In the spring of 1890, eleven-year-old Matsuura Isami’s great-grandfather Daisuke, the retired village head, took him by train on his first trip to Tokyo. Accompanying them were Isami’s grandparents: Yoshi, who was Daisuke’s daughter, and Jinsuke, her husband and the current village head. The family group had awakened at dawn to start the trip, their path down the mountain aided by servants hauling luggage on their backs and carrying lanterns to light the way. At the town of Ishikawa, five miles down the mountain, they hired a horse-drawn cart to carry them fifteen miles west across the rice plain to the new railroad station in the town of Shirakawa.

Members of the Matsuura family were accustomed to walking. Thirty years earlier, Daisuke had even walked to Tokyo (then called Edo) with his wife, Moto. It took them eight days to cover the entire distance, roughly 120 miles. Now, thanks to the newly opened Tōhoku line, Daisuke and his relatives could reach Ueno Station, in the nation’s capital, in less than one day, hurtling through space at the breath-taking speed of twenty miles per hour. The iron rails symbolized industrialization, one of the goals set by the new Meiji government in its zeal to modernize.

The three adults seated on the hard wooden benches in the train compartment had a clear mission. They were mulling over their young charge’s future. In the twilight of his life, Daisuke, the eighth-generation patriarch of the Matsuura family, worried that Isami, heir to the eleventh generation, would fall behind in the world if he did not obtain a modern, Western-style education.

Tokyo was at the forefront of exhaustive Japanese efforts to learn from the West. The opening of Japan’s doors to trade and diplomatic relations with the United States and Europe in the 1850s had introduced an avalanche of Western culture and technology that had undermined the value of classical Chinese scholarship, which had dominated Japanese intellectual life.
for hundreds of years. Negotiations with Westerners, whose treaties had forced Japanese relations with them, required a whole new body of knowledge. “Civilization and enlightenment,” a popular slogan in the 1870s, called on Japanese to study all things foreign: languages, science, technology, medicine, political institutions, protocol, etiquette, law, dress, cuisine—the list seemed endless. From translating constitutions to learning how to eat spaghetti with a fork, literate Japanese tackled the task of learning all about the Occident.

Isami’s father had left the early education of his firstborn son in the hands of Daisuke. From the age of five, Isami had lived with his great-grandparents in the separate retirement cottage on the family’s grounds. His first four years of compulsory education were taken at the “simple, easy [village] school” that Daisuke had founded. When Isami demonstrated greater ability as a student than his father had shown, Daisuke, having, in Isami’s view, a “very progressive, action-oriented personality,” considered sending him to Tokyo for his higher education. Although Daisuke himself was a scholar of Chinese classics and gave private instruction to many of the young people in their area, he recognized that Chinese learning was now outmoded.

While in Tokyo the family group visited a world exposition of goods and technology intended to open Japanese eyes to the so-called wonders of the modern industrial world. Daisuke also arranged to have the famous artist Nagahara Tan paint his portrait with his great-grandson. The oil painting of the pair, which still hangs in the retirement cottage on the grounds of their village home, captures the transitional nature of their era: the patriarch, with his long, pointed, white beard and his white hair, looks like a Chinese mandarin—the keeper of the old-style humanistic learning promoted in the previous Tokugawa era—while Isami, dressed in hybrid fashion with Japanese jacket, Western military-style cap, and a white scarf tied jauntily around his neck, represents the family’s future.

The main purpose of the trip to Tokyo was to seek advice on Isami’s future education from a man whom Isami identified in his family history as a former official in their home region. Somehow this got translated into the legend (perpetuated by Isami’s children) that the travelers had called on Fukuzawa Yukichi, the well-known Meiji educator and ardent exponent of Western education who later became something of a role model for Isami. Aside from this confusion, all parties agree on the advice the Matsuura patriarch received. A Tokyo education would certainly be superior to anything their home prefecture had to offer, but sending Isami to the capital city at such a young age would involve a risk, because he might not want to re-
turn to the countryside, where he was needed to carry out the Matsuura tradition of village leadership. “If he is someone who must return home, it would be better to let him finish middle school in the countryside and then, after his ideas are, for the most part, fixed, send him to the capital.”4 With their plans for a metropolitan education deferred, Isami and his relatives traveled back to their village to rethink his future.

In September of that same year, Daisuke made another trip to Tokyo, this time to visit his grandson Saburō—Isami’s uncle. Saburō had already brought pride to the family by gaining employment in one of Japan’s newly established modern banks. But pride was overwhelmed by grief when Saburō suddenly was stricken with cholera, which British traders had brought with them to Japan’s treaty ports, newly opened since the 1850s.5 Saburō died before his twenty-fourth birthday, and Daisuke himself, overcome with sorrow, died shortly thereafter, in his seventy-second year. One hundred twenty young men whom he had tutored over the years arranged to honor him by dedicating a stone Shinto shrine lantern to his memory.6

After Daisuke’s death, his son-in-law and heir, Matsuura Jinsuke, relied more than ever on his own firstborn son, Yūya, Isami’s father, for help in managing village affairs. The thirty-year-old Yūya had become the legal head of the household in 1887 and had been married for more than ten years to Ishii Miyo, the daughter of a village head from a neighboring county. The couple by this time had five children. Assured of the eventual assistance of his own oldest son, Isami, and of managers who helped oversee family holdings, Yūya was poised to launch the third century of Matsuura local leadership.7

Although not as interested in book learning as some of the earlier generations of Matsuura patriarchs, Yūya focused his energies on promoting education. As times rapidly changed in the Meiji period with the opening of Japan to the West, Yūya regretted not having pursued his own education more seriously. Daisuke had entrusted Yūya’s early education to his senior assistant and then sent him to board in the home of a Chinese studies scholar, because he thought his eldest grandson needed to know the world outside his own home. The classical education that Yūya received imparted basic literacy and instilled such fundamental Confucian virtues as filial piety, frugality, loyalty to political authority, decorum, and observance of duty, but his instruction hardly equipped him to grasp the wider political world outside Japan or even outside his prefecture. Moreover, he showed no special interest in his studies. After several years at his tutor’s house, where he helped care for the family’s children in exchange for room, board, and tuition, he
returned home in his midteens to work in the family’s extensive business enterprises, which included sake and soy sauce production and rice-land holdings in several villages.

For Isami’s education, Yūya chose several different public and private institutions established in their prefecture to carry out the new Meiji government’s mandate of four years of education. The idea of sending Isami to Tokyo appears to have been discarded after Daisuke’s death. Nevertheless, Isami did become the first Matsuura to attend modern educational institutions and to receive at least a taste of Western studies, including English-language classes. The mastery of foreign languages, preferably English or German, was deemed essential to Japan’s future elite, because these languages provided access to Western learning, which had become the measure of “civilized” life in this era.

Even a smattering of Western subject matter in Isami’s childhood, however, was not easily accessible. He attended upper elementary school in the town of Asakawa, two and one-half miles from the village of Yamashiraishi, but after one year there he was sent to the Fukushima prefectural preparatory school in Kōriyama, about thirty miles from his village, in order to study English, a subject not offered in Asakawa but required to pass the entrance examination for the Kōriyama middle school. Two years later he was admitted to that middle school for a five-year course of study.

Only a small percentage of male students possessed the requisite ability, ambition, and financial resources to go much beyond the four years of schooling mandated by the Meiji government at this time. Isami was one of the fortunate few. His pursuit of advanced education, however, necessitated boarding in Kōriyama: commuting was impossible given the fifteen-mile distance between the nearest train station and the village of Yamashiraishi. One of Isami’s lifelong ambitions became the opening of a train station closer to home in order to bridge the gap between his isolated village and the metropolis.

Isami completed his formal studies in 1899, at twenty years of age. He never went to school in Tokyo. Instead, he returned to his village just in time to help rebuild the family’s century-old house after it burned down in a “mysterious fire.”

The Matsuura family had lived in the mountain village of Yamashiraishi (the name means literally “mountain white rock”) since the time of their introduction.
founding ancestor, the late seventeenth century. The village, in existence since the late sixteenth century, is located in the southeastern part of present-day Fukushima prefecture, one of six prefectures forming Japan’s remote Northeast, or the Tōhoku region. Cold and mountainous, the Northeast was not amenable to rice farming, and yet the area was dependent on rice as a food staple and as the mode of currency in which land taxes were paid to the ruling military class.

Unlike more temperate climes to the south, where double-cropping was possible and warm summers produced healthy rice crops on flat plains, Yamashiraishi farmers, like others in the Northeast, eked out one harvest each year, if they were lucky. They worked small, scattered plots of flat land no larger than a suburban American lawn or paddies climbing up the hillsides. The village covers less than three square miles. Its 1,730 acres, including a small wilderness area, sprawl over seven hamlets separated by low-lying, tree-shrouded mountains. “Our home region,” Isami wrote, “did not receive many blessings of nature.”

Map 2  Fukushima prefecture
The Northeast, largely unexplored in the seventeenth century, lay far from the capital of the highest military general of the land, the shogun of the House of Tokugawa, in Edo (present-day Tokyo). It was even farther from the ancient cultural center of the emperor’s court in Kyoto. A cultural and economic backwater in the eyes of urban dwellers, the rugged “deep North” intrigued—and intimidated—the renowned poet Matsuo Bashō, whose travels largely on foot through the region brought him close to Yamashiraishi, in Shirakawa domain, in the same year that the Matsuura founding ancestor became village head. In his midforties and in poor health, the poet approached his trip to the “furthest interior” with some trepidation, fearing his hair would “turn white as frost” before he returned home—“or maybe I won’t return at all.”

Shirakawa became the northern perimeter of the Tokugawa family’s territories after they had pacified the country in 1600. The domain served as a strategic buffer between the Tokugawa and several powerful military houses to the north. The castle town of Shirakawa was the Tokugawa government’s last checkpoint barrier for travelers on the highway going north, where guards carefully checked travel documents.

During the Tokugawa period, from 1600 to 1868, the family’s successive shoguns, even while devising strategies to maintain control of their 260 or so domains, some more loyal than others, gave each domainal military governor (daimyō) considerable autonomy vis-à-vis his own bureaucracy, army, vassals, and taxes. These hereditary military rulers in turn allowed the villages within their territory to govern themselves as long as they faithfully paid their taxes and preserved the peace. Village heads (shōya), members of the peasant class, served as the channel of communication between their villages and the military governor’s local representatives, headquartered in towns scattered throughout the domains. Tax collectors, judges, record keepers, arbiters of disputes, and local boosters all rolled into one, village heads survived by walking the thin line between their fellow villagers and the military lords above them.

Obsessed with preserving its power, the Tokugawa family, through its own large bureaucracy (bakufu), attempted to maintain the elaborately structured political and social system. The four legally defined status groups of samurai (warrior rulers), peasants, artisans, and merchants were hereditary; foreign contacts were severely restricted; and the content of theatrical productions and literature was subject to censorship. Through sumptuary laws regulating everything from dress to deportment, house construction, num-
ber of servants, and content of theatrical performances, the Tokugawa govern- 
ment attempted to control the population of thirty million people, who, 
despite restrictions and sometimes owing to them, produced a vibrant pop-
ular culture along with diverse goods and services and gained access to ed-
ucation, making the Japanese arguably the most literate country in the world 
by 1800.

But wealth and learning were not distributed equally throughout the 
land. Although the Japanese were productive rice growers, when terrible 
famines devastated broad swaths of the countryside during the Tokugawa 
period, rice farmers desperately struggled to meet their tax quotas. One 
task of village heads was to increase productivity in order to pay the land 
tax, which was levied on the village as a whole. Spearheading economic 
development and the spread of literacy and culture in the rural areas, vil-

dage leaders such as the first eight Matsuura househeads in the Tokugawa 
period promoted rural industry and trade and contributed to the construc-
tion and maintenance of temples and shrines, even as they profited from 
their extensive rice lands, often simultaneously exploiting and assisting their 
villagers.

By the late eighteenth century, especially toward the end of the Toku-
gawa period, Isami’s ancestors had become members of the upper stratum 
of the farm class and, as such, potential targets of peasant uprisings. The 
family’s wealth and role as village heads also made them vulnerable to ex-
tra levies from domain officials in search of additional revenue sources. In 
the early 1860s, for example, the Asakawa government office asked his great-
great-grandfather Daisuke for a special “donation” of three pairs of Japanese san-
dals per every hundred koku of assessed land, to give as gifts to the visiting 
wife and father of a high-ranking official from a nearby town. In 1867, 
Daisuke and two other households paid three or four gold coins (ryō) — 
more than any of the other eighty-two households—as their families’ share 
of a special tax levy. Wealthy rural landowners and entrepreneurs such as 
the Matsuura risked losing the privileges of their special status if they re-
 fused the governing class’s requests, which were made with increasing fre-
quency toward the end of the Tokugawa era.

Daisuke seemed unperturbed by these extra expenditures, which he 
recorded without notation in the same journal he used to itemize his travel 
and gift expenses in a given year. If he did not distinguish between his fam-
ily budget and his official outlays, he also did not worry excessively about 
either exceeding his budget or meeting the extraordinary levies. Nor did he
chafe at the Tokugawa regime’s incompetence; he had sufficient wealth to pay off the officials without questioning a political system that was impoverishing the many and approaching collapse.

The immediate cause of the massive crisis that afflicted Japan in the last fifteen years of Tokugawa rule was an event of such terrifying proportions that it threw Japan’s political system into immediate turmoil and tore apart the frayed, anachronistic political bonds that had held the country together for over 250 years. That event was the arrival in 1853 of an American naval squadron under the command of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, who brashly sailed into Edo Bay and, backed by four gunboats, demanded an end to the shogun’s ban on contact with Western countries.¹⁸

Few Japanese had ever seen foreigners. Shogunal policy since the early seventeenth century had prevented Japanese from going overseas and had limited trade contacts primarily to the Dutch and Chinese at the port of Nagasaki, at the other end of the country from the Matsuura family’s village. With the coming of Perry, this isolation policy ended. The British had already forcibly opened China’s ports to trade in 1842, after the so-called Opium War. Under pressure from American negotiators and against the wishes of the emperor, the shogun reluctantly signed treaties in 1854 and again in 1858, opening trade and diplomatic relations with Americans. Similar treaties signed soon afterward with England, France, Holland, and Russia enabled European and American diplomats, traders, sailors, and missionaries to enter the newly opened ports, including Yokohama, close to the seat of the shogun’s government in Edo but outside its criminal jurisdiction. According to the terms of the treaties, these foreign nationals, if accused of a crime, had the right to be tried by their own consular courts.

The firestorm of protest that followed the signing of the treaties turned the political system upside down. Although shogunal officials, in the face of the Western countries’ superior military force, saw no choice but to open Japan, a group of domainal lords and samurai thought otherwise. They appealed to the imperial court to legitimize their more isolationist views. Calling for the expulsion of the “barbarians,” patriotic, sword-waving samurai assassinated foreigners and Japanese advocates of foreign trade, inaugurating a decade of violence and civil war.

In 1860, the year Isami’s father, Ōya, was born, a group of young extremist samurai, outraged by the treaties, murdered the shogunal official in direct control of the country as he traveled in a palanquin through a snowstorm to his office in the shogun’s castle in Edo. The assassins’ movement to “revere the emperor and repel the barbarians” gained further momen-
tum in the succeeding four years, when enemies of the Tokugawa strengthened their own armies and allied with one another.

Commoners living close to Edo were politically awakened by the foreign threat and converged on the city in response to the crisis. “Suddenly everybody seemed to have an opinion on the matter and gathered in various places to argue,” recalled Shibusawa Eiichi, the son of a well-to-do peasant-entrepreneur from a village fifty miles northwest of Edo. In 1861, Shibusawa had gained his father’s permission to move to Edo, which he had been primarily motivated to do, he recalled, because of his “growing conviction that these were no longer the times to be a peasant.”19

Isami’s great-grandfather Daisuke, also a well-to-do rural entrepreneur, was not entirely unaware of the stormy political scene in Edo aroused by the unfamiliar, and unwelcome, presence of foreign men and women from the United States and the other four countries that had signed treaties with Japan. In fact, he might very well have described to Isami how he and his wife, Moto, while visiting the shogun’s capital in the spring of 1863, had taken a side trip to nearby Yokohama, one of the newly opened treaty ports that symbolized Japan’s foreign crisis, and had circled the harbor area in a rented boat to view the large oceangoing steamers and sailing vessels of the five treaty countries. The foreigners had quickly gained control of over 90 percent of Japan’s trade with the outside world, and Yokohama, with its fine harbor, rapidly drew even more Western traders.20 In late March, several English and Dutch men-of-war also arrived in the harbor.21 In his journal Daisuke specifically reported seeing foreigners—probably the first non-Japanese he had ever encountered. Yet, his journal entries on other activities, such as pilgrimages, pleasure jaunts, and commercial transactions, were more detailed, suggesting that the seriousness of the national political and economic predicament wrought by the forced opening of Japan to foreign trade and diplomatic relations had not yet penetrated his consciousness, even though he was in the thick of it.

Shortly before Daisuke and Moto’s visit in and around Edo, nearly a quarter of a million people left the capital. In the face of an anticipated war with the foreigners, the shogun had released the domain lords and their families and retainers from their longstanding requirement to maintain separate residences in Edo, so that they could return home to prepare their domain defenses. The sight of thousands of people streaming out of the shogun’s capital so captured the attention of one American merchant-observer that he described the event as “a grand epoch of history” in a letter he wrote to the New York Tribune on February 3, 1863.22
Daisuke made no mention of the emptying of Edo in the journal he kept of his two-month trip with Moto to the capital and its surrounding tourist attractions. Only after the couple’s return from Edo did the political consequences of the treaties finally reach their home grounds. At that point, Daisuke could no longer ignore national and international events.

In 1864, civil war broke out in the southern part of Fukushima, near Hanawa, the site of the Tokugawa office newly opened to oversee the territory that contained the Matsuura family’s village. That year’s revolts by a pro-emperor, anti-foreigner group were followed in 1865 by another peasant demonstration, this one in response to the economic impact the new foreign trade had on Japan. Poorer farmers, hurt by the ensuing inflation, protested the Hanawa intendant’s decision to give a monopoly over the konnyaku trade to a group of village heads in Shirakawa domain. (Konnyaku is the devil’s tongue plant, or konjak, of the arum family, from which an edible jelly was made.) Daisuke was drawn into the affair when he joined five other village headmen in signing a formal apology addressed to the local intendant to secure the release of the four major leaders of the demonstration.\(^{23}\)

Peasant uprisings erupted elsewhere in the region and indeed all over Japan in the following year. In Shindatsu to the north, an uprising was specifically aimed at wealthy rural families.\(^{24}\) One year later, in 1867, when pro-emperor forces from the southwestern domains of Chōshū and Satsuma captured the ancient capital of Kyoto and forced the resignation of the moribund Tokugawa shogunate in Edo, the violence finally threatened the Matsuura’s village.

For several decades the village of Yamashiraishi, as well as the rest of Shirakawa domain, had been directly under the control of the shogun’s government. The village and others nearby remained, for the most part, on the sidelines during the civil war, but not Aizu-Wakamatsu, the large domain three days’ journey on foot northwest of Shirakawa. Staunchly committed to Tokugawa rule, Aizu’s ruling family, a collateral branch of the Tokugawa, joined an anti-imperial alliance composed of thirty-one domains located in the Tōhoku region. After Aizu’s fortified White Crane Castle fell on November 8, 1868, and the Imperial Army entered the city, many families of military officers committed group suicide. Imperial soldiers raped and looted the population, and merchants from as far away as Shirakawa came to buy and barter the war booty.\(^{25}\)

Caught up in the mayhem, peasants in many neighboring domains staged uprisings. In the Asakawa area, two hundred rioting peasants trashed the
property of village heads and wholesalers as the political order collapsed around them. Triggering their outburst was another poor harvest, as well as the additional and unprecedented burden of their conscription into pro-Tokugawa armies to fight in the civil war during the busy harvest season. Peasants focused their anger on wealthy sake brewers, cutting open sake barrels and spilling the contents onto the ground.

Even though two years earlier Daisuke had sided with demonstrators, bailed out their leaders, and succeeded in restoring peace after the “Konnyaku Riot,” this time farmers from the neighboring village of Itabashi did not spare the family. In his official report, Jinsuke described how he and Daisuke had tried to reason with the crowd at their gate, but the rioters would not listen to them. They broke down the door of the sake storage house and damaged tools. They also used a wood plane to carve ugly scars into a post inside the Matsuura family’s house, built seventy years earlier, after rioting farmers from the nearby town of Asakawa and environs in the 1790s had converged on the family’s village.

The plane marks, reminders of communal disorder, were left unrepai red for the next thirty years, while the Matsuura family, remarkably, rode out the overthrow of the Tokugawa House and the dismantling of the entire antiquated system of rule. But the violence of the crowd shocked Daisuke, who was accustomed to thinking of himself as a benevolent village headman, and after the attack he seems to have lost the will or energy to continue in an official capacity. Having passed his fiftieth birthday, he decided to retire, turning over his responsibilities to his son-in-law Jinsuke. Nevertheless, despite social and political changes of a revolutionary scale that followed the collapse of the entire Tokugawa system and resulted in the ousting of hereditary village heads elsewhere in the area, the family managed to remain in office.

Threats to the Matsuura hereditary position after 1868 no longer came from house-smashing farmers but from modernizing reformers in the new central government. The young samurai from domains in the southwestern part of Japan, who in 1867 overthrew the shogun and the entire moribund Tokugawa political system, sought to control all of Japan from a single center. They transferred the teenage emperor to Edo, which they renamed Tokyo, “eastern capital,” and declared it the new capital of a unified Japan. They also declared a new reign period—Meiji, “bright or enlightened rule.” Justifying their rule in the name of the supposed ancient authority of the emperor, whose reign period lasted until his death in 1912, the young new leaders quickly set about implementing administrative
changes designed to increase their command over the country. The effects of their ambitious program of reform soon reverberated in Yamashiraishi, where the Matsuura struggled to retain their local political influence.

Although the Matsuura patriarchs had witnessed many administrative changes and several major political crises during the 180 years of their local stewardship before the Meiji Restoration, they had managed to survive them all. Protesting farmers had been pacified; inept intendants had come and gone. Rulers from the military class had arrived on the scene, conducted the usual greedy assessment of rice yield, extracted loans from the family, and rotated out. The village had fallen under one jurisdiction or another, but for the most part it had been left alone as long as the required tribute reached the intendant’s office in Asakawa, close to the Matsuura family home. The events of 1868, however, were different. These constituted not simply change but revolution in the guise of an “imperial restoration.”

In a matter of years, the new leaders succeeded in replacing all hereditary domains and Tokugawa lands with a centralized system of prefectures, whose governors owed their political appointment directly to them. Yamashiraishi became part of the new nation’s third largest prefecture, Fukushima, created by combining a number of domains, including Aizu, Shirakawa, Sōma, and Nihonmatsu, along with the districts of Shindatsu and Shinobu. The new prefecture derived its name from Shindatsu’s castle town, which became the prefecture’s capital city, also called Fukushima. Located in the northern part of the prefecture, Fukushima City emerged as the site where local politics would thereafter be played out, at a considerable distance from Asakawa, which had been the Matsuura’s closest political nexus since the days of their founding ancestor.29

One of many popular slogans of the era—“rich country, strong army”—reflected the Meiji government’s goal of forging a strong modern nation-state capable of achieving parity with Western powers. To this end, the leaders launched further drastic reforms. Pronouncements from Tokyo came one after the other. Promoting the hitherto secluded emperor as a symbol of national unity and modernity, the Meiji government overturned Tokugawa strictures on class mobility and foreign trade and announced a bootstraps policy of economic development and military strengthening modeled on the leading powers of the day.

Japan’s new leaders focused on liberating people to pursue freely chosen occupations and on educating them to achieve nationalist goals through a system of compulsory education for boys and girls. With a stroke of the pen, the new government eliminated the centuries-long samurai monop-
oly on arms and instead required all men to serve three years in the nation’s new national army and four additional years in the reserves. To encourage industrial development and to knit the country together, the Meiji government began construction of a national railway line in one of its earliest reforms. The line that the young Isami rode with his elders to Tokyo was completed in 1887, between the capital’s Ueno Station and Kōriyama.\textsuperscript{30}

Local leaders such as Daisuke and his successors, first Jinsuke and then Yūya, faced unfamiliar challenges as they developed strategies to guarantee that their part of the country and of the prefecture did not fall behind in Japan’s race to achieve “civilization and enlightenment.” Daisuke, already retired as village headman, had briefly considered heeding the appeal of local literati, who asked him in the 1870s to apply for a bureaucratic post in the inspectorate (kensakan). Isami’s beloved great-grandfather had forged good relations with Asakawa government officials and was admired by villagers for miles around. Like many of his ancestors, Daisuke had established a reputation as a talented man of letters, but beyond that he was admired for his powers of persuasion. He already had contacts in Tokyo, as his 1863 trip there with Moto demonstrated. In the eyes of his adoring great-grandson Isami, he was also handsome, open-minded, dignified, kind, tolerant, smart, progressive, and even elegant.\textsuperscript{31}

Yet, not even these admirable traits were sufficient to convince Daisuke’s wife that he could deal successfully with the group of young and inexperienced hotheads who had seized control of Japan. They were, after all, unknown entities. Moreover, they hardly enjoyed the support of everyone in the country. The new leaders’ monopoly on power and their reform agenda produced opposition groups whose suppression and whose methods of protest were often violent. The 1870s witnessed numerous outbreaks of organized resistance. Those samurai who were not among the founders of the new government had lost their elite status and thus staged armed rebellions; farmers threatened by the new land tax and compulsory military service rampaged across the country, destroying the homes of the rich and toppling newly erected telegraph poles. Political parties, inspired by Western political practice, became yet another way of contesting central government encroachment.

These troubled times led Moto to discourage Daisuke from coming out of retirement to apply for a position in the new government. She argued that if he failed, he might harm his descendants. Sensing that her husband was not cut out for the more complex and even dangerous political battles that lay ahead, Moto persuaded Daisuke to devote himself instead to teach-
ing the younger generation. He consequently threw himself into the task of educating the young at a time when compulsory public education worldwide was still rare. Embracing the goal of universal literacy, he became a champion of popular education in his area. Daisuke contributed land for the first primary school in Yamashiraishi; it opened in 1873 on the family’s property along the road below their house, with thirty students enrolled. In the late 1880s, Isami was one of the school’s pupils.

To represent village interests at the prefectural and national levels, Daisuke relied on his son-in-law and heir, Jinsuke, and Jinsuke’s firstborn son, Yūya. Longtime village heads struggling to maintain local autonomy in the early Meiji period tended to be among the strongest promoters of the newly formed Liberal, or Freedom, Party (Jiyō). The Matsuura men, too, found themselves sympathetic, though not overly so, to the efforts of the newly formed political parties to protect local regions from the growing arm of the central government. While Yūya demonstrated a conservative, Confucian bent of mind that made him no special fan of the liberal ideology espoused by opponents of the new governing oligarchy, he appreciated the personality of Nakae Chōmin, a champion of Rousseau and an outspoken liberal ideologue, even if, according to Isami, Yūya “probably did not approve of Nakae’s ‘strange [i.e., democratic] ideas.’”

The nemesis of the parties was the ruthless Tokyo appointee Mishima Michitsune, who was nicknamed “the devil governor” for good reason. His other nickname was “the public works governor,” because his plans for road construction and other public works in Fukushima entailed poorly paid heavy labor and additional local taxes. Mishima, one of the southwestern samurai who had overthrown the Tokugawa, was determined to destroy the parties. Fukushima, the center of the popular rights opposition movement in the northeastern districts in the early 1880s, became the site of bloody confrontations.

The Matsuura must have been aware of the political turbulence so close to home. They most likely knew the several activists from the nearby town of Ishikawa who clashed with authorities over their political activities. Among them was the Shinto priest who was also the Ishikawa township head and Kōno Hironaka, the Liberal Party leader in Fukushima, who was arrested for his role in opposition activities.

Still, the Matsuura, reluctant politicians with a long history of political neutrality, initially remained aloof from the Liberal Party and the outbreaks of violence in 1882 that resulted in arrests of many of its members. Prefectural assemblies, political parties, and election campaigns were among the
unfamiliar Western political ingredients that Matsuura househeads encountered. The family’s forte had always been conscientious tax administration and conflict negotiation—in disputes among villages over water rights, for example, and among families within their own village. Their area of operations centered on the local intendant’s seat in Asakawa, a mere forty-minute walk from their village.

As late as the leadership of the eighth generation’s Daisuke, the family’s official status as peasants, albeit very wealthy ones and village heads, gave their househeads no official access to political affairs at the national level. Before the mid-nineteenth century, there had been no acceptable public forum for the discussion of countrywide political issues.

One way or another, the Matsuura had to learn how to work with the unfamiliar political institutions and practices that developed in the Meiji period. In particular, they had to devise strategies to guarantee that their part of the country and the prefecture would not fall behind. Their leadership role now also entailed manipulating the new political system in order to protect their region from the central government’s demands. In addition, they could no longer restrict their activities to the Asakawa region; their scope had to expand at least as far as Fukushima City, the new capital of the prefecture and the site of the newly established prefectural assembly. Despite the efforts of Daisuke and Jinsuke to avoid political entanglements, the Western-influenced political institutions and practices introduced in the Meiji period virtually demanded the family head’s participation if he were going to champion his region’s interests.

Between 1878 and 1890 the Meiji government revamped the local administrative apparatus several times. After carving out prefectures and a new tax system, the central leadership created a single, uniform system of counties within the prefectures. In 1879, Yamashiraishi fell under the jurisdiction of Ishikawa county, which had a population of almost thirty thousand. Extending the county’s reach even further, the oligarchs in Tokyo also mandated village assemblies to “deliberate upon matters relating to the general expenses of the locality, and upon the means of defraying expenses therein.” Further administrative reforms in the late 1880s finally shocked the Matsuura into political action. The Home Ministry announced a plan for the consolidation of villages through mergers, which led almost overnight to the disappearance of Yamashiraishi as a separate entity. Its new designation rendered it merely a hamlet of another village. This new arrangement cost the Matsuura their age-old village leadership position, but it did not remain uncontested.
The Matsuura men swung into action to overturn the annexation. During their seven-year-long effort to reinstate Yamashiraishi as a separate village, Jinsuke rented a farmhouse in the prefectural capital of Fukushima City, so that he and Yuya had a place to stay while they lobbied prefectural officials. Father and son also traveled back and forth by train between Fukushima and Tokyo to make personal appeals to the Home Ministry. In 1888, the twenty-eight-year-old Yuya even did a brief stint as a member of the new prefectural assembly, though not because he sought the job.

Prefectural assemblies had been in existence for only a decade, and qualified candidates were few in number when Yuya was elected as an assemblyman. To be eligible, members had to be males over the age of twenty-five, residents of the prefecture for at least three years, and landholders paying an annual land tax of ten yen or more. Only about 2.45 percent of the population was qualified to run as candidates, and only 4 percent of the population was qualified to vote for them.39 Yuya was among that handful, and, without his knowledge, a party politician nominated him.

Serving in prefectural assemblies was often a boring and frustrating experience, and many assemblymen resigned early. The political system created by the central government was designed to draw local notables into the decision-making process at the prefectural level without actually giving them much power. Prefectural governors, appointed by the central government and under the control of the Home Ministry in Tokyo, monopolized the right to draft bills, and all assembly resolutions were subject to their final approval. They represented the state’s policies, not the individual prefectures’ needs.40

Boredom, however, was not the main problem in Fukushima. For many years the prefecture had been rife with violence, much of it centered on the despotic governor. In 1884, seven radical Liberal Party politicians from a nearby prefecture were hanged for attempting to assassinate him.41

The strain of political life soon took its toll on Yuya. During his one-year stint in the prefectural assembly, he proposed a plan to sell bonds to finance the purchase of national forest land in the prefecture to be used as a kind of trust fund to generate income for the prefectural school system. He also offered to donate some of his own money. The plan, however, was rejected.42

Within the year, Yuya fell sick with an undisclosed ailment whose symptoms sound like nervous prostration. Isami, who was nine years old at the time, recalled in his family chronicle how Yuya had become too “agitated” and had to resign, giving his seat to the person who had received the next
highest number of votes, while he himself recuperated in Fukushima City under the care of a housekeeper from the Inoue family, with whom the Matsuura had longstanding ties.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite this resignation and Yūya’s departure from party politics after 1893, his and his father’s political efforts ultimately paid off in that year. They succeeded in restoring Yamashiraishi’s separate identity and preserving the office of village head for themselves. Over forty-four years later, at Yūya’s public funeral, which the entire village attended, he was eulogized (“worshipped”) as “the saint of village autonomy,” in the words of his eldest son.\textsuperscript{44}

Yūya’s childhood and early adulthood paralleled the wrenching birth of the modern Japanese nation. By the time Isami came of age, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, however, Japan’s new political order was in place. The country boasted a modern-style constitutional monarchy with a national legislative body. It was now ready to prove itself equal to the West by taking on and defeating a Western country. Awaiting Isami was the excitement of Japan’s rapid transition both from a country saddled with inequitable foreign treaties to a nation recognized as a world power in possession of its own empire and from a largely rural society to an industrialized, modern one.

Isami enthusiastically embraced Japan’s foray into modernity. He was especially fascinated with technology. Throughout his life he would delight in making sketches of labor-saving machinery and seek manufacturers willing to produce his inventions. But also awaiting Isami as he reached manhood was the struggle to master unfamiliar modes of politics and business practices in the new nation-state, the effort to advance his community’s interests while rearing and educating his many children, and, finally, the long period of war, military occupation, and recovery.

Fortunately, Isami did not know what lay ahead for him when he completed his formal schooling. He returned home a cherished young man full of energy and confidence, rooted in family and agrarian values but at the same time forward-looking, optimistic, and receptive to change, like the new nation itself at the turn of the twentieth century.