

Power, Legitimacy, and the Japanese Emperor

By John Sagers

To integrate the study of Japan into the world history curriculum, it is important to find themes of comparison. Political legitimacy provides one such theme. Even when regimes have the *power* to rule, they try to establish their *right* to govern. As the oldest reigning dynasty in the world, the Japanese monarchy has evolved over nearly two millennia to support governments in a variety of historical contexts, from primitive society to a modern nation-state. This essay will outline three types of legitimacy that the Japanese emperors cultivated: sacred, historical, and popular. An analysis of each type provides one possible framework for comparing the Japanese monarchy to other political institutions in world history.

SACRED LEGITIMACY

Sacred legitimacy is based upon the ruler's special relationship with the supernatural. Ancient agricultural societies were completely dependent upon the benevolence of nature for their survival. Drought, flood, insects, and disease could all destroy a people's livelihood. Consequently, most ancient societies believed in a spiritual realm where deities controlled the forces of nature. Elaborate systems of beliefs and rituals developed to maintain the goodwill of the gods. The priests who performed these rituals then wielded important spiritual authority among their people.

When wet rice agriculture was introduced to Japan from the Asian mainland around the third century B.C.E., communities formed to organize the leveling of fields, construction and maintenance of irrigation works, planting and harvesting of crops, and defense from hostile neighbors. Organized along kinship lines, these clans became the basic building blocks of ancient Japanese society.¹ Each clan had a chief who was said to have descended from a deity. With this special relationship to the god, the clan chief performed an important priestly role that has extended into modern times.

Around the fifth century C.E., the Yamato clan emerged as the most powerful agricultural community in central Japan. Through negotiation, marriage, diplomacy and warfare, the Yamato unified the rival clans into a confederation and ruled as Japan's first emperors. The Yamato claimed the Sun Goddess their ancestor, and the emperor was her high priest. The performance of religious rituals to secure peace and prosperity for the people gave the Yamato a measure of sacred legitimacy.



Minamoto no Yoritomo took great care to rule with proper authorization from the court.

Attributed to Fujiwara Takanobu (1142–1205).
Collection of the Jingo-ji Temple, Kyōto, Japan.

HISTORICAL LEGITIMACY

Historical legitimacy stems from precedent. By linking their regime to ancient tradition, rulers try to demonstrate that they are conforming to well-established and accepted practices. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Japanese rulers did this in two ways. First, they codified a set of hereditary aristocratic ranks that solidified each powerful family's position in the ruling hierarchy.² Second, they commissioned dynastic histories, the *Record of Ancient Matters* of 712 and *Chronicles of Japan* of 720, which established the Yamato's genealogy from the gods in the written record.³

When the samurai warrior class became powerful in medieval Japan, warlords also used the emperor's historical legitimacy to secure their right to rule. Preferring the cultural and intellectual pursuits of court life to the rather dismal business of governing peasants, the emperors and their aristocratic supporters left local government in the hands of managers and constables. Over time, these samurai local administrators developed power based upon direct control of the land and its resources through armed force.

In 1185, after a civil war between two competing warrior bands, Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–99) established a new type of government in Japanese history, the military regime (bakufu). This development marked the beginning of feudalism in Japan. The warriors who actually controlled the land and the taxes that it generated swore allegiance to the shōgun. In one sense, the shōgun ruled by virtue of his personal military power cultivated through feudal ties with other warriors. Yet, Yoritomo and future shōguns took great care to rule with proper authorization from the court. In return for Yoritomo's promise to keep tax revenue flowing to the aristocratic landlords in Kyoto, the emperor granted Yoritomo the title of shōgun and allowed him to rule in the emperor's name.⁴ This established a precedent which several military regimes followed to forge a link with the emperor's historical legitimacy.

ESSAYS



Image of Toyotomi Hideyoshi
From the Web site:
<http://www.geocities.com/shogunafurika/hideyoshi.htm>

Even Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98), who through sheer force and shrewd diplomacy united Japan after a century of civil war among competing warlords (1467–1568), carefully patronized the imperial court. Although he had overwhelming personal power, he found it worthwhile to work through established practice. The emperor’s granting to Hideyoshi a distinguished surname and the title of imperial regent greatly enhanced his prestige and helped give him the right to rule in addition to the power to enforce compliance.⁵



Image of Tokugawa Ieyasu from the *Height of Feudalism*
Web page: <http://www.ews.uiuc.edu/~ellen/samurai/height.html>

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) completed Hideyoshi’s pacification of rival warlords and established a lasting peace in 1600. Following precedent, Ieyasu took the imperial title of shōgun and established the Tokugawa military regime that

ruled Japan until 1868. He well understood the potential threat presented by the emperor as a rival source of historical legitimacy. Ieyasu restricted the emperor’s granting of titles to only those whom the shōgun endorsed. In this way, Ieyasu used the emperor to legitimate rule by himself and his loyal supporters.⁶

When the last Tokugawa shōgun was overthrown in 1868, the new regime claimed to “restore” the Emperor Meiji to his rightful place as sovereign. The Meiji government then established itself on the basis of the emperor’s historical legitimacy.



Image of the Meiji Emperor from the *Hidden Variable*
Web site: http://www.variable.net/hidden/japan/D3_2.J.HTM

POPULAR LEGITIMACY

Popular legitimacy is based on support for a regime among the people. In modern nation-states, political elites have been particularly careful to cultivate this type of legitimacy in two ways. First, they create an ideology that equates patriotism and community duty with loyalty to a given regime. Second, they extend political participation to wider and wider segments of the population. Japan after the Meiji Restoration provides us with an excellent example of this phenomenon.

In 1868, most Japanese people identified with their families and villages and perhaps their feudal domains, but the sense of belonging to a larger national community was still forming. The Meiji government actively tried to build national consciousness in several ways. Educators instilled patriotic values and loyalty to the emperor through the modern school system. Recruits were trained in the armed forces to have pride in their office as the emperor’s servants.⁷ Press releases to newspapers circulated the emperor’s activities to a nationwide audience.⁸ There was an organized effort to revive ancient Shintō beliefs surrounding the emperor’s divine nature and Japan’s special national destiny.⁹ Finally, national and local govern-

ment officials developed new ceremonies and national observances to raise awareness of the emperor as the head of the nation.¹⁰

Of course, the Japanese people conceived of their modern nation and the role that the emperor played in it in a variety of ways, and not everyone accepted the government leaders' perspective.¹¹ To strengthen popular support of the emperor and the state, the government extended political participation to a wider segment of the population. By the 1890s, Japan had a constitution and a national assembly, the Diet. The emperor's ministers then ruled in consultation with the people's elected representatives. Through ideological innovation and institutions to widen political participation, therefore, the Meiji government established in the minds of the people the legitimacy of the emperor and the modern Japanese state.

With this brief outline of sacred, historical, and popular legitimacy, students of world history can readily compare Japanese political institutions with other cases they encounter. It also provides an excellent point of departure for the discussion of complex themes as ethnic identity and modern nationalism.

NOTES

1. For a broad overview of the clans and the emergence of the Yamato, see John Whitney Hall, *Japan: From Prehistory to Modern Times* (New York: Dell, 1970). For more detail, see Delmer M. Brown, "The Yamato Kingdom," in *Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 1: Ancient Japan*, ed. Delmer M. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge History of Japan, 1993), 108–62.
2. Richard J. Miller, *Ancient Japanese Nobility: The Kabane Ranking System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
3. Donald L. Philippi, translator, *Kojiki: A Japanese Classic* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1968). William G. Aston, translator, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from Earliest Times to AD 697* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).
4. Jeffrey Mass, "The Kamakura Bakufu," in *Cambridge History of Japan, Vol-*

ume 3: Medieval Japan, ed. Kozo Yamamura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

5. Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
6. Herschel Webb, *The Japanese Imperial Institution in the Tokugawa Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
7. Kenneth B. Pyle, *Making of Modern Japan* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1996).
8. The importance of media and language in developing modern nationalism is addressed in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983).
9. Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
10. Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
11. On the complexity of Meiji era ideological discourse, see Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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The author in front of the Heian Shrine in Kyoto. Built in 1895 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the imperial capital's founding, this replica of the original imperial palace focused popular attention on the emperor's sacred and historic authority and enhanced the prestige of the modern Japanese state.



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