

# ETERNAL CHRYSANTHEMUM: THE ENDURING LEGITIMACY OF JAPAN'S IMPERIAL FAMILY

ETHAN WOODARD

The imperial family of Japan is the oldest and longest unbroken hereditary monarchical line in the world. Since the fall of Rome and before the birth of Islam, for 1500 years the Yamato family have successfully laid claim to the title of Emperor. How did a royal family with the crest of a delicate chrysanthemum and drained of nearly all military might in the 12<sup>th</sup> century manage to hang onto a position of such authority for centuries, even as the rest of the nation fractured and reunified around them? The answer lies in the unique and isolated nature of Japan, its long history as a singular and definable nation, and the remarkable way that its politics and religion interact at the imperial level. The Yamato family maintained their status and legitimacy by becoming deeply ingrained as the Shintoistic personification of the Japanese nation and to remove them would destroy what it meant to be Japanese. This was accomplished not through a claimed legal authority or direct divine mandate, like Western monarchs, but through the fundamental nature of the native religion and a deeply ingrained concept of Japan as a singular idea.

The foundation of Yamato dynasty is mired in myth. Until recently it was accepted that it was founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE by the legendary Emperor Jimmu, a direct decedent of Ameratsu, the sun god. However, most modern historians believe that current dynasty began in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD with a powerful military conquest that spread across the main island of Honshu undertaken by the historical Emperor Ojin.<sup>1</sup> The exact origin of the Yamato family is shrouded in mystery; most records from that time have been lost to fire, earthquakes, or deliberate purging over the centuries. Throughout its 1500 year history the nature and function of the imperial family has evolved to fit the needs of the times. This evolution led the Yamato dynasty to a very different means of legitimacy as

1 Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subsistence in Japanese History*. Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005. P. 6-7

Emperors than Western monarchs.

The most difficult aspect of royalty in Japan for Westerners to understand is the nature of divinity that the Yamato family laid claim to in order to create legitimacy. Western kings claimed many different means through which to grant legitimacy to their positions and what those positions meant. A European king was the absolute ruler of his domain and he was sovereign, that is, he embodied the state in matters of politics. However, the king still was a man and whether or not the king claimed legitimacy through a divine right, eventually that king would die and another would assume the office. Because most Western religions equate divinity with immortality this dualism between the immortal and mortal natures of the king caused dissonance from a Western perspective. Therefore, in order to resolve this dissonance Western monarchies were codified through a separate immortal concept: law. Ernst Kantorowicz, for example, discussed Medieval European law on the nature of monarchs in *The King's Two Bodies*. He wrote that sovereigns were bisected into both a mortal body and an immortal superbody: the legal authority of the king:

This migration of the “Soul,” that is, of the immortal part of kingship, from one incarnation to another as expressed by the concept of the king’s demise is certainly one of the essentials of the whole theory of the King’s Two Bodies. It has preserved its validity for practically all time to come. Interesting, however is the fact that this “incarnation” of the body politic in a king of flesh not only does away with the human imperfections of the body natural, but conveys “immortality” to the individual king as King, that is, with regard to his superbody (13)

This concept of a king as both divine and mortal is essential to ensuring that a new king has legitimacy and can maintain continuity of law from a Western perspective. For the Japanese imperial family, however, this juxtaposition of mortal vs. immortal bodies was unnecessary. As Ben-Ami Shillony argues in his book *Enigma of the Emperors*, “While in Europe the monarch was God’s representative on Earth, charged with the implementation of His orders, the Japanese gods did not issue orders and did not need a monarch to implement them. The emperor was neither a pope, laying down codes of behavior, nor a religious authority prescribing rituals

and heading the priesthood” (Shillony 20). The Emperor of Japan neither created religions nor led them; instead, he was first among worshippers in a completely different kind of spirituality.

Just as the legal theory of King’s Two Bodies draws its philosophical foundation from the divinity and mortality of Jesus Christ, so too did the divinity of the imperial family derive its foundation from Shinto. Shinto is the religion native to Japan, traditionally equated with spiritualism, and though there are some familiar aspects of Western spiritual worship in Shinto the full meaning is far more complicated. The word for “spirit” in Japanese is *kami*, but the word for “god” is also *kami*. For Shinto practitioners in many ways spirits and gods are one in the same. Everything has a spirit or *kami*: the sun, rice, mountains, animals, and even individual objects may eventually gain enough spiritual energy or worthiness and become active spirits. These spirits may also be gods, but not gods as they are understood in a Western context. Because a spirit is a real world object or concept the more important the object or concept, the more powerful the spirit, and if an object or concept is important enough, their spirit, or *kami*, is specifically worshiped and it becomes a god.<sup>2</sup> *Ameratsu* is the *kami* of the sun, and is therefore the most important god, but *Ameratsu* is not omnipotent, omniscient, or even immortal, only very powerful. A god is the embodiment of an object or a concept, so while a god can be killed, to do so would irrevocably damage whatever the god embodies and would, therefore, be considered unthinkable. The dead too, are important in Shinto, for once a human has shed their mortal body, they become a spirit. Ancestor worship is a keystone of Shinto practice, as it is believed that families are irrevocably tied through these spiritual bonds.<sup>3</sup> Bad things done in life harm not only the individual but also the ancestors and therefore the entire family.

This concept of representative and familial divinity is essential to understanding the longevity of the Yamato imperial family’s reign. The dynasty was able to become the god/*kami* of the political nation of Japan, a representation of the idea of a “Japan.” This is different from Western

2 Littleton, C. Scott. *Understanding Shinto: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Festivals, Spirits, Sacred Places*. London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2002. p. 43-50

3 Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subservience in Japanese History*. Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005. P. 17-20

monarchs because while a king may claim to speak for a nation, and their rule may be hereditary, the Yamato legitimacy is predicated on the idea that without their family the political entity of Japan would be damaged. The imperial family made itself integral to Japan through religious ceremony. For most of Japanese history the Emperor was the single most important figure in Shinto, not because he was its leader, but because he performed the most important ceremonies for the most important gods, managed the calendar, and chose which days were lucky and unlucky.<sup>4</sup> The Emperor never generated religious ceremonies or claimed to speak for gods; he was, instead, first among worshippers. This cemented the Yamato family's status as religious figures and tied them to the notion of continuing divinity. Whether by accident of history or specific intent, the Yamato family became a Shintoistic divinity such that the family, itself was, in many ways, the kami of the nation of Japan. Not Japan in the sense of the landmass, but the nation as a distinct socio-political cultural identity.

When the Yamato dynasty was founded sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, it was most likely done so in the traditional manner of military conquest over large areas of territory. However, as the dynasty continued over hundreds of years the Yamato family worked to define themselves as part of the essential fabric of Japan.<sup>5</sup> They did this through a number of ways: first they created history and a legacy. As stated above, until the modern era it was generally accepted that the founder of the Yamato dynasty was the legendary half-god Emperor Jimmu who lived sometime in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This history was accepted because all official Japanese records collaborated and provided a detailed (and partly fictional) genealogy of the imperial family for dozens of generations. By cross referencing histories with regional neighbors in China and Korea, historians have learned that this mythology was already fully institutionalized by the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Chinese histories of the Japanese imperial family perfectly match the Japanese versions from that point on. It is likely that at some point an official history of divine origin was commissioned. In much the same way

4 Ibid

5 Minear, Richard H. *Japanese Tradition and Western Law: Emperor, State, and Law in the thought of Hozumi Yatsuka*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970. P. 78-90

6 Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subsistence in Japanese History*. Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005. P. 17-20.

that Virgil's Aeneid provided the Emperor Augustus legitimacy by tying his family to the Classical pantheon and the foundation of Rome, this fictitious history provided the Yamato's a similar legitimacy within Japan.

This monopolization of history was made possible partly because there is no direct historical evidence that prior to 1945 that Japan had ever been conquered by an outside force. History is rarely rewritten to diminish the importance of the ruling sovereign. As a result of Japan's military ability and relative geographic isolation there were very few foreigners or different cultures that ever came to settle the islands, and the nation was able to maintain an incredibly powerful and singular idea of what it meant to be Japanese. This unity of national identity was essential for the preservation of the imperial family. By instituting a millennia old history the Yamato family appealed to ancestral worship, by grounding that history in divinity they appealed to respect for the divine, and by assuming the highest authority in a religion without leading it they tied their family to the spiritual health of the whole nation. To harm the Yamato family would be to harm the whole of Japan, and thus the family became the kami of the national Japanese identity. These internal factors made it difficult for anyone born into Japanese culture to depose the Yamato family. Only a foreign conqueror unconcerned with the spiritual harm destroying the royal family might cause would have the authority to do so, this is how the family maintained its sovereign status over the centuries.

While the reign of the Yamato dynasty was unbroken, this does not mean that it was unchanging. Yet another factor in the imperial family's continued survival is their ability to shift in their nature and capacity as rulers. Though direct historical records are sparse from the founding of the dynasty in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD to the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Emperors were likely rulers that held direct political and military power in a manner relatively similar to that of their Western counterparts.<sup>7</sup> However, in 1192 a powerful aristocrat named Minamoto no Yoritomo took command of the majority of the Japanese military forces and installed himself as a permanent military ruler: the Shogun. Shogun had previously been a high ranking military title but from this point forward came to mean the de facto political and military ruler of Japan. Theoretically, the Shogun was subservient to the Emperor, but in practice it was the Shoguns that politically controlled Japan until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This era of Shogunate control is known in Japan

7 Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subservience in Japanese History*. Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005. P. 81-82

as the Kamakura Era. This change in power raises the question of why no Shogun ever attempted to depose the Yamato family and install their own on the imperial throne. The answer lies in the divine ties the Yamato family had to Japan and their own willingness to accept change.

The Shintoistic symbiotic relationship that the Yamato family held with Japan affected not only the people of the nation but their rulers as well. The various Shoguns may have been prepared to see the imperial family as political rivals, but that did not mean that they were not considered divine. It is important to remember that it is the Yamato family as a whole, and not specific family members or Emperors which held this nature of untouchable divinity. This differs from a European line of succession for two reasons: 1. The Yamato family were the only royalty that existed for Japan. Several times in the history of Western nations a royal line might be extinguished only for new royalty from another nation to assume the position through a contrivance of ancestry. For example, when the Dutch William of Orange took the throne of England after Oliver Crowell's destruction of the previous English line. In Japan the operative concept was not of royalty in general, but of the Yamato family in particular. 2. Living Emperors were not, by themselves, divine. Singular Emperors were merely the current extension of the Yamato dynasty, the Yamato kami, which represented the political and cultural nation of Japan. Unlike the king's two bodies, there was only one superboddy, the kami, which was the entire Yamato line and the sitting Emperor which existed as an extension of that superboddy, like a limb.

An Emperor could make mistakes, get sick, be assassinated, all without losing his divinity, because he was only a piece of a much larger family that were all divinely connected to the spirits of their ancestors. While kami may be gods, Shinto holds that gods and spirits are living beings directly connected to their embodiments. If one killed the kami of a book, it would irreparably damage that single book, but if one killed the kami of books, it would damage all books everywhere. In that same way if an Emperor was killed, that would damage that Emperor's kami or spirit, but if the Yamato line was deposed or killed, that would damage their collective kami and the nation of Japan as a whole and what it meant to be Japanese.

This belief wasn't just limited to the Shoguns of the Kamakura Era; it was shared by the imperial family themselves. That is why, while the

Shoguns held power, the Emperors were largely content to remain as politically weak, highly spiritual figures, to bring destruction upon themselves would bring destruction upon Japan, and instead of risking the destruction of their lineage and the nation, they devoted themselves to cultural refinement and aesthetic pursuits.<sup>8</sup> From the beginning of the Kamakura period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, through the Sengoku Era of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Tokugawa Era of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and all the way to the Meiji Restoration in 19<sup>th</sup> century Emperors spent most of their days in complete comfort attending to religious and cultural pursuits and spent less and less time on political matters. Similarly, the family largely remained in Kyoto, the historic capital of Japan. The Emperor became a mythical figure to most of the populace, and for hundreds of years no Emperor was ever seen in person outside the imperial palace by anyone other than nobility.<sup>9</sup> This detachment and mythology further contributed to the atmosphere of divinity surrounding the family and even as the territorial unity of Japan disintegrated and then re-solidified the shared spiritual and cultural unity of what it meant to be Japanese paved the way for Yamato's return to prominence.

With the dawning of the Tokugawa Era the position of the Emperor became increasingly precarious and symbolic. Completely cut off from direct exposure to the populace the imperial family finished its shift from a political or social significance into one of near complete myth. In the entire history of the Yamato family this was when their political power was at its weakest and the closest the family had come to annihilation. The only thing that prevented their destruction was the theology attached to their name. The religious, divine significance that the family carried even as their practical power faded. This living mythology was responsible for the family's return to power during the Meiji Restoration.

The turning point for the Yamato dynasty came in 1853 when United States Admiral Matthew Perry arrived in Edo Bay with four battle-ships and threatened to bombard the city with the superior weapons aboard, unless the nation was opened for trade. This crisis ended the Shogunate's monopoly on political authority and left the societal and political elite of the nation seeking a new source of legitimacy which they found

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8 Butler, Lee. *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680: Resilience and Renewal*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center. 2002. P. 58-61

9 Conlan, Thomas Donald. *From Sovereign to Symbol: An Age of Ritual Determinism in Fourteenth Century Japan*. Oxford: OXFORD University Press, 2011. P. 70-77

in the Emperor. The warrior class of the samurai had been cultivated by successive generations of Shoguns as a way to maintain a feudalistic system of governance. However, the opening of Japan to the West had the effect of making a feudal system obsolete, and in response a significant portion of the warrior class began to lay the foundations of a modern national army modeled after industrialized European nations.<sup>10</sup>

In order to legitimate this great expansion of the warrior class to include nearly all able-bodied men, the samurai required a central authority that would have unquestioned legitimacy and sovereignty. The sequestration of the imperial family within their palace in Kyoto had caused the Emperor to take on mythic as well as divine traits. In 1876 Emperor Meiji was ascended to the throne, and a new political sovereign rose. Within ten years the Shogunate came to an end, the Emperor left Kyoto for the first time in centuries, and the tradition of the cultural Emperor ended. Emperor Meiji became a standard-bearer for Japan's industrialization. The first image of an Emperor ever to be widely distributed across Japan was that of the Emperor in a Western-style military uniform in a pose very similar to that of the European royalty of the day. In keeping with the shifting nature of the Japanese Emperor, Meiji took on a military significance in addition to his continuing divinity and renewed political importance.

The military leadership was the practical political authority in Japan during the Meiji Era, but they drew their legitimacy from the imperial family. This was because the ruling class changed the religious meaning of the Emperor from a Shintoistic personification or first among worshippers figure to a more Western direct deification. The Emperor remained the kami of all Japan, but that role expanded from the representation of the political and cultural nation to all aspects of life and death amongst the civilian and military populations. There is a tendency in Western thought to classify the Japanese Emperor as a figurehead during this period of Japanese history, but that does not adequately describe the meaning of the sovereignty of the Emperor at the time. All orders throughout the military high command were done so in the name of the Emperor and even if he did not create them, without his official approval they carried no legitimacy.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Keene, Donald. *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852-1912*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. P. 24-30

11 Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subservience in Japanese History*. Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005. P. 121-123

Meiji was briefly succeeded by the Emperor Taisho who was confined to his sickbed for the majority of his fourteen year reign and upon his death Emperor Hirohito took the throne. Hirohito had a remarkable flexibility in his identity and his role as Emperor. Hirohito was the first Emperor to make his skepticism about his own divinity known and actively disliked the military's efforts to deify him in the style of Western monarchs. Yet, he also respected the spiritual and political sovereignty of the imperial family itself and continued his role as the military Emperor until the last days of World War II. During the American occupation Hirohito would sign proclamations that would disavow his own divinity, but he refused any that disavowed the divinity of his ancestors. These actions fit perfectly into the continuing idea that the Yamato family, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, and not a single Emperor are sovereign over Japan. After his death and to this day the sitting Emperor still continues many of the most important Shinto rituals for the most important gods. However, members of the imperial family are now allowed to marry regardless of class status, their children attend normal schools and universities, and in recent public opinion polls the Japanese public regards the imperial family today not with awe, but with affection.<sup>12</sup> This shift in the status of the imperial family should not be surprising, for it is just the latest in a long line of changes from a monarchy that draws its legitimacy adaptations as much as tradition.

The divine nature of the Yamato family is difficult for Westerners to understand. Their legitimacy, their divinity was not granted by God in the manner of European kings, nor are they gods made flesh like the kings and pharaohs of the ancient world. The divinity and legitimacy of the Japanese imperial family is born from the unique religious and geopolitical climate of their homeland. The exact nature of their purpose and power has changed over and over again through the centuries, but throughout it all they have remained unbroken by forging a relationship with the spiritual heart of their people. As the nature of those people, their government, and their territories has changed the imperial family has changed with them. Japan and the Yamato imperial family are inextricably linked; remove one and the other risks becoming meaningless.

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12 Fujitake, 'Tenno e no kei-I', p82, NHK Broadcasting Cultural Institute, *Japanese Value Orientation Survey 6*. (1998). Tokyo, Japan.

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