

W(h)ither the Chrysanthemum Throne?

By Catherine Maxwell (Editor)

The Emperor¹ of Japan is the centre of an institution which dates back 2,600 years – the oldest hereditary royal dynasty in the world. Like other royal families around the world, the Japanese imperial house appears to be struggling to maintain relevance in the modern world, yet it is cloaked in enough mystique that the people continue to respect and uphold the institution. Traditionally, the emperor represents the ancient connection between the Japanese people and the gods (*kami*). Yet this role is increasingly juxtaposed with the advanced technology and industrialisation of modern Japan.

The origins of Japan's imperial institution lie in the very mythological origins of Japan itself. The earliest history of Japan is recorded in legends which describe the creation of the Japanese islands and a pantheon of gods, including the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Oomikami. According to the legends, Amaterasu sends her grandson to subdue the Japanese islands, having bestowed upon him a sacred mirror, sword and jewels, which later become the imperial regalia. It is his great-grandson who becomes the first emperor, Jimmu, supposedly in 660BC². While few details are known about the reigns of the early emperors, it is clear that this sacred lineage gave them the legitimacy to rule, and that spiritual or shamanistic powers demonstrating their role as an intermediary between the people and the gods were a fundamental aspect of their leadership³.

The spiritual role of the emperors tended to place them above the day-to-day governing of the land, and it became the trend for certain influential families, who dominated the ranks of the emperor's ministers and connected themselves to the emperor through marriage, to hold the real political power. Eventually, in the 12th century, one of these powerful families, the Minamoto, established a military-style government led by the shogun (or *sei taishō gun* – 'barbarian-quelling generalissimo')⁴. This title was theoretically conferred by the emperor and was subject to his authority, but in practice it was the shogun who actually ruled Japan. The emperor continued to receive a varying degree of respect, but his activities were largely limited to performing religious rituals and to scholarly and artistic pursuits.

The shogun-led government remained in place for most of the intervening years until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The overthrow of the shogunate and re-establishment of imperial rule was not only a result of increasing external threat to Japan from Western nations, but also due to the growing intellectual movement *sonnō jōi* ('Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians')⁵. This movement saw the emperor as the unifying

centre of the Japanese nation and became an ideological basis to abolish the shogunate.

The Meiji Restoration 'restored' the emperor to a position of power, placing him politically and ideologically at the head of the nation. The new constitution gave him both executive and legislative authority, although this was subject to Diet⁶ approval. However it also declared him 'sacred and inviolable', creating ambiguity about the actual limitations placed on the emperor by the constitution⁷. In practice, this tremendous authority was utilised by politicians and bureaucrats to implement policy in the emperor's name⁸. Increasing emphasis on traditional Confucian values and State Shinto stressed the divinity of the emperor and described him as a 'father' with his subjects as his 'children'.⁹ As these ideas gathered momentum, absolute loyalty to the emperor was inculcated through military service and the education system, making him the focus of nationalistic fervour in the pre-war years.

The link between ultra-nationalism and the emperor's divine authority was seen as a cause of the militaristic and expansionist policies which precipitated the Pacific War and the imperial institution thus became an object of postwar reform. Although the emperor was retained in the constitution drafted by the occupying Allied forces, it was simply as 'a symbol of the State and of the unity of the people'¹⁰. In a separate declaration he renounced his divine status, emphasising that the connection between the emperor and the people did not depend on 'mere legends and myth'¹¹.

The postwar constitution affords the emperor no political power and restricts his role to various official ceremonies and investitures – a role not differing greatly to most emperors prior to the Meiji period¹². In contrast with other modern monarchies, such as the British monarchy, the Japanese emperor does not have even the theoretical power to dissolve parliament or dismiss the prime minister and he is not the official head of state. He does however make state visits overseas and receives foreign dignitaries in order to promote international goodwill¹³. In keeping with the secular nature of the constitution, any religious rites the emperor performs are in a strictly private capacity¹⁴, despite his historically spiritual role.

Moving into the 21st century, the imperial house faces a number of challenges. The most prominent current issue is that of the succession. While Crown Prince Naruhito will succeed his father, the current Emperor (Akihito), no male heir has been born into the imperial household in over 40 years¹⁵. The Crown Prince's only child, Princess Aiko, born in 2001, cannot under the present law accede to the



throne. With little prospect of another child, and the average age of possible male heirs being 59, the oldest hereditary royal dynasty in the world is in danger of extinction. On the one hand, popular opinion supports amendment to the law to allow female accession to the throne¹⁶. This point of view was recently upheld by a panel of experts convened by Prime Minister Koizumi which recommended succession of the first-born child, regardless of gender, and descent through either the male or the female line¹⁷. On the other hand, traditionalists are concerned that the age-old lineage will be broken if descent switches to the female line and have called for other options to be considered, such as reinstating branches of the imperial family which lost their royal status under the postwar reforms.

Underlying this and other issues is a more fundamental question – the very relevancy of the imperial house to modern Japan. Cocooned in tradition and protocol, which both affords extensive privilege and denies certain basic freedoms, royal dynasties such as Japan's imperial family are inclined to appear out of touch with the contemporary world and at odds with a modern democratic society. In spite of this, the emperor is supposed to represent the 'unity of the people' and serve as a model for the nation. While older generations still tend to see value in preserving ancient traditions, it is foreseeable that younger Japanese and future generations will seek to redefine and redirect Japan's Chrysanthemum Throne.

1. Although I use the word 'emperor' throughout this article, it should be noted that there have been a total of eight reigning empresses throughout history.
2. This is the date given in the *Nihonshoki* (an ancient chronicle) but it is historically improbable. ('Emperor Jimmu' in *Kodansha's Encyclopaedia of Japan CD-Rom 1999*, Kodansha International, Tokyo.)
3. International Society for Educational Information, *The Japanese Emperor Through History*, by Sakamoto, T. (trans Horton, M.), Tokyo 1984, pp. 17-18.
4. *ibid.* p. 38.
5. 'Sonnōjōi' in *Kodansha's Encyclopaedia op. cit.*
6. Japan's legislative assembly.
7. 'Meiji Constitution' in *Wikipedia* viewed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_Constitution on 24/11/05.
8. 'Controversies regarding the role of the Emperor of Japan' in *Wikipedia* viewed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_regarding_the_role_of_the_Emperor_of_Japan on 24/11/05.
9. 'State Shinto: 'Kokutai' in *Kodansha's Encyclopaedia op. cit.*
10. Nakamura, M. *The Japanese Monarchy: Ambassador Joseph Grew and the Making of the 'Symbol Emperor System'*, 1931-1991, (trans Bix, H. et al) M. E. Sharpe: New York, 1992 etc.
11. 'Emperor, renunciation of divinity by' in *Kodansha's Encyclopaedia op. cit.*
12. 'Controversies regarding the role of the Emperor of Japan' op. cit.
13. Imperial Household Agency Homepage (English version) viewed at <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/eindex.html> on 16/11/05.
14. 'Controversies regarding the role of the Emperor of Japan' op. cit. etc.
15. 'Japan changes rules for its little princess' in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 27/10/05 p. 10, etc.
16. Public opinion surveys by *The Asahi* (2/2/05), cited in 'Japan's Imperial Succession System and the Council of Learned Persons on the Imperial House Law' 30/6/05, Foreign Press Center Japan, *Japan Brief*, viewed at http://www.fpc.jp/e/mres/japanbrief/jb_559.html on 8/12/05.
17. 'Female monarchs get green light' in *The Japan Times* 25/11/05 viewed at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20051125a1.htm> on 25/11/05, for example.

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