

I am Itoh Hirobumi. I was born in 1841 at Tsukari in Yamato-cho, now a part of Hikari City as the first son of Risuke Hayashi, a farmer.

My name was changed to Itoh when my father was adopted by Naouemon Itoh, a low-ranking samurai. I moved to Hagi when I was 8. I studied very hard and became one of the students of Yoshida Shoin at Shoka-Sonjuku.

This was during the time that many people believed that foreigners should be expelled from Japan.

I was also a supporter of this idea and joined a group headed by Takasugi Shinsaku which set fire to the British Consulate under construction at Shinagawa.

Going abroad was also prohibited, under the Tokugawa Government's policy of national isolation.

However, the leaders of the Choshu Clan realized that Japan could learn from western countries. So, they decided secretly to send 5 young samurai, including myself, to the United Kingdom in 1863. The five of us were later called the "Choshu Five", and our mission was to learn about advanced technology and study the Royal Navy in order that Japan could prepare for modernization after all foreigners had been expelled. This all happened 5 years before the Meiji Restoration.

Professor Alexander Williamson of University College London took care of us during our stay in London. All of us stayed at his house to begin with and we all studied in his chemistry class. He arranged study tours to various factories to show us the latest technology. Everything was new and exciting.

Inoue and I, however, returned to Japan after being in London for only 6 months, because a newspaper reported that a fleet of warships from 4 countries was planning to attack Choshu. By now we had come to realize the strength of Western countries and we had already realized that the plan to expel foreigners was mistaken. We tried in vain to persuade the Choshu Clan not to fight against the Western powers.

I, and other members of the Choshu Five, contributed to laying the foundations for the modernization of Japan during the Meiji Era.

I myself became the first Prime Minister of Japan.

Before we left Japan, we were forced to cut off our chonmage, or topknot, and leave our swords behind. This meant that we had lost our honour as samurai.

So, I wrote a tanka poem before we left Japan,

[ますらおの 恥を忍びて 行く旅は 皇御国(すめらみくに)の為とこそ知れ]

I will keep in my mind my shame as a brave samurai, because I know this journey leads to the bright future of the land where our Emperor reigns.