

## Calling for Anti-Shogun Movement- Inventing Modern Self in Letter Writing

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### Abstract

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The change from the feudal period to modern times via the Meiji Restoration (1868) was the most turbulent and complex in the history of Japan, and many details of the change remain unexplained. This paper will shed new light on this social change by bringing attention to the seemingly sudden appearance of *boku*, a male first person pronoun,<sup>1</sup> in the emerging culture of letter writing. It was after a century of civil wars ended in 1600 and a centralized feudalism was established that samurai members and richer commoners learned writing. Letter writing became a social phenomenon of the time. It played an important role in disseminating information and awakening Japanese intellectuals to what was happening outside the country. In fear of western military power, a growing trend towards the anti-Shogun movement led to an extremely radical change in the social structure from a strictly hierarchized feudalism to a modern democracy. In the process of such fundamental social change, language inevitably played a crucial role in forming and accommodating new meanings and new ideologies. All the samurai self-referencing words that had previously been borrowed from Chinese were strongly associated with various power relationships between communicants, and they were extremely incongruent with the self of the new breed of samurai intellectuals. Samurai intellectuals adopted *boku*, a Chinese word with a nuance of solidarity, in the letters exchanged in the movement. Letter writing was a crucial tool for networking among anti-Shogun activists, just like the Jasmine Revolutions calling for pro-democracy online in China and other places today.

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**Keywords:** Male first person pronoun, self-referencing word, the Meiji Restoration, centralized feudalism, solidarity, power, Samurai intellectual, anti-Shogun movement

### 1 - Historical Background

The Japanese people had lived without writing until they came into contact with the Chinese.

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At first they tried to write down their language with Chinese characters only phonetically applying them to their language. Because Chinese and Japanese were completely different in their basic sound patterns as well as their morphological nature, this sound matching between Chinese and Japanese was done with enormous difficulty. But, they finally managed to develop a syllabic alphabet called kana sometime in the 8th century. The availability of a syllabic alphabet greatly facilitated Japanese writing. One can tell that their writing soon became remarkably sophisticated as the existence of great literature such as *The Tale of Genji* shows.<sup>2</sup>

This world masterpiece contains many letter-like poetic messages. In early years the nobility learned letter writing using textbooks brought from China. It was just about the time when *The Tale of Genji* was being written that the first book on writing letters in Japanese was written by a Japanese scholar. For many centuries after that, however, writing was only for the privileged elite, the Emperor and nobles, Confucian scholars and Buddhist priests. The majority remained totally illiterate. The common soldiery was no different from the illiterate masses. Soldiers were kept busy with a series of civil wars that lasted more than one hundred years.

It was in 1600, when Tokugawa Ieyasu established a centralized feudal system, a military dictatorship with himself as the generalissimo, that the civil war period was finally brought to an end, and a new page of Japanese history opened. This new period of closely enforced peace saw members of the samurai class engaged in learning as a major activity. By the 18th century virtually the whole of the samurai class became literate and so did many merchants and richer commoners. Each han (or feudal fiefdom) established a school to educate its own samurai and their children and private classes to teach reading and writing to commoners' children mushroomed all over. Japan was shifting from a society where the majority of the people were almost totally illiterate to one of high literacy.

## **2. Letter Writing Era**

The rapid rise of literacy concurred with the development of hikyaku – couriers or messengers who transported currency, letters, packages, and the like to various distant places.

The hikyaku routes connecting big cities became established institutions first in 1851. Then, the network of hikyaku messengers expanded dramatically and also became more organized and systematized. Historians are amazed at how quickly information was propagated from Edo, from Kyushu, from Osaka to all distant places, especially, among young samurai. David Magarey Earl comments, "One of the peculiar characteristics of the late Tokugawa period was the swift spread of the new-old theory throughout the country." He quotes:<sup>3</sup> From one man to two, from two to four or ten, from ten to a hundred or a thousand, and from a thousand to ten thousand, this conceptual impulse completely permeated the hearts of the Japanese people.

More recently, Miyachi Masato, who gathered more than 180 letters exchanged between brothers (medical doctors) during the 33 years from 1844 to 1877 has claimed that letters are the most important data for the study of real conditions in the past socio-political events.<sup>4</sup> Hikyaku not only delivered letters and presents, but also told stories to the receiver and his family and neighbors about the letter writer, his family, and his town. Miyachi named the later time of the feudal period the "Era of Letter Writing."

The era of letter writing was concomitant with many other social processes or events, such as the development of highways and waterways, and the increase in people's mobility from rural areas to big cities. It was also the time of European powers taking over much of South Asia and attempting to expand their influence into East Asia. In spite of the government policy of sakoku, which prohibited foreigners from entering Japan and Japanese people from leaving the country on penalty of death, young samurai intellectuals did cross borders and saw the reality of Japan in the world. They were horrified by what the Opium Wars had done to China.<sup>5</sup> And, in 1853 the American fleet of black ships commanded by Commodore Perry appeared off the coast near Edo, making the Japanese desperately afraid of Western barbarians. Perry's letter delivered to the Japanese told them that in case they chose to fight, the Americans would destroy them. Some buildings in the harbor were actually shelled. Perry's ships were equipped with new cannons capable of wreaking great destruction with every shell. All of these developments constituted one whole historical current towards the disintegration of the feudal system and the opening the country to the world, i.e. the Meiji Restoration.

### 3. Yoshida Shoin's Letters

Among the ideological leaders, there was a young samurai scholar Yoshida Shoin from Choshu, a remote feudal domain in the southern end of the Japanese mainland.<sup>6</sup> His name was probably first mentioned in the West in a brief biographical essay entitled *Yoshida Torajiro* authored by Robert Louis Stevenson. The essay was based on the story given by Masaki Taizo, a former student of Shoin, who met Stevenson when he visited England in 1886. Stevenson wrote:<sup>7</sup> The name at the head of this page is probably unknown to the English reader, and yet I think it should become a household word like that of Garibaldi or John Brown. Some day soon, we may expect to hear more fully the details of Yoshida's history, and the degree of his influence in the transformation of Japan.

Although Shoin's name has remained generally unknown outside Japan until today, his contribution to the Meiji Restoration has been recognized among scholars of Japanese history. Van Straelen wrote a biography of Yoshida Shoin *Forerunner of the Meiji Restoration*, and Earl has a chapter "Life of Yoshida Shoin" in his book *Emperor and Nation in Japan*. He writes, "Shoin is considered the best single representative of late Tokugawa thought because, in his own person, he gathered together the influence of the preceding two hundred years."<sup>8</sup> These researchers all referred to Shoin's letters as a historical resource for their studies, but they were not aware that letters were different from other historical documents. It was Fujita Shozo, a Japanese political scientist, who placed these letters in the foreground as the major writing of Shoin. Fujita understood letters, especially the letters written by Shoin, a tragic figure, with deep emotion and philosophical objectivity:<sup>9</sup> At the time when there was neither telegraph nor telephone, letters were the most direct means of communication. Even the Japanese word *tegami* 'letters' distinctly shows it. The calligraphy style conveys the warmth of fingertips. In that sense, letters imply shaking hands and touching each other done across a distance, but at the same time those feelings are not real.

Those letters written by a person actively involved in the social movement which had already lost its fundamental structure and begun to rapidly flow in different directions, has handshakes, astonishment, arguments, confessions, inner feelings bared, or their cancellations ... when those feelings and acts bewilderingly come and go, the writing styles also become inconsistent, regional dialects can spontaneously be mixed in the tightly proper style of Chinese letters.

The work of his life – letters – has been woven as such. And, since they were not addressed to the same person, the letters as a whole look irregular and multi-dimensional, as if they are unrelated broken pieces. But his writing reflects the conflicting flow of the diverse lives of historically contingent social conditions. Nevertheless, when his major writing approaches the apex of his life, just as small streams come together to become a torrent and it immediately gets released into all directions. The pattern in his letters reflects not only the sudden change in his life but also every time he experienced failure or a setback. It must be the pattern of communication that is manifested only in the life of a man who lived his best always with all his strength and energy.

Shoin was a tireless letter writer. Letters of Yoshida Shoin by Fujita consists of 245 letters. Most of them are quite long, beginning with the one written when Shoin was 21, when he traveled for the first time in his life beyond the boundary of his feudal domain to Kyushu, a place of Chinese and Western studies, in 1850, and it concludes with his farewell letters to his family, his close friends, and to his students, which he had written a week before his execution on October 27, 1859. The less-than-ten years when he most actively devoted himself to the anti- Shogunate were indeed the peak of the letter writing era.

#### **4. Nationalism and New Self in Letters**

Although the anti-Shogun movement spread under the slogan “Honor the Emperor”, the real issue may not have been pro-Emperor or pro-Shogun. The real question was how to defend Japan from the barbarians. As we will see later in his letter to Mokurin, Shoin was not opposed to the Shogun at first. The destiny of Japan was his concern. It was ‘the power politics of nineteenth century Europe and America’ and ‘the sudden revelation of Asia’s helplessness’ that made a deep impression on Shoin’s militarily trained mind. He refers several times to the Opium War and the ineptitude of Chinese diplomacy in his writings and letters. The anti-Shogun movement was, therefore, an expression of emerging nationalism that the Japanese were experiencing for the first time in their history. Prior to this point, they did not question their given relationship with the Shogun by way of their han, lord. They belonged to their respective feudal domains, and they did not have to look beyond the closed nation. Now, many samurai chose to undo their ties with the domain,<sup>10</sup> which was still in many cases considered to be an unforgivable act against their lords.

The language that used to be their status no longer properly represented their identity. There was a need for new language, especially, self-referencing forms for free samurai intellectuals.

This understanding of the changing society meaningfully connects with what I have found about the historical background of *boku*, the most popular male first-person pronoun of Contemporary Japanese—Japanese has more than several forms of first person pronouns to be used depending on the speaker's social status and the context. Dictionaries describe only vaguely that *boku* came into existence in Japanese as a new male pronoun around the time of the Meiji Restoration. One of the popular biographers of Yoshida Shoin wrongly believes that Shoin is the innovator of *boku*, and it is true that Shoin uses *boku* to give such an impression. However, my studies confirmed that *boku* was used earlier than in the lifetime of Shoin. It is then more reasonable to think that *boku* had come into Japanese as one of the many first person pronouns by the middle of the 18th century, and it spread with a particular sociolinguistic connotation among samurai intellectuals, especially, those who joined the anti-Shogunate movement. Therefore, I chose the above mentioned letters of Yoshida Shoin by Fujita Shozo for its detailed and precise annotations as the text for a quantitative analysis. As a result, I could make two specific points concerning the history of *boku*: (i) it entered Japanese in the middle of the Edo Period mainly by way of epistolary texts; and (ii) it came to be associated with the I-You relationship of "solidarity" about the time of Yoshida Shoin.

Although the majority of the letters in this collection are of a personal nature, I have further distinguished two types, (a) letters addressed to his family and his superiors and (b) those written to his "friends." In the former, Shoin identified himself in the traditional vertical framework, as a son, as a younger brother, as an elder brother, and as a subordinate. *Boku* was not used in these letters with some exceptions in the letters to his brother, who was only three years older than Shoin. Excluding these family letters and those with unspecified addressees, I analyzed 136 letters, paying careful attention to the relationship between Shoin and the addressee and to some extent to the content. The 136 letters were addressed to 45 individuals with whom he had camaraderie with different degrees of intimacy. Most of them were either young men Shoin taught at Shookason-juku<sup>11</sup> or samurai scholars who Shoin met during his travels—he made many close friends while he was traveling throughout the country since his first trip to Kyushu, joining political and philosophical discussions and attending classes of various schools.

And he used boku only in these letters to his intimate friends. Table-1 summarizes these self-referencing forms and their frequencies in his letters. The forms other than boku are Chinese or Japanese that had been in use not only in letters but also in conversations. Since these other forms are not relevant for our theme here, I will not discuss them.<sup>12</sup>

**Table-1: Self-referencing forms in 'Shoin's Letters'<sup>13</sup>**

Form 'I'	boku	ware	shosei	yo	wagahai	sessei	shoshi	sessha	other	Total
Instances	360	128	75	44	20	11	12	7	21	681
%	52.86	18.8	11.01	6.46	0.29	1.62	1.76	1.03	3.08	100

What is seen from the table is that Shoin greatly preferred the new self-reference form boku over other forms in writing to his students and friends. In monographs for publication, however, he used yo, another classic Chinese first person pronoun, and he did not use boku at all. Taking into consideration that as soon as the Meiji Restoration was achieved, people expected that a society with freedom and equality would be realized, and boku widely spread in spoken conversations and identified the speaker as modern. Every time I see the Chinese character boku in Shoin's letters, I hear in my imagination the echoes of the author's calling for solidarity for dismantling the feudal government and constructing a new social condition.

## 5. Letter Writing and the Movement

The letters that Shoin exchanged with Mokurin (1824-1898) are of particular interest in this regard. Mokurin was a Buddhist scholar with a hearing and speech handicap. He firmly believed that the current power structure with the Shogun almost above the emperor was philosophically wrong and that the Shogun's government should be overthrown. In September, 1855, when Shoin was in confinement in Hagi, Mokurin visited Hagi and wrote his first letter to Shoin, and quickly began exchange of letters with Shoin. Mokurin's letters are not available, but because he returned letters received from Shoin with his comments, guessing his intention from Shoin's letters is not difficult. Mokurin was trying to persuade Shoin to change his attitude towards the Shogun.

Shoin was different—How to defend the country with the current system was the top priority in his way of thinking, and the anti-Shogun idea was not important. In his letter to Mokurin in 1856 he wrote (square bracketed parts are Mokurin's addition): I am a vassal of the Moori family. Therefore, night and day I try to serve the Moori. [I have read this letter more than once, and sometimes I cried, and some other times I smiled. At the end I was so overwhelmed by emotion that I ran out of tears for crying.] The Moori is the vassal of the Emperor, and he serves the Emperor night and day. Our loyal service to the Moori, therefore, means our loyal service to the Emperor. [I have known such things.]<sup>14</sup>

Shoin was strongly attached and loyal to his han, Lord Moori Yoshichika, who was a feudal lord in the Shogunate system. Mokurin responds to this issue immediately. Shoin responds back to it on the same day, pointing out that 'we are in disagreement concerning this matter.' Then, it seems that Mokurin wrote again urging Shoin to answer right away. Mokurin had to leave Hagi without persuading Shoin. But he came back to Hagi one year later and requested to meet him in person. Shoin turned down the request because he thought he was still under house arrest. These letters were all written in Chinese using *boku*, the word inspiring the modern self: They consisted of long arguments, and at the end of the above letter Shoin notes:

The above mentioned Mokurin, a priest of Ikko Buddhism, was deaf and he was unable to speak. His aspiration is extremely high. I have exchanged several letters, and I must admit that I have given in.

Shoin and Mokurin never met in person. But they came to understand each other through letters about the most important problem that Japan was facing at the time. Letters made Shoin become the 'forerunner of the Meiji Restoration.' Letters also provided the ground on which samurai intellectuals were able to innovate *boku* as a word representing their new modern self. The Meiji Restoration was incomplete in the sense that it did not succeed in transforming the feudal society into an ideal democratic society, but it changed Japanese people who could not question their given status to individuals with a modern self.

## Notes

1 Japanese has a number of forms that look like first person pronouns. However, each of them has its own semantic content like usual nouns. Thus, some scholars hesitate to identify them as "pronouns". I refer to them alternately as self-referencing words or as first person pronouns.

2 The Tale of Genji is a romance written in the early years of the 11th century by a court lady, Murasaki Shikibu. It is said to be the first novel in the world.

3 Earl cites from Kimura Toshio (1942) on p.109.

4 Miyachi Masato published the collection of the 180 letters in 1973.

5 Opium Wars, or the Anglo-Chinese Wars, were from 1839 to 1842 (First Opium War) and from 1856 to 1860 (Second Opium War).

6 Current Yamaguchi Prefecture.

7 R. L. Stevenson (1902), p.150.

8 D. M. Earl (1964), p.157.

9 S. Fujita (1978). P. 610. Translated by Reynolds.

10 Leaving one's domain required the lord's permission. Sometimes it was viewed as "desertion."

11 A small private school which Shoin's uncle founded in Hagi. Shoin taught thereafter his release from the Noyama Jail until he was again arrested and executed.

12 Scholars and samurai intellectuals wrote most letters in Chinese at first. As letterwriting became increasingly more common, samurai intellectuals began to use a code switch style, switching from Chinese to Japanese, and switching back to Chinese.

13 This study was made public in Reynolds (2005). Ware is a native form that had existed from ancient times; shoosei (Chinese) had been used in personal letters for a long time before the appearance of boku and survived as such until recently; yo (Chinese) was used by samurai of considerable distinction and it was often used by samurai scholars in monographs at the time of Shoin; wagahai is a variant of ware; sessei and shooshi were humble forms borrowed from Chinese and perhaps used only in epistolary texts; sessha, also a Chinese borrowing, was a form stereotypically used by samurai in Kabuki scripts; soregashi, a native word literally meant 'somebody' was another typical samurai word; watakushi literally meant 'private' or 'personal' as opposed to 'public' and was used as a formal self-reference in writing as well as in speaking.

14 This letter (No. 107 of "Shokan" by Fujita) was written on August 18 or 19, 1856. Translated by Reynolds.

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