs, and intellectual frameworks that guided many of the revolutionaries who sought to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate and reinstate the imperial household as rulers of Japan, a project they achieved in 1868. The study will emphasize the city of Mito and its intellectual elite, as well as the ordinary people who lived there, as a unique lens onto the broader transformations of the mid-nineteenth century, when Japan opened up more fully to the outside world and embarked on a rapid and thorough transformation into a modern, industrialized, imperial nation-state. This perspective will add to our existing understanding of this era by illustrating the intellectual networks that connected Mito to scholars and revolutionaries across the Japanese archipelago, highlighting the importance of Mito, a city removed from the centers of political power in Edo/Tokyo and Kyoto, in the creation of modern Japan. Throughout, the book will stress the revolutionary potential of ideas, and their ability to effect great change in the hands of dedicated actors.

Audience:

This book is designed for a lay audience with interest in Japan, and perhaps some knowledge of Japanese geography and history, but with little to no knowledge of Mito. By illustrating the connections between Mito and wider processes in nineteenth-century Japan, the book will go beyond the scope of 'local history.' The book will introduce Mito to people who have visited Japan but have yet to explore beyond Tokyo and Kyoto, and to people who are interested in Japanese history but who are not academic historians.

Target length:

Approximately 40,000 words (~150 pages)

(translated into Japanese, this works out to approximately 80,000 characters)

Timeline (tentative):

Autumn 2018: draft manuscript complete

Winter 2018-19: editing

Spring 2019: translation?

Summer 2019: publication?

Outline:

Introduction:

Revolutions change the world; and revolutions begin with revolutionary ideas. In the case of Japan's Meiji Restoration, which kicked off a revolution in Japanese society in the 1860s, one significant strand of those ideas emanated from the city of Mito. These ideas, broadly called the 'Mito School,' cohered around the idea that Japan ought to have a culture and identity independent of classical Chinese learning; such an autonomous identity would give it the strength to solve a variety of domestic crises and foreign threats that were growing in size and severity by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 1: Mito: Background and Context

An overview of the history of Mito before 1800, focused on its founding, the rise of the city as a center of education and political power in the seventeenth century, and the establishment of various important sites within the city, as well as the broader development of Mito Domain. This will also include a discussion of the natural features, climate, and other important environmental characteristics of the city.

Chapter 2: The Mito School

The Mito School was an intellectual lineage that focused on researching and disseminating native traditions of Japan (as opposed to those imported from China or elsewhere). This chapter will explore both early and late Mito School thinkers, starting with Tokugawa Mitsukuni and the compilers of the massive historical work, *Dai Nihon shi*. In the late eighteenth century, domestic and international concerns, such as fiscal problems in Mito and Russian encroachment to the north, led scholars to engage with contemporary social and political problems. Key figures include Tachikawa Suiken, Fujita Yūkoku, Aizawa Seishisai and Fujita Tōko. Throughout this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which Mito attracted scholars from all around Japan, and how the findings of the Mito School reached audiences across Japan, emphasizing the city's role as a center of knowledge and, increasingly, political influence.

Chapter 3: A Time of Crisis, 1830s~1860s

This chapter will situate developments in Mito alongside the growing crises of late-Tokugawa-era Japan, including the Tenpō famine, the increasing presence of western ships in the waters around Japan, and political dysfunction in the shogunate. I will focus on Tokugawa Nariaki and his various reforms, such as the establishment of the Kōdōkan in 1837, as well as rifts between Mito and the shogunate in the 1840s. I will explore the growing political factions emerging in Mito, culminating in dramatic events such as the assassination of Ii Naosuke at Sakuradamon and the Tengu-tō Rebellion.

Chapter 4: Mito in the Meiji Restoration

This chapter seeks to situate the turmoil in Mito in the broader turmoil across Japan in the late 1860s by tracing the impact of intellectual and political ideas from Mito on revolutionaries across the archipelago, particularly the *sonnō jōi* movement, including Yoshida Shōin, Saigō Takamori, and Sakamoto Ryōma. I will also explore the experience of the violence of the Restoration in Mito through first-hand accounts to show how abstract ideas can take on very real meaning in the hands of revolutionary actors.

Chapter 5: Modern Mito

This chapter will trace the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration, particularly by focusing on the commemoration of sites and events related to late-Tokugawa-era Mito. It will also give an overview of the city's modern development, up to present times, noting significant events and characteristics of the modern city, to highlight its continued importance within the archipelago.

Conclusion:

Return to theme of revolutionary ideas, and the people who put them to action, with some observations about the lessons Mito's experience in the nineteenth century might hold for present-day Japan.