

**DIVINITY AND GENDER: THE RIDDLE OF THE
JAPANESE EMPERORS**

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Mark Rebick
Editor

Divinity and Gender: The Riddle of the Japanese Emperors

Introduction

The subject of the emperor is a sensitive one in Japan. It is highly politicised, so that whatever one says about it may carry wider implications. It may also be dangerous, as there are right wing extremists ready to settle accounts with those who in their opinion have insulted the emperor. It is an embarrassing topic, reminiscing myths and beliefs that many Japanese would like to forget. As Ôe Kenzaburô wrote in 1966, "The intellectual climate of Japan... causes writers to avoid the subject of the emperor system."¹ Japanese historians tend to shun the topic. So why am I interested in it? Perhaps for the same reason that people climb a forbidding mountain.

When Sir Edmund Hilary was asked why he had climbed Mt. Everest, he replied: "because it was there". The imperial institution of Japan, like Mt. Everest or, to be geographically more accurate, like Mt. Fuji, is there, and cannot be ignored. It is soaring high, shrouded by mists, and better seen from afar. So it may be easier for a foreigner to work on this subject, as he is less prone of having a political axe to grind.

The majority of postwar Japanese historians, highly critical of Hirohito's role in the Second World War, have been hostile to the "emperor system" (*tennô-sei*),² unlike the Meiji and pre-war intellectuals who had been generally in favour of it. In the 1980s a more dispassionate attitude developed, especially toward the pre-modern emperors who cannot be blamed for the war.³ In the West most books about Japanese emperors focus on Hirohito and his war

¹ Ôe Kenzaburô, "Sakka wa zettai-ni hanseiji-teki tariuru-ka?", *Ôe Kenzaburô Zensakuhin* (Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1966), vol. 3, p. 382.

² One example is Inoue Kiyoshi, *Tennô sensô sekinin* (Tokyo: Gendai Hyoronsha, 1975).

³ Examples of these are: Amino Yoshihiko et alii, eds., *Nihon ôkenron* (Tokyo: Shinjûsha, 1988); Hara Tomio, *Tennô fushinsei no dento* (Tokyo: Shinjûsha, 1984); Taki Koji, *Tennô no shôzô* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988); Kuroda Hideo, *Ô noshintai, ô no shôzô* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1993). The term "tennô-sei" was coined by the Japanese Communist Party in the 1920s, but after the war it was adopted also by the right-wing, replacing the prewar term "kokutai" (national polity).

responsibility. It is amazing that no one has yet written an English biography of Emperor Meiji (Donald Keene has been serializing such a biography in Japanese in *Shinchô* 45), although David Titus, Carol Gluck, Takashi Fujitani, and Stephen Large have illuminated important aspects of his life.⁴ The Imperial Household Agency does not release its documents, but historical materials concerning the Shôwa emperor keep coming out in Japan in the form of diaries and revelations by persons who were close to the throne.⁵

The Riddle of the Unchallenged Dynasty

The greatest enigma of the Japanese emperors is the long duration of their dynasty from at least the sixth century until today, which means that it is more than 14 centuries old. It is the oldest reigning dynasty in the world, the only one that the Japanese are aware of having had, and the only one that does not have a name. It has survived aristocratic authoritarianism, feudal disintegration, internal warfare, shogunal despotism, modern Westernization and, most surprising, total military defeat.

As this exceptionally long survival was used in the past by the nationalist propaganda, postwar historians have tended to dismiss or ignore it. Yet it is a puzzle how Japan has succeeded in preserving its reigning family for such a long time. Why did Japanese strongmen and military rulers throughout the ages refrain from grabbing the throne, in the way their counterparts in other countries did? What prevented a powerful warrior like Toyotomi Hideyoshi, or the Fujiwara nobles with their strong blood ties to the imperial family, from declaring themselves emperors? Why did all the shoguns, despite the fact that they could claim a distant imperial ancestry, accept the principle that once their families had become subjects (*shinka*) they could not aspire to the throne anymore?

⁴ David Titus, **Palace and Politics in Prewar Japan** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Carol Gluck, **Japan's Modern Myths** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Takashi Fujitani, **Splendid Monarchy** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Stephen Large, **Emperors of the Rising Sun** (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1997).

⁵ The most important of these was Emperor Shôwa's soliloquy, discovered in 1989. **Shôwa tennô dokuhaku** (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjûsha, 1995).

The explanation that we often hear is that the throne was powerless and therefore worthless, so it was more advantageous to use it than to ascend it. This explanation ignores the high status and enormous prestige of the imperial institution, that any strongman would love to possess, as well as the possibility that in the hands of such a strongman that institution could acquire much more power. But were the emperors powerless? Here we should distinguish between three levels of the term emperors: As individuals, they were usually weak and absorbed in religious duties; as a family with a monopoly over the throne, they were much stronger, as in the case of the powerful ex-emperors (*in-sei*); as the highest state organ they wielded great power, being the source of all political legitimacy.

In many respects their authority was theoretic, but in some areas it was real. Only an emperor could dispense court titles, bestow aristocratic names, or appoint people to senior positions. No one was shogun unless appointed by the throne. In doing this, the emperors usually acted on the advice of others, but their approval was not automatic and they could always stall. Minamoto Yoritomo had to wait seven years before he was appointed shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu waited three years. The titles that the emperors bestowed were not empty formalities. In a status-conscious society they carried immense importance. Thus there was a residual strength behind the emperors' apparent weakness.

Postwar historians have often pointed out to the fact that before the Meiji Restoration peasants in far-away localities had never heard about the emperor. This is true, but these peasants had never heard about the shogun either. Not all peasants were so ignorant. Participants in the rural rebellions of the Daishôji han (now Ishikawa Prefecture) in 1712, of the Chôshû han (now Yamaguchi Prefecture) in 1831, and of the Nose district (now Osaka Prefecture) in 1837, appealed to the emperor for help but their pleas went unheeded.⁶ The significant thing is not that illiterate peasants were

⁶ Yasumaru Yoshio, **Kindai tennô-zô no keisei** (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1992), p. 87.

ignorant of the emperor, but that educated people expressed reverence for him at a time that he was politically irrelevant.

Was the emperor just a portable shrine (*mikoshi*) as Maruyama Masao has phrased it,⁷ an empty object of worship? Reverence for the emperor was not restricted to conservatives or to the ruling elite. It was voiced by modernizers, liberals and non-conformists, such as the leaders of the People's Rights Movement, Fukuzawa Yukichi, Minobe Tatsukichi and Yanagida Kunio. The theory that the authorities fabricated the imperial myth in order to deceive the people, attributes supreme shrewdness to the Japanese government and supreme stupidity to the Japanese people, two assumptions that are highly dubious.

The Vague Divinity

Another explanation of the emperors' durability is based on religion.

It says that because the emperors were believed to be gods, no one dared to overthrow them. But were they indeed believed to be gods in the traditional sense of the term *kami*? Contrary to what many think, living emperors were not worshipped in Japan, and there were no shrines dedicated to them. The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* do not portray the emperors as gods. The *Nihon shoki* makes a distinction between "the age of gods" (*shindai*) before Jimmu, and the period of human sovereigns which started with him. Had the emperors been divine, then Ninigi no Mikoto, who had descended from heaven, should have been designated as the first emperor, and not Jimmu who merely moved his seat to Yamato. The way the emperors are portrayed does not suggest divinity. According to the *Nihon shoki*, Jimmu's son Suizei ascended the throne by murdering his elder brother, while Emperors Yuryaku (r. 456-479) and Buretsu (r. 499-506) are described as blood-thirsty sadists.⁸ Some poems in the *Manyōshū* address emperors and empresses as *ara-hito gami* or *akitsu mikami* (both meaning god

⁷ Masao Maruyama, **Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 128-129.

⁸ **Nihongi** (translated by W. G. Aston. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972), vol. I, pp. 335-336, 406-407.

manifest), but according to the literary scholar Origuchi Shinobu, these are expressions of poetic praise and not of divinity.⁹

The emperors were descendants of gods, but so were other aristocratic families. Every *uji* had an *ujigami*, but being a descendant of a *kami* did not convey divinity. The superiority of the imperial family was not based on divinity but on the claim that its *ujigami* was the supreme deity Amaterasu Ômikami, often referred to as the sun goddess. On the basis of this widely-accepted belief the emperors mediated between the people and "the gods of heaven and earth". The emperor was therefore a shaman, although he lacked the shamanic elements of possession by a spirit and prophetic utterances. He was also a holy figure that ordinary people could not touch or gaze at.

It is sometimes said that the Japanese emperors assumed divinity in the *daijôsai* enthronement ceremony. Origuchi suggested, at the time of Hirohito's enthronement, that there is an eternal "imperial soul" (*tennô-rei*) which is transferred during that ceremony from one emperor to another.¹⁰ But as other scholars have pointed out, there is no evidence that such a belief indeed existed.¹¹ Moreover, for more than two centuries, from 1466 until 1687, the *daijôsai* was not performed, but this fact did not diminish the legitimacy or sacred status of the emperors of that time.

The phenomenon of divine rulers was known in many countries. In ancient Egypt and Rome, kings were worshipped and sacrifices were offered to them. In medieval Europe, monarchs were believed to perform miracles and to heal the sick. In England in the fifteenth century, King Henry VI resurrected the dead and made the blind see, and in the seventeenth century King Charles II cured scrofula ("the king's evil") by his royal touch. Until the late eighteenth century French and English kings were healing certain diseases.¹²

⁹ Origuchi Shinobu, **Origuchi Shinobu zenshû** (Tokyo: Chûh-kôronsha, 1955-67), vol. 20, pp.63-69.

¹⁰ Origuchi, **zenshû**, vol. 3, pp. 188-198.

¹¹ See for instance Carmen Blacker, "The *Shinza* or God-seat in the *Daijosai*: Throne, Bed, or Incubation Coach?", **Japanese Journal of Religious Studies**, vol. 17, Nos. 2-3, (June-September 1990), pp. 179-198; Stuart Picken, **Essentials of Shinto** (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 84-85.

¹² Marc Bloch, **The Royal Touch** (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 214-228; Henri Frankfort, **Kingship and the Gods** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 354, n.1.

Nevertheless, the divinity of the Egyptian and Western kings could not guarantee the survival of their dynasties, and those who overthrew them found ways to establish their own divinity.

In Japan emperors did not perform miracles, heal the sick, or foretell the future, and those who did these things, like the *ikigami* ("living gods"), the super-natural persons who visited villages and performed miraculous acts, were not emperors. Prince Shôtoku was said to perform miracles and to be an incarnation of the Buddha, but he never became an emperor. Dead emperors were gods, but so were other dead people. Only one emperor, the legendary Ôjin, became after his death a popular deity, Hachiman the god of war. The historical figures who became famous deities were not emperors, and sometimes they were even opponents of the emperors. Sugawara no Michizane, who had been accused of treason, became after his death in the tenth century a "Heaven-filling heavenly god" (*temman tenjin*), and shrines for him (*temmangû*) were built all over Japan. Taira no Masakado, who had rebelled against the emperor later in that century, became in the fourteenth century the patron deity of Edo.¹³

Tokugawa Ieyasu was enshrined in the seventeenth century at Nikkô as a Shinto and Buddhist deity, "The Great God Shining in the East" (*tôshô dai-gongen*), and was worshipped in the *Tôshôgû* shrine there on a scale that no emperor had ever been accorded. There was no cult of Emperor Jimmu, the legendary founder of the dynasty. His shrine in Kashiwara near Nara was built only in 1889, and the founding of the empire on February 11 started to be commemorated only after the Meiji Restoration. The magnificent Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, where Emperor Meiji and his wife are enshrined, was built only in 1920.

In the Tokugawa period one was not allowed to speculate about the shogun's authority, but one could question the authority of the emperor. The Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan dismissed the axiom that the emperors were descendants of the sun goddess, and in his treatise *Jimmu tennô ron* suggested that Jimmu was the descendant of a

¹³ Judith Rabinovitch, tr. and ed., **Shomonki, The Story of Masakado's Rebellion** (Tokyo: Monumenta Nipponica, 1986).

Chinese prince who had fled to Japan.¹⁴ Another Confucian scholar, Arai Hakuseki, in his book *Tokushi yoron*, claimed that the civil wars before Ieyasu proved that the imperial family had lost the mandate of heaven.¹⁵ This apparent blasphemy was tolerated despite the fact that the emperors played an important role in legitimizing the shogunal government.

The Meiji oligarchs elevated the position of the emperor, making him into the central pillar of the state. But, contrary to what is often assumed, they did not make him into god. None of the official Meiji documents, like the Charter Oath (1868), the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors (1882), the constitution (1889), or the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), claimed that he was *kami*. The constitution stated that the dynasty stemmed from the gods and was eternal (*bansei ikkei*), but it did not go so far as to claim that the emperor was divine. Article 3 said that he was "sacred" (*shinsei*) and "inviolable" (*okasubekarazu*), but this article was copied from Western constitutions which had similar clauses.¹⁶

The divinity of the emperor was propagated by nationalist scholars like Hozumi Yatsuka and Uesugi Shinkichi, and by military officers like Honjo Shigeru¹⁷. After the outbreak of war with China it was disseminated in schools. The teachers' manual *Kokutai no hongii* of 1937 stated that the emperor was *akitsu mikami*, but qualified the statement by adding that this did not mean that he was omniscient or omnipotent in the Western sense of the word God.¹⁸ The morals textbook *Shushinsho* of 1940 said: "The emperor, whom we the people worship as god, is the descendant of the Great August Sun Goddess".¹⁹

But the emperor's divinity did not become an essential article of

¹⁴ Ryusaku Tsunoda et alii, eds., **Sources of Japanese Tradition** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 358-359.

¹⁵ Quoted in Kate Nakai, **Shogunal Politics** (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1988), pp. 261-263.

¹⁶ Such a clause appeared in the constitutions of Sweden (1809), Norway (1814), Bavaria (1818), Portugal (1826), Italy (1848), Hungary (1848), Denmark (1849), Austria (1867), and Spain (1878).

¹⁷ Honjo Shigeru, **Emperor Hirohito and His Chief Aide-de-Camp: The Honjo Diary, 1933-36** (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1982), p. 131.

¹⁸ Robert Hall and John Gauntlett, eds., **Kokutai no Hongii: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 71.

¹⁹ Robert Hall, ed., **Shushin: The Ethics of a Defeated Nation** (New York: Columbia University, 1949), 76.

faith. Radical nationalists like Kita Ikki regarded the emperor as "the supreme representative of the Japanese people", but not as a divine monarch.²⁰ The "Young Officers" did not regard him as god and were angry when he supported the suppression of their 1936 uprising.

If so, what did the Shōwa Emperor renounce in his January 1, 1946 rescript? The answer is that he did not renounce anything. All he said was that the ties between him and the people did not "depend upon mere legends and myths" and were not "predicted on the false conception that the Emperor is divine (*akitsu mikami*)". He confirmed the fact that his sacred position did not derive from the belief that he was god, but from the belief that he was a descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami. Hirohito could renounce the frenzied wartime deification, which he had not claimed, but he could not renounce the divine descent which he and his ancestors had always claimed. This descent could not be renounced, because it provided the legitimacy for the imperial dynasty and for the religious rites that the emperors continued to perform in their capacity as mediators between gods and men. It is significant that on the same day that Hirohito renounced his divinity, he performed the New Year obeisances to the gods of heaven and earth at the palace shrine, as he had always done.

Unlike the Meiji constitution, the postwar constitution does not refer to the emperor's divine pedigree and does not allow the state to engage in a religious activity. As a result, the emperor's religious rites, which for a millennium and a half had been his most important function, became a private affair of his family. So the emperor today makes "private" donations to various Shinto shrines, like the Gokoku Jinja which before 1945 served as local branches of the Yasukuni Shrine.²¹

Nowadays hardly anyone claims that the emperor is god. The conservatives, contrary to what one might expect, have little interest in the imperial institution. In 1978, a government-sponsored body, the Japan Cultural Institute, published a book in English called *Great Historical Figures of Japan*, edited by the

²⁰ Kita Ikki, *Chosakushū* (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 1959), vol. 2, pp. 372-373.

²¹ Takahashi Hiroshi, *Gendai tennō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978), p.238)

writer Murakami Hyôe.²² The purpose of the book was to introduce leading historical figures of Japan to the Western audience. Of the forty one persons listed in the book only one is an emperor: the seventh-century monarch Temmu. The group of revisionist historians headed by Fujioka Nobukatsu, which has been publishing new textbooks aimed at making young people proud of their past, has not yet come out with a book on the emperors. Even the right-wingers are interested more in defence and education than in the divinity of the monarch.

Gender Ambiguity: Mother Figures or Father Figures?

The sacred position of the emperors was buttressed by a significant gender factor. Both the Chinese and the Japanese chronicles describe a feminine starting point of the Japanese monarchy. The history of the Wei dynasty tells the story of Queen Pimiko, who unified Japan in the third century, and about Queen Toyo who reigned some time after her. The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* trace the imperial family to Amaterasu Ômikami, whose shrine at Ise was constructed by an imperial princess, Yamato-hime. They do not mention Pimiko, but tell the story of an important shaman queen, Jingû Kôgô, who might have been Pimiko.²³ They also mention Iitoyo-ao no Kôgô, a female ruler in the fifth century.

Between the years 593 and 779, for almost two centuries, Japan was ruled by six empresses, two of whom reigned twice under different names. These empresses occupied the throne for a combined period of 89 years, nearly half of that time. They were significant not only because of the long time of their reigns, but also because of the important things that they did or that were done in their names. Empress Suiko (r. 593-628) was the first monarch to carry the title of "emperor" (*tennô*). The Japanese language does not distinguish between a male and a female *tennô*, nor do their posthumous names, by which they are known to us, indicate gender). She was also the first

²² Murakami Hyoe and Thomas J. Harper, eds., **Great Historical Figures of Japan** (Tokyo: Japan Cultural Institute, 1978).

²³ For the identification of Pimko with Jingû Kôgô see Robert Ellwood, "Patriarchal Revolution in Ancient Japan", in **Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion**, vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp.26-27.

to propagate Buddhism throughout the realm. Empress Jitô (r. 686-697) built the first planned capital, Fujiwara-kyo, started the custom of rebuilding the Ise Shrine every twenty years, introduced conscription, and was the first monarch to resign and assume the title of Great Abdicated Emperor (*dajô tennô*). Empress Gemmei (r. 707-715) issued the first Japanese money, built the capital at Nara, and was the first to take holy Buddhist orders upon abdication. The bizarre phenomenon of emperors reigning twice, under different names (Kôgyoku-Saimei, Kôken-Shôtoku), occurred only in the case of empresses.

In the late eighth century the custom of reigning empresses came to a halt, because of the growing influence of China where a woman on the throne was considered to be an aberration. The only female sovereign that the Chinese had was Empress Wu, who ruled from 690 to 705, at the time that Empress Jitô ruled in Japan. Since then reigning empresses reappeared twice in Japan, in the seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries (Empress Meishô, r. 1629-1643, and Empress Go-Sakuramachi, r. 1762-1770). The phenomenon of royal female shamans was preserved in Okinawa, where a wife or a sister of a king served as chief priestess (*kikoe ogimi*), a position with the rank and prestige almost equal to that of the king.²⁴

The Chinese influence which had removed women from the throne, also changed the sex of the imperial progenitor. In the Heian period Amaterasu Ômikami started to be identified with a male Buddhist god, Dainichi Nyorai, and was portrayed as a man.²⁵ Engelbert Kaempfer, who stayed at Deshima in the late seventeenth century, described Amaterasu Ômikami ("Tensio Dai Dsin" in his rendering of the Sino-Japanese pronunciation of that name) as a male, adding that the Japanese did not know who his wife was.²⁶ Until the Meiji Restoration no emperor visited Amaterasu's shrine at Ise. Instead they were represented there by a consecrated princess (*saiô*) from the imperial

²⁴ Kokan Sasaki, "Priest, Shaman, King", **Japanese Journal of Religious Studies**, vol. 17, Nos. 2-3 (June-September 1990), pp. 120-121; George Kerr, **Okinawa: The History of an Island People** (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1958), pp. 36, 110.

²⁵ Toba Shigehiro, "Amaterasu omikami no imeeji no henshen ni tsuite", **Kogakkan daigaku shinto kenkyûsho kiyo**, No. 13 (March 1997), pp. 119-179.

²⁶ Engelbert Kaempfer, **The History of Japan** (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1906), vol. 1, pp. 155-156.

family. In the fourteenth century this position too underwent a sex change and male aristocrats started representing the emperor at Ise.

This masculinization did not change the feminine character of the imperial institution. More than father figures, the emperors remained mother figures in both the Shinto tradition of the great goddess and in the Confucian tradition of the submissive mother, leaving the masculine function of government to others. They remained, as women were supposed to be, passive and inassertive. The *daijōsai* enthronement ceremony includes until today noticeable female elements, like the comb and the fan on the holy bed (*shinza*), and in that ceremony the emperor is accompanied by female attendants only.²⁷

Unlike monarchs in other countries, who engaged in fighting and hunting, the emperors of Japan engaged in poetry, calligraphy and painting. They were surrounded by women: wives, concubines, ladies-in-waiting and priestesses. They had often to ascend the throne as children and abdicate it as young men. So much were they identified with youth that the role of an emperor in a *noh* play is always performed by a child. Algernon Mitford, the British diplomat who saw the 16-year old Emperor Meiji in the spring of 1868, was struck by his feminine appearance. He wrote "He was dressed in a white coat with long padded trousers of crimson silk trailing like a lady's court-train... His eyebrows were shaved off and painted in high up on the forehead; his cheeks were rouged and his lips painted with red and gold. His teeth were blackened".²⁸

When it came to selecting a Western model for the modern monarch, the Meiji oligarchs preferred the authoritarian German *kaiser* to the democratic Queen Victoria. So they embarked on a campaign to masculinize the emperor. The feminine-looking Mutsuhito was made commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He grew a beard, put on a

²⁷ Carmen Blacker, "The *Shinza* or God-seat in the *Daijōsai*: Throne, Bed, or Incubation Ground?" **Japanese Journal of Religious Studies**, vol. 17, Nos. 2-3 (June-September 1990), pp. 179-198. In 1928 Origuchi suggested that the *Daijōsai* was originally a sexual intercourse, but this has not been proven. **Origuchi Shinobu zenshū** (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1955-1967), vol. 3, pp. 229-240.

²⁸ Hugh Cortazzi, ed., **Mitford's Japan** (London: Athlone Press, 1985), p. 120. See also Ernest Satow, **A Diplomat in Japan** (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 371.

uniform, wore a sword, and mounted a horse. Until 1945 the standard outfit of the emperors was a military uniform. Instead of the ladies-in-waiting he was now surrounded by soldiers and statesmen. In contrast to his secluded predecessors, Emperor Meiji went on extensive tours, becoming the first emperor to see Ise Shrine and Mt. Fuji.²⁹ Masculinization on earth was followed by feminization in heaven. As Shinto was separated from Buddhism, Amaterasu resumed her female image.

The Meiji Constitution banned women from ascending the throne, in disregard of Japan's ancient tradition as well as of Western examples. When the official list of emperors was compiled, two female sovereigns, Jingû Kôgô who reigned from 201 to 269 and Iitoyo-ao no Kôgô who reigned from 484 to 485, were excluded from it on the grounds that traditionally they had not been considered to be reigning empresses.³⁰ On the other hand, two male emperors who previously had not been included in the list because of their very short reigns, Kôbun (r. 671-672) and Chûkyô (r. 1221), were added to it and given their posthumous names.

Contrary to the effeminate monarchs of the past, the Meiji emperor, as he gazed from his majestic official portrait, looked impressively masculine. But compared with the Western monarchs of his time, including Queen Victoria, he remained remarkably passive. Although Japan's constitution was modelled on that of Germany, the difference between the monarchs was striking. When Kaiser Wilhelm II did not like the policies of Chancellor Bismarck, he dismissed him in 1890 and conducted his own foreign policy. Nothing like that could happen in Japan. When Emperor Meiji did not like his cabinet's idea of waging war on China in 1894,³¹ he bowed to its recommendation, declared war and followed his generals to Hiroshima, where he stayed with them for eight months.

²⁹ T. Fujitani., **Splendid Monarchy** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 47-56.

³⁰ Richard A. B. Ponsonby-Fane, **Misasagi** (The transactions of the Japan Society of London, 1921), p. 65; Margaret Mehl, **History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan** (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 89.

³¹ **Meiji tennô-ki** (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1968), vol. 8, p.481.

Poetry writing at the palace was continued and enhanced. In January 1869, when the civil war was still raging, the sixteen-year old Emperor Meiji held his first New Year poetry party at the Kyoto palace. These parties gained momentum in the following years.³² The emperor himself was a prolific poet, and until his death in 1912 he composed 93,032 short poems (*tanka*), more than any other emperor in Japanese history (and perhaps more than any other poet in the world, which should assure him of a place in the Guinness Book of Records).

But there was a difference between Emperor Meiji's poems and those of his predecessors: none of his published poems dealt with romantic love. The theme of love, central to the imperial anthologies of the past, was now considered feminine and therefore unfit for a monarch's public display. The "frivolous" theme of love was replaced by such "serious" themes as patriotism and national progress.

Emperors Taishô and Shôwa were administered the same dose of masculinity. They were given military training, and from the age of ten started to be promoted in the military and naval ranks, so that when they assumed office they could be commanders-in-chief. Like Emperor Meiji they appeared in uniform, often on horseback. This flamboyant virility was brittle. Emperor Taishô was an ailing person and at the age of 42 was obliged to hand over his duties to his regent son. Emperor Shôwa was more at ease observing marine specimens at his palace laboratory than inspecting troops. The bespectacled diminutive Hirohito looked quite lost on his majestic white horse.

Back to A Feminine Throne?

Japan's defeat in the Second World War put an end to the virile pretensions of the imperial institution. The postwar democratization and humanization of Hirohito meant a return to the image of the effeminate monarch. The emperor was shorn of all military and executive powers and relegated to the role of a vague symbol. The bemedalled generalissimo was transformed into a soft-spoken, suit-wearing gentleman, accompanied by a smiling chubby wife. Even the

³² Iwai Tadakuma, *Meiji tennô* (Tokyo: Sanshodo, 1997), pp. 144-147; Hideo Kishida, "Utai-Hajime: The New Year's Poetry Party", *Japan Quarterly*, vol. 30, No. 1 (January-March 1983), pp. 44-49.

name of the country changed from the hard-sounding *Dai Nippon teikoku* to the soft-sounding *Nihon koku*. Hirohito's tours of the devastated country were interpreted by some observers as the healing touches of a merciful mother.³³ The office of the imperial representative at Ise Shrine regained its feminine character, when Emperor Meiji's daughter, Kitashirakawa Fusako, was appointed in 1947 as chief priestess (*saishu*) there. She was followed by Hirohito's two daughters Takatsukasa Kazuko (from 1974 until 1988) and Ikeda Atsuko (since 1988). The postwar emperor seems to be again a mother figure.

The term "imperial family" (*kôshitsu*) also underwent a change. Whereas before the war it signified the dynasty, after 1945 it came to mean the emperor's nuclear family. The wedding of Crown Prince Akihito with Shôda Michiko in 1959 created a great excitement (*Mitchi-bûmu*), not only because the crown prince married a commoner, but also because an imperial wedding was allegedly the result of a love affair. Later the rumours about Michiko's bad treatment by her mother-in-law and other ladies of the family (*Mitchi-ijime*) created a public sympathy for her. The image of Akihito is softer than that of his father. He refers to himself as *watakushi*, a word which his father rarely used, and speaks with honorifics, something which his father rarely did. As Takie Lebra has pointed out, the image of the imperial family preoccupied with its own affairs irritates conservatives who would like the emperor to dedicate himself to the nation rather than to his wife and children. When Crown Prince Naruhito said that he would do everything to protect his wife, they complained that he should do everything to protect the nation.³⁴

The Last Emperor?

The present emperor, at 65, is already five years older than Emperor Meiji was when he died. Crown Prince Naruhito, at 38 and still far from the throne, is already at the age that Emperor Shôwa was when the Second World War broke out. However, a problem that no one has

³³ Han tennô-sei undô renraku-kai, **Michiko no gyakushû** (Tokyo: Shakai hyoron-sha, 1994), pp. 65-66.

³⁴ Takie Lebra, "Self and Other in Esteemed Status: The Changing Culture of Japanese Royalty from Showa to Heisei", **Journal of Japanese Studies**, vol. 23, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp.257-289.

foreseen is now casting a shadow over the future of the imperial family. The crown prince and princess, in their sixth year of marriage, have not yet produced a child. In previous times such a problem was solved in several ways. First of all, emperors maintained aristocratic concubines (*nyôkan*), whose sons could ascend the throne in case the empress had none of her own. Emperors Kômei, Meiji and Taishô were all sons of such concubines. But the palace concubinage system was abolished in the Taishô period, when the ailing emperor and his wife had four healthy sons, one of whom, Hirohito, lived and reigned until the unprecedented age of 87.

The second device to assure continuity were the specially-designated collateral houses (*miya-ke*), which stemmed from emperors and could supply a successor when the main family failed to do so. The last time that this mechanism was used was in 1779, when Emperor Go-Momozono died at the age of 21, leaving only a one-year old daughter.

In that case, a nine-year old boy from the collateral family of Kan'in, a great grandson of Emperor Higashiyama, was enthroned as Emperor Kôkaku. Since Kôkaku until the present, for seven generations, the throne has passed smoothly from father to son, which means that every emperor had at least one son who survived him. The collateral system was abolished after the Second World War, when the imperial family was reduced to the immediate relatives of the Shôwa emperor and his brothers. The eleven collateral princely families were downgraded to commoner (*shinka*) status.

The postwar Imperial Household Law, in apparent contradiction to the constitutional principle of the equality of sexes, preserved the Meiji ban on reigning empresses. This law, enacted in 1947, stipulates that only males of the imperial family can become emperors. It is strange that the American and Japanese drafters of the law did not envisage the danger that in such a small imperial family, a situation might arise when no male candidates would be available.

The danger is not yet acute. The crown princess, at 34, may still bear a son, as may Prince Akishino's wife Kiko, who at 31 is mother

of two girls. After the death of the present emperor, let us say around the year 2020 (he will then be 86), his son Crown Prince Naruhito will be enthroned. But when Naruhito dies, let us say around the year 2050 (he will then be 90), there may be no one to succeed him. As of now, all the six children in the imperial family are girls: two daughters of Naruhito's brother Prince Akishino, two daughters of Prince Mikasa Tomohito, and three daughters of his brother Prince Takamado. If neither Masako nor Kiko bears a son (the wives of the Mikasa princes have passed the child-bearing age), then by the middle of the next century there will be no one to ascend the throne.

What will happen then? One possibility is that the imperial dynasty will come to an end, in the same way that many princely families died out in the past. The last one to do so was the family of Prince Chichibu, the younger brother of Hirohito, which came to an end after the prince died in 1953 and his wife died in 1995 without leaving children. Those who oppose the imperial institution may favour such an outcome. Although their number is still small, it may grow in the future. Today, according to public opinion polls, about 80% of the Japanese favour keeping the emperor³⁵, but almost one half of the population, and about 80% of the young people, define themselves as indifferent to him.³⁶

Another possibility is that the Imperial Household Law would be amended to allow women to ascend the throne. Such an amendment may not be difficult, as the last reigning empress, Go-Sakuramachi, left the throne only in 1771. In that case one of the seven imperial-family girls of today, who will then be between 55 and 70, will

³⁵ According to the poll conducted by **Asahi shimbun** in April 1997, 82% favored retaining the imperial institution as it is, 8% favoured abolishing it, and 6% favoured strengthening it. **Asahi shimbun**, 26 April 1997, morning edition, pp. 18-19.

³⁶ According to an **NHK** poll of 1988, 46.5% were indifferent toward the emperor, 48.6% respected or liked him, and 2.1% hated him. The same poll conducted in 1992, following the enthronement ceremonies of Akihito, showed 32.7% indifferent toward him, 64.6% liking or respecting him, and 1.3% hating him. Fujitake Akira, "'Tennō e no kei-i' wa kietaka?", **Shokun**, July 1993, pp. 70-85. A 1986 poll by **Asahi shimbun** showed that while 40% of respondents in their 40s felt no attachment to the emperor, in the case of people in their 20s the rate rose to 80%. Nisihira Sigeki and Nathaniel Thayer, "The Japanese Emperor in Public Perspective", **Journal of Northeast Asian Studies**, V, 2 (Summer 1986), p. 85.

become a reigning empress, provided she does not marry until then, as princesses who marry leave the family and become commoners. But this would only be a temporary solution. As the dynasty has always been based on the male lineage, even when there were reigning empresses, and adoption from outside has never been allowed, the problem is who will succeed that empress when *she* passes away, let us say some time in the 2080s. Letting an empress to marry a commoner and allowing the offspring to succeed her would be a revolutionary change difficult to carry out. So the real problem is not whether Japan can have an empress (*jotei*), but whether it can have a female line (*jokei*); that is, whether the father line (*fukei*) can be supplanted by a mother line (*bokei*), something which is common in Europe but has never occurred in recorded Japanese history.

Another possibility would be to reinstate one or more of the former collateral families, like Higashikuni or Kaya, and reappoint their heads as imperial princes qualified to succeed the throne. Such an amendment of the law, enabling commoners to regain their former imperial status, might be rejected by the conservatives as unprecedented, and might be rejected by the progressives as an unacceptable enlargement of the imperial family.

Thus we have come the whole way from the big questions of the divinity and survival of the imperial dynasty to the seemingly trivial question of Princess Masako's fertility. But as we have seen, the two are connected. What protected the imperial family for many centuries was the belief in its descent from Amaterasu Ômikami, the motherly deity of the Shinto pantheon. Discontinuity of that line, by extinction or usurpation, was tantamount to breaking the cosmic cycle of fertility and destroying the nation. The feminine nature of the imperial institution was the root of its chronic weakness, but also the source of its unusual strength.