

**Chapter I**  
**Entertaining Poverty**  
—Conviction of a Nationalist Immersed in  
State Affairs despite His Poverty—

*Kaisei Gakko*

While Mutsu Munemitsu had steered the diplomacy of the modern state of Japan from the Meiji Restoration through the revision of the unequal treaties with the Western powers and the First Sino-Japanese War, it was Komura Jutarō (小村寿太郎) who was at the helm of Japanese diplomacy during the period of the Russo-Japanese War on which Japan staked the fate of the Empire of Japan.

Komura was born in 1855, two years after the arrival of Commodore Perry's fleet at Uruga, making him eleven years junior to Mutsu. Because Japan in those days was undergoing a drastic change, this ten-year difference puts Mutsu and Komura in two different generations.

Until he turned fifteen years old, Komura received the traditional education of the Tokugawa period. Komura excelled in all his courses at the highly esteemed school owned by Obi-*han* (飫肥藩), a small local domain in Kyushu of only 50,000 *koku*. Despite the minuscule size of its *han*, the school had produced great Confucian scholars such as Yasui Sokken (安井息軒), under whom Mutsu had once studied. Here Komura received the traditional teachings on the Chinese classics. Komura looked more like a girl than a boy with a slender physique and handsome features, and was not well endowed in terms of physical strength or health. Nevertheless, he was so full of perseverance and determination that he would not tire out even after eight successive training bouts in swordsmanship, whereas a normal boy would be exhausted in just two bouts.

Thus, already under the feudal system of the Tokugawa period Komura was distinguished from early childhood as a future member of the elite.

But Komura came from a low-ranking samurai family. As such, even though he was trained as a samurai at school during the day, he also studied arithmetic at home, something that high-ranking samurais had despised of in those days. And he was known to walk around with his abacus.

Komura even engaged in farming, tending to the farmland owned by his uncle during the busy farming season. Later, in the journal he kept in English, he wrote that the sneering of his classmates for his hand labor did not bother him at all. Obviously, Komura was the type of young man with full self-confidence who firmly believed that, as long as he excelled in study and conduct, he had nothing to be ashamed of.

A man named Ogura Shohei (小倉処平), who was nicknamed “Saigō of the Obi-*han*,” looked after Komura and managed to send him to an English cram school in Nagasaki in 1869 and, subsequently, to the *Daigaku Nankō* School (大学南校) in Tokyo in 1870. *Daigaku Nankō*, or “University South School,” was an institution for Western education. It was called the South School relative to the *Shohei-kō* (昌平校), an institution devoted to traditional Chinese teachings that was called the East School (大学東校). The South School was later reorganized into the *Kaisei Gakkō* (開成学校) school, which was renamed Tokyo University (東京大学) in 1877. In 1888, it became Tokyo Imperial University (東京帝国大学), the prestigious center for educating modern Japanese elites.

In the early days of the Meiji Restoration, the South School was filled with sons of dignitaries of the Satsuma-Chōshū oligarchy. Although Ogura was one of the few among the faculty members of the South School who had come from an insignificant local domain, he soon distinguished himself. Eventually, he became the dean of the school. Later Ogura became an official of the Ministry of Education in the Meiji government and, among other achievements, made a proposal on educational reform.

As a result of this proposal, a *kōshin-sei* (貢進生) system was adopted to recruit brilliant students from 300 domains all over Japan by the ratio of three from each large domain with over 100,000 *koku*, two from each medium-size domain with over 50,000 *koku*, and one from each small domain with less than 50,000 *koku*. Under this system, Komura was chosen from the Obi-*han* on the recommendation of Ogura. When *Kaisei Gakko* instituted a scholarship for the top 50 students, Komura was again chosen.

Although it had long been the aspiration of male youth throughout the Tokugawa period to make their way up in the world through studying, active participation in the political turmoil provided a better opportunity to get ahead than studies during the short transition period from the shogunate to the Meiji government—the time during which Mutsu had spent his late

boyhood. As the dust of the Restoration settled, however, studying once again became the major source of determining one's future success. Komura was among the first generation of graduates of this new system.

### **Komura's View of the Meiji Restoration**

An American English teacher at *Kaisei Gakko*, William Elliot Griffis, left a collection of documents on Japan in those days. Among the recently discovered documents was a lengthy English autobiography written by Komura. From the documents, it also became clear that Griffis had been amazed by the accuracy of the spelling and grammar that Komura had used in the autobiography.

Komura's initial decision to set his mind to study English required courage. He had already been recognized under the traditional education system as a future scholar of the Chinese classics. Komura himself had a strong wish to "continue [his] studies of Oriental classics," as disclosed in the above autobiography, and he agonized over being sandwiched between his father, who encouraged him to study Western sciences in Nagasaki, and his friend, who opposed the idea. In the end, though, he resolutely chose to go to Nagasaki, and wrote the following in his farewell letter to his friend: "I cannot defer, my dear friend, to your opinion, for I have made up my mind to know everything about foreigners and to judge them accordingly." It was this intense motivation that enabled Komura to accomplish in only five years a level of English proficiency that seems simply beyond the reach of the Japanese today.

What astonished Griffis more than Komura's mastery of English was his profound thinking as a youth. Komura wrote this autobiography six years after the Meiji Restoration and three years after the abolition of the *han*-system and the establishment of prefectures. He left the following descriptions on these and other rapid changes in his autobiography:

In order to consolidate the nation's power and bring prosperity to the country, it was necessary to overthrow the feudal system and establish a new central government. This was accomplished through a bloodless revolution and, as the result, taxation, military, and jurisdiction are now in the hands of the emperor . . .

Which country in the world has succeeded in overthrowing a feudal system without shedding blood? It was only after a long warfare that the centralization of government began in Britain, while in France, . . . rulers who had controlled peasants with force were not overthrown until the French Revolution in 1789. In contrast, feudalistic rulers were toppled without any bloodshed in Japan.

This success was attributable to efforts made by the Japanese people and the government. Before the revolution erupted, many of the feudal lords had voluntarily resigned and handed over their domains with patriotic motivation. Even the stubborn feudal lords did not resist to the end, recognizing their own fate . . .

With the political changes, my mind underwent an entire revolution . . . I was still loyal to my Prince, but when he was removed from office I rejoiced at it more than lamented, for national patriotism was greater than loyalty to him.

It is strange that few foreigners understand the reason behind the voluntary handover of various privileges by feudal lords without resorting to a single fight. Furthermore, many foreigners failed to understand why today's government leaders, who used to be retainers of feudal lords, would harm their former masters. Perhaps, these foreigners would understand these conducts once they realize that the sense of patriotism of the Meiji government leaders was, like me, much stronger than their loyalty to their former masters.<sup>1</sup>

The above observation by a Japanese youth who was still under twenty years old should be regarded as an invaluable testimony to the common reactions to the Meiji Restoration among the Japanese intellectuals in those days. And these sentences were written in such a high standard that they provided irrefutable evidence that Komura was indeed the brightest student at *Kaisei Gakko* and, therefore, in all of Japan under the new educational system.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated back from the Japanese translation of the original autobiography except for the fourth paragraph.

## Traditional Mentality of High-Ranking Samurai

All the *kōshin-sei* students were required to live in the dormitory, where everyone's morale, not only Komura's, was reported to be extremely high. Feeling responsible as the representatives of their respective *han* and proud to be chosen as future leaders of modern Japan, these youths gladly led a well-regulated life, refusing to be stained with the vice of Tokyo city. They all studied diligently, debated rigorously, read Japanese, Chinese, and Western intellectual legacies until deep into the night, and worked hard together to become useful human resources for the country.

This climate of pursuing the perfection of one's personal and intellectual development among fellow *kōshin-sei*, defying the vulgar glamour of the city, finds an echo in the latter-day tradition of the old higher school education system in the Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa eras. And its remote roots can be traced to the tradition since the Edo period for high-ranking samurai families to train their children in both the literary and military arts, paying no heed to any training in worldly affairs, for the sake of nurturing young adults who would devote themselves to state and societal affairs.

Fukuzawa Yukichi left very detailed descriptions of the samurai society under the feudal rule in his *Kyū-han Jijō* (旧藩事情). Fukuzawa writes: "Drinking and partying are seen frequently among low-ranking samurais, while high-ranking samurais prefer a modest and simple life. While it is rare for the latter to sing or dance at the height of banquet, many lower-ranking samurais love to contribute to the gaiety of the party by displaying their respective hidden talents." Fukuzawa characterizes high-ranking samurais as "graceful and correct but naïve" and low-ranking samurais as "vulgar and shallow but spirited." Because high-ranking samurai engaged in such lofty activities as the reading of Confucian teachings and history, discussing books on strategy, and mastering the martial arts, their conduct, according to Fukuzawa, naturally became lofty and honorable.

Persons like Mutsu and his father, Mutsu Munehiro, who were great intellectuals but who also excelled in pleasure in demimonde, must have been rare among high-ranking samurais. It is not hard to imagine that such conduct must have earned frowns of disapproval from the majority of the high-ranking samurais.

Although Komura grew up in an environment where he must have been exposed to the vulgar and shallow ways of the low-ranking samurai, he chose to maintain the traditional samurai disciplines throughout his entire life. This was probably due to Komura's self-respect as an elite who had been singled out since early childhood as a bright student representing his *han*. Komura only once sang and danced at a banquet: during his send-off party for Beijing, he became drunk and overcome with emotion, and stood up abruptly to dance and cited something like an English poem. Of course, this "dance" must have been nothing but a mere fluttering of his limbs.

This, too, was a typical attitude of the traditional Japanese. And this Spartan-like or ancient Roman aristocrat-like disposition remained a backbone of the Empire of Japan from the Meiji era through World War II.

### **More Time for Books and Thoughts than Socializing**

As teachings of Western learning at the *Daigaku Nanko* School advanced, students' desire for studying abroad intensified. Because they all were poor students from samurai clans, they could by no means finance their own overseas tuition and living expenses. It cost a fortune to study abroad in those days, and it was only a few promising sons of the Satsuma-Chōshū oligarchy that could afford to study in the West with their own funds.

Against this background, Komura and five classmates submitted a proposal on the establishment of a government-sponsored study-abroad program. Moved by the zeal of these students, the government decided to select by examination ten students to be sent overseas with the first Ministry of Education scholarship. Selected from the Faculty of Law at that time were, aside from Komura, Hatoyama Kazuo (鳩山和夫, Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1896–97, vice minister of foreign affairs and president of Waseda University, and father and great-grand father of Prime Ministers Hatoyama Ichirō and Hatoyama Yukio); Kikuchi Takeo (菊池武夫, Japan's first Doctor of Laws, professor at the University of Tokyo, and, subsequently, President of Chuo University); and Saitō Shūichirō (齋藤修一郎, Vice-Minister for Agriculture and Commerce).

Thus, in many senses, Komura should be regarded as a member of the first generation of Meiji bureaucrats. Under this scholarship program, Komura entered Harvard University in 1875 (8th Year of Meiji), while

Hatoyama was sent to Columbia University. Although Harvard policy required foreign students to take one year of intensive language training, Komura was exempted from this requirement in recognition of his outstanding competence in English. Komura's command of English remained incomparable even at the foreign ministry, which he joined later.

While in Boston, Komura shared lodgings with Kaneko Kentarō (金子堅太郎, later Minister of Agriculture and Commerce and Minister of Justice), who came to Harvard one year later, in order to save on rent. One time, both of them suffered from eye troubles and were advised by the eye doctor to refrain from heavy reading at night. While Kaneko, who was determined to become a diplomat, decided to follow the doctor's advice and began socializing in the evening, Komura would not join Kaneko. When Kaneko came home from socializing one evening, he found Komura meditating alone, staring at the ceiling. To a puzzled Kaneko, Komura explained that he was meditating what he had read earlier in the day.

This disposition of Komura remained unchanged until his old age.

When he was later stationed in London as the Japanese ambassador to Britain in 1906 after the Russo-Japanese War, Komura devoted his time to reading and contemplation, paying no heed to the gaiety of Edwardian London. The city at the time was at the center of social events organized by the diplomatic corps, including days and nights of receptions, dances, and bridge parties. Komura once attempted to learn dancing by consulting a textbook, and practiced the steps by himself. Naturally, this attempt, which relied solely on the textbook, was proven abortive, and Komura literally threw away the book.

In the memoir of Katsura Taro (桂太郎[1848-1913], 11th, 13th, and 15th Prime Minister of Japan), it is recorded that Valentine Tyrol, the foreign news editor of *The Times* at that time, complained directly to Katsura that Komura had evaded contact with the press. Knowing Komura's mindset, Katsura did not pay any attention to this complaint. In later years, hearing of Komura's death, Tyrol wrote, "Although I was quite close to Komura, his excessive secrecy was unbearable at times."

Komura indeed lacked an appreciation of the importance of public opinion and newspapers, a shortcoming that Sergei Witte took advantage of in outmaneuvering him in relations with the press at the time of negotiations

for the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905.

### **Diplomacy without a Face**

In many ways, Komura was one typical example of the Japanese, totally different from Mutsu, who had transcended the framework of the Japanese.

The Japanese samurai ethics set a high value on reticence, on action rather than speech, and on absolute commitment to one's words. A man should pay no heed to appraisal and censure, and it would be dishonorable for a Japanese man to vindicate himself or to make excuses.

The end product of this samurai ethic would be someone as uniquely Japanese as Komura. But this type of personality is bound to be unfit for a profession such as diplomacy that involves heavy interactions with others. Particularly in the democratic system, a diplomat is expected to explain, persuade, and vindicate vis-à-vis public opinion and newspapers. "Actions speak louder than words" is as bad as no device at all. Diplomats who refuse to socialize would be isolated from the diplomatic corps and the local community and shut off from information.

The credit for the birth of the Empire of Japan as well as the blame for its demise should be at least partially attributed to this kind of Japanese diplomatic style represented by Komura.

Although Komura was a fine-looking man, he was short of stature; he is believed to have been about 150 cm tall. Li Hung Chang once teased Komura at a reception attended by diplomats from various countries, saying, "Are all Japanese as short as Your Excellency?" Komura replied, "No, some of Japanese are as tall as Your Excellency, but they are all slow-witted and they have to earn a living by becoming sumo wrestlers." This, too, was a typical reaction expected of the Japanese in pre-World War II days. The Japanese in those days tended to overreact out of vengeance to protect the country's honor even to such a small jest. The above episode was viewed in those days as a praiseworthy anecdote of the patriotic Komura.

### **Destitution Nurtures Boldness**

Another factor that should not be forgotten about Komura is his poverty.

Perhaps there has never been a statesman or diplomat in the history of the world who was as poor as Komura.

The only clothes he wore, winter or summer, was an old, worn out frock coat. When asked whether it was not too hot during summer, Komura would say a poor man never felt the heat even in the peak of summer. During lunch time he was often seen clipping frays of thread from the sleeves of his frock coat. Oftentimes, he only took tea for lunch, having no money for food.

The main cause of his destitution was the debt that Komura had inherited from his parents, who had failed in a business venture. Having been in debt to all the moneylenders in Tokyo, Komura lived in a house devoid of any valuables because everything had been thoroughly confiscated by bill collectors. He only owned two cushions, which he had to abandon when he had more than two guests. Having no umbrella, not to mention the money to hire a cab, he would simply walk in the rain, with rain drops dripping freely from his cap. And yet, Komura would enter the Foreign Ministry proudly from the main gate, even though the rear gate was much closer to his house.

At the send-off party held at Shinbashi Station as Komura was en route to Beijing, where he was assigned as deputy minister, one of his friends tried to present a watch to Komura, knowing that Komura did not have one. He rejected the friend's offer, saying that loan sharks might be hidden among the well-wishers seeing him off at the station and that they would immediately jump on whatever valuables he might receive as his farewell gift. He asked this friend to give him the watch at the next station if he was really willing to give it to him.

Before being stationed in Beijing, Komura endured ten years of obscurity at the Foreign Ministry. He earned his position through the *kōshin-sei* system with his *Obi-han* background, and won his chance to study at Harvard thanks to the recognition and patronage of Ogura Shohei. But Ogura joined Saigō's forces in the Satsuma Rebellion while Komura was in Harvard and committed suicide after being defeated. Consequently, Komura became deprived of any supporter or patron in officialdom, which was dominated by the Satsuma-Chōshū oligarchy. For ten long years, therefore, Komura had to watch his colleagues with powerful backing being promoted one after another while he himself was overlooked and remained assigned to the ministry's translation bureau.

While boldness might have been Komura's nature by birth, it must have been further enhanced by his living conditions—in other words, he was so poor that he had nothing to lose. No matter how heavily indebted he was, Komura said, "I am all right as long as I am not beaten by the debts."

Komura's contemporaries at the Foreign Ministry got together monthly for a dinner. They split the cost, but Komura never contributed his due. Consequently, in time, it was decided that Komura should not be informed of the time and venue of the monthly banquet. Nevertheless, Komura somehow succeeded in detecting the time and place and never failed to show up in time to take the seat of honor, eat and drink more than the other members, and enjoy the occasion freely discussing current affairs. Eventually, the other members agreed to exempt Komura from paying his portion of the cost.

Boldness must be accompanied by a supporting conviction. A devotion to state affairs would allow him to forget the misery of destitution.

### **Komura's Nationalism/Ultrationalism**

Komura believed in nationalism/ultrationalism throughout his life.

One major origin of the nationalistic movement during the Meiji era was the antipathy toward the government's planned appointment of foreign judges as a concession to winning the revision of unequal treaties in the early days of Meiji.

In those days, Japan was still regarded as a semi-civilized country and Westerners worried that their own nationals might be treated unjustly by the Japanese court. This argument was used to justify consular jurisdiction over foreign nationals in Japan. In order to eliminate this humiliating practice and, thereby, become a genuine sovereign nation, the government of the time proposed the arrangement of allowing foreign judges to sit in on court proceedings when foreign nationals were tried. These foreign judges acted as watchdogs, so to speak, for a certain period of time to appease Westerners' apprehension. This concession, which the Japanese people of the time looked upon as a national disgrace, invited the heated backlash of public opinion.

It was this sort of nationalism that propelled the anti-government movement around 1887 (20th year of Meiji), when the announcement of the date of the establishment of the Diet tamed the Freedom and People's Rights

Movement.

In the summer of 1887, Komura abruptly announced to a gathering of his friends that he might rebel against the government shortly. Referring to the treaty revisions planned by then Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru, Komura declared, “[These are] humiliating provisions for Japan. Being an official of the Foreign Ministry, what I intend to do might be considered treason against the government. But I nevertheless must do it for the state.” After disclosing the details of Inoue’s plan, Komura decided to team up with Sugiura Shigetake (杉浦重剛), a lifelong friend of Komura since his *Daigaku Nankō* days, to engage in activities to sabotage the negotiations.

This proposal on the revision of the treaties was aborted owing to, among other things, intra-cabinet resistance from Tani Tateki (谷干城). Another proposal was attempted by Foreign Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu, but this effort, too, was wrecked by enraged public opinion against its content, which had been exposed by *The Times* of London. Both of these two proposals contained the provision on the appointment of foreign judges.

It has been suspected that it was Komura who leaked the draft treaty to *The Times*. Judging from Komura’s everyday words and conduct, this allegation does not seem to be totally groundless. It was indeed an act of fearlessness by a man who focused solely on state affairs and who had nothing to lose.

But Komura was not a slovenly person who could easily ignore official regulations. On the contrary, he observed the rules so rigorously that, in later years, foreign correspondents had to complain about his inflexibility. Depending on the time and occasion, however, Komura was capable of deciding that state affairs were much more important than compliance with the rules.

### **Skeptical of Party Politics**

Komura once made the following comment on domestic politics in Japan: “There are too many political parties engaged in party affairs. We should have something more neutral and solid.” “Neutral” in this comment refers to the standpoint that bases decisions on an objective assessment of national interest instead of party interest. Komura made the above comment in 1889, the year of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution, in which every

political party was running around in preparation for the first general election scheduled in the ensuing year. It was against this backdrop that Komura let out his skepticism of party politics. This political view of Komura remained unchanged throughout his life.

Ten years later, the Ōkuma-Itagaki cabinet (隈板内閣), the first party administration in Japan, was formed in 1898. Highly appreciative of the Komura's administrative capability, Ōkuma pleaded to Komura who was vice minister for foreign affairs by that time to join his own *Shimpotō* (進歩党, Progressive Party). In those days, those who sought political power had no other choice than to ask for protection of the *han*-clique or to join a political party. For Komura, who had managed to become a vice minister without any *han*-clique's backing, joining the ranks of *Shimpotō* was definitely one natural course for him to take. Nevertheless, Komura had absolutely no interest in party politics. He had the following to say about political parties in Japan:

I say so-called political parties in Japan are cliques of people with their own self-interest and political agenda, and they have no ideology or ideal of their own. Their members would not hesitate to sell their honor to advance their self-interests or even to sacrifice their own party in order to accede to power. Although I have no intention to cling to my position as vice minister for foreign affairs for my own self-interest, I will not leave my position lest these party-related people should become in charge of Japan's diplomacy.

*Han*-clique is already a shadow which no longer has any substance, while the political party is a fiction, so to speak, that was born from the idea of constitutional government. Either one is without a root or substance. I am afraid that a day will come to Japan in the future when these two empty forces will damage Japan beyond salvation.

Anyone that is concerned about the future of this country should be prepared to rescue Japan from this peril starting today. In order to do so, one has no other choice than to become nonpartisan, departing from any clan or political party, and to cultivate oneself.

Political history through the Meiji and Taishō eras was a history of the struggle between the *han*-clique camp and the parliamentarian camp. This

struggle first resulted in Taishō Democracy, or the establishment of party politics to overtake the autocracy of the *han*-clique, thanks to the painstaking labor of Mutsu and his disciples, including Hoshi Tōru and Hara Takashi. While this was undoubtedly a great achievement in itself, it was, in Komura's view, nothing but a victory of a fictitious parliamentary democracy over the *han*-clique, which had long lost its substance.

Subsequent history shows the demise of the short-lived party politics, which were overtaken again by autocracy—this time, by the militarists and bureaucrats in the turmoil during the Shōwa era following the Great Depression. The ideological source of this shift can be found in the above-quoted comment by Komura, which testifies that, even in the infancy of democracy in Japan, there were some among Japanese leaders who harbored skepticism about party politics.

In this sense, Komura was again an archetype of the right wingers that occupied a substantial portion of pre-World War II Japanese population. In fact, the overwhelming majority of arguments that appeared in newspapers on the eve of the Pacific War condemned the corruption of party politics. The day of right-wing autocracy which Komura dreamed of had indeed come—and ruined Japan eventually.

### **A Taciturn and Stoic Nationalist**

Mutsu and Komura were two extreme types of Japanese on different ends of a spectrum. While Mutsu belonged to an exceptional minority in Japan that understood the orthodoxy of parliamentary democracy and aspired to realize it, Komura advocated for autocracy, defending the objective national interest from the nonpartisan standpoint of a bureaucrat. While Mutsu was an advocate of Westernization, Komura was a nationalist. In contrast to Mutsu, who was loquacious and open-minded, Komura remained taciturn and stoic.

These personal differences notwithstanding, Mutsu promoted Komura to the top position in the foreign ministry. When Japanese diplomatic missions were almost exclusively staffed with officials with the personal backing of the *han*-clique, Mutsu had appointed Komura to this important position against opposition within and outside the ministry, including from Prime Minister Itō. This indicates that, when promoting his subordinates, Mutsu must have chosen a person for his personality rather than any other

attributes.

Although Komura gave the impression of being an eccentric and his words and conducts tended to be excessive, it was obvious to anyone that his only concern was the survival and prosperity of the Japanese Empire. Everyone could see that Komura was totally devoid of any self-interest.

Although Komura could be a dangerous person who would not hesitate to revolt against the government when he considered that the fate of the state and nation was at stake, Mutsu himself had once conspired to assassinate Ōkubo and Itō at the time of the Satsuma Rebellion, giving him no right to call Komura dangerous. In fact, Mutsu might have felt empathy for Komura's boldness, in spite of the ideological difference.