In Name Only:  
Imperial Sovereignty in Early Modern Japan

Kokutai Myth and Historical Consciousness

In the following pages, I reexamine the issue of imperial sovereignty in the early modern (or Tokugawa) period of Japanese history. It is a contentious, emotionally charged issue closely linked to politics and historiography under Japan's modern emperor state. In April 1933, for example, the eminent Tokugawa specialist and Emeritus Professor Mikami Sanji welcomed a new class of Japanese history majors to Tokyo Imperial University. But he warned them that, concerning emperor-related topics, “You’re going to study true history here; just don’t teach it to your pupils after you become teachers.”

The next month, Minister of Education Hatoyama Ichirō dismissed Kyoto Imperial University law professor Takigawa Yūkitora for harboring and disseminating anti-emperor “dangerous thought.”

Mikami’s censorship of “true” history and the government’s persecution of Takigawa in 1933 foreshadowed the Minobe Incident of 1935, which epitomized prewar Japan’s brutal suppression of political dissent, academic free-

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2. On the 1933 Takigawa Incident, see Ōuchi Tsutomu, Nihon no rekishi 24: Fashizumu e no michi (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1967), pp. 360–67. The incident did little to harm Hatoyama’s postwar political career. Though initially purged by SCAP in April 1946, he went on to serve as prime minister, heading three cabinets from December 1954 to December 1956.
dom, and civil liberties in the name of “clarifying our kokutai” along the road to fascism and war.

Most of Japan’s postwar historical profession, having suffered through these and even more unpleasant prewar and wartime experiences, has dedicated itself to refuting kokutai dogmas and myths propagated by the old emperor state. Some of the more prominent of these include belief in: a harmonious family state under direct imperial rule since 660 B.C., widespread popular reverence for the emperor throughout Japan’s history, and the superiority of the Japanese race due to its divine origins. Postwar Marxist historians in particular have been at the forefront of this myth-debunking crusade, striving to prove that emperors did not actually rule and commoners did not truly revere them as deities during most of Japanese history.

As Hattori Shisō explained in 1948, ancient and modern Japan suffered from imperial despotism; but “the emperor system lost real power in between those eras, when it existed ‘in name only,’ as under our new [1947] constitution.” In 1946, Inoue Kiyoshi argued that the imperial institution had always been totally divorced from the people’s daily lives. He provocatively asserted that early Meiji commoners did not even know of the emperor’s existence; they had to be introduced to him and informed of his divine lineage thus: “The emperor is descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and has been master [nushi] of Japan since the world began.”

Leftist Japanese intellectuals today, from academic historians such as Fujiwara Akira to best-seller novelists such as Morimura Seiichi, still subscribe to Inoue’s thesis of commoner ignorance about the emperor.

This postwar Japanese abhorrence to and repudiation of kokutai dogmas and myths is by no means limited to Marxists. In fact, the non-Marxist legal historian Ishii Ryōsuke produced what became postwar historiographic orthodoxy on the emperor system in his 1950 opus, Tennō: Tennō tôchi no shiteki kaimei (The emperor: a historical clarification of imperial rule).

According to Ishii, Japan’s “normal” political system and “true” tradition of government was for emperors not to rule; they actually wielded power only from Nara to early Heian times and from 1868 to 1945. But those eras were anomalies within Japanese history as a whole because they

4. Quoted by Inoue in Tennōsei, pp. 15–16.
witnessed the full-scale importation of alien despotic political models from China and the West. Ishii argued that the emperor had not empowered Tokugawa Ieyasu to govern Japan by naming him shogun in 1603, for no one can delegate powers he does not have. Thus, granting the shogunal title did not constitute an “imperial investiture” of power, as standard explanations held. Instead, Ieyasu empowered himself to rule by achieving military hegemony in the realm. Emperors in the early modern period enjoyed but three prerogatives: to grant court ranks and office titles, select era names, and promulgate the calendar. Yet even these functions meant nothing because they in fact were dictated by Edo.6

The 1962 draft version of Ienaga Saburō’s controversial high-school text, Shin Nihon-shi, expanded on Ishii’s thesis, stating that “emperors lost their position as sovereigns [kunshu]” at the start of the Tokugawa period. But the Ministry of Education censored this passage in 1965, retorting that “emperors did indeed remain sovereigns, though only formally. This is clear because shogun . . . were appointed by the emperor; and shogun, daimyo, and bakufu bannermen were appointed to court office under the ritsuryō system.” 7

But regardless of the Ministry of Education’s stand in this controversy, the scholarly consensus among postwar academic historians in Japan and the West generally upholds Ishii.8 Though revisionism began to appear in the 1980s, most historians would agree that Tokugawa-era emperors closely resemble postwar emperors: In both eras, they were (are) politically impotent “symbols” of the state, not actual ruling sovereigns.9 As Ishii put it, the emperor’s “appointing” of shogun from 1603 to 1867 was an empty formality, just as the emperor’s “appointing” of prime ministers or su-


preme court chief justices has been since 1947 under Article Six of Japan's postwar constitution.\textsuperscript{10}

Without doubt, emperors in early modern Japan were impotent and the imperial court in Kyoto survived due to bakufu largesse. The Tokugawa military regime in Edo exercised de facto sovereign power. The shogun, not the emperor, took responsibility for Japan's defense and foreign relations; the shogun, not the emperor, conferred lands to daimyo and confiscated these from them. Politically conscious Japanese in early to mid-Tokugawa times believed that the emperor and court had proven their administrative incompetence by the time of Emperor Go-Daigo (r. 1318–39). People assumed that only military governments could rule effectively in Japan after centuries of court corruption and decline that had culminated in the disastrous Jōkyū War of 1221 and Kemmu Restoration of 1333–36.

Tokugawa thinkers construed this fall of the imperial house leading to warrior and bakufu supremacy as “historically irreversible.”\textsuperscript{11} As the Chu Hsi Confucian Muro Kyūsō (1658–1734) noted, it ran contrary to reason in nature and human affairs to desire a never-ending imperial dynasty: “No dynasty that has risen to power has ever avoided falling from it, [just as] no man given life has ever escaped death.”\textsuperscript{12} The Sorai School thinkers, Dazai Shundai (1680–1747) and Yamagata Daini (1725–67), called Japan's imperial house a “defunct dynasty” (shōkoku).\textsuperscript{13} According to Kumazawa Banzan (1611–91), “control of the realm will never revert to imperial court nobles; for even if we warriors restored it to them, [their rule] would not last for long.”\textsuperscript{14} Or, as Yamaga Soko (1622–85) put it, “even myriad oxen could not return the imperial court to the power it enjoyed in antiquity.”\textsuperscript{15}

Emperor Go-Mizunoo (r. 1611–29) admitted that much when he la-

\textsuperscript{10} Ishii, Tenno, p. 171. In either era, the emperor lacked (lacks) any power to reject the designated candidate or to substitute someone else for the post in question.


\textsuperscript{15} Takkyō dōmon, in Hirose Yutaka, ed., Yamaga Sokō zenshū shisō hen (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1940), Vol. 12, p. 322.
mented: “In antiquity, imperial edicts commanded obedience in all matters; now Our words have no effect. . . . That is appalling, but it can’t be helped in this degenerate age.”\(^{16}\) The Tokugawa bakufu was being realistic, not punitive, when it decreed in 1615 that the emperor and court confine themselves to cultural, ceremonial, and religious pursuits, for these were the only matters they were competent to handle.

Despite all this persuasive evidence for the emperor’s impotence and political irrelevance, the perennial question in early modern Japanese political history remains unanswered: Why couldn’t this superfluous emperor just be killed off and his anachronistic dynasty eradicated? In other words, how can historians rationally explain why the imperial line remained “unbroken throughout the ages eternal”?\(^{17}\)

At the risk of seeming to exhume abhorrent prewar kokutai myths, I believe part of the answer is that the emperor and his court alone were qualified to perform certain necessary functions in early modern Japan, especially for the shogun and daimyo, but also for other social strata. Many Japanese in that prescientific age perceived the emperor to be their country’s highest deity and ultimate source of divine legitimation. Court ties with Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines became stronger, not weaker, in the Tokugawa period. This sacred authority, which only the emperor and court could bestow, manifested itself in ritsuryō court ranks and titles and in imperial lineages—in “names” that conveyed incontestable prestige throughout the nation.

Modern, and especially Western, historians such as myself tend to miss the significance of these factors. First, we often forget that, despite the vaunted rationalism attributed to some Tokugawa thinkers such as Arai Hakuseki, many highly intelligent people in that period continued to believe in the ability of the emperor and court to invoke the power of gods, buddhas, and spirits. The Kyoto scholar Hori Keizan (1688–1757), who was Motoori Norinaga’s first mentor, is a prime example. Hori declared that even the most powerful warriors and would-be usurpers in Japanese history, such as Taira no Kiyomori and Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, could not help being deferential toward “the master [nushi] of Japan” in Kyoto. This was because they dreaded being branded “an enemy of the emperor”\(^{17}\)

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Amaterasu’s “mysterious and unfathomable” illustrious virtue ensured that a warrior’s demise would be “as fast as a mudslide” if he were so branded. Hori cited the periodic Ise pilgrimages as another manifestation of the “mysterious and unfathomable” bond linking the imperial court and Japanese masses. Here, too, was a warning to any military leader who might dare forget his subject status and become an enemy of the emperor.

Second, and more to the point of this article, we Western historians often fail to appreciate the prestige and significance that imperially granted “names” have had for Japanese people. Thus, we customarily cite Japanese historical figures by their true surnames and best-known given names for reasons of clarity and easy identification. And we dismiss—as *merely* formal or honorific—the imperial lineages, assumed surnames, and court ranks or titles that those figures actually went by. But those formal, honorific names conveyed an important sense of identity and self-esteem to pre- and early modern Japanese. By ignoring or discounting these names, we have overlooked a key reason—though not the sole reason—why Japan’s emperor system has survived and prospered into modern times.

**The Early Modern Bases of Kokutai Myth**

It is undeniable that significant segments of commoner society in early modern Japan knew about and felt affection for emperors. For example, townsfolk throughout the land were beginning to celebrate the Doll Festival (*momo no sekku*) at that time. Each spring, women and girls displayed in their homes dolls of the emperor, empress, and high nobles—all decked out in court dress and lined up on steps according to court rank and office. So even illiterate little commoner girls were starting to yearn for the elegant and enchanted world of Kyoto’s imperial court, the imperial family, and the high nobility. And, we should note, they learned about court ranks and titles. Perhaps because of such childhood experiences, one Kyoto maiden mourned the passing of Emperor Go-Yōzei in 1617 with the verse:

[His Majesty,]
beyond us above the clouds.
In all places under Heaven,
tears of sadness drench our sleeves.

Many early modern Japanese commoners, especially in or near the Kyoto region, held the emperor in religious awe as a “manifest divinity” (genzai no kami). The emperor was deemed to possess magical power and sacerdotal authority. When Sengoku or Tokugawa daimyo signed loyalty oaths to an overlord in return for recognition of their fiefs, they swore by “the great and lesser gods of all the 60-plus provinces in Japan,” of whom the emperor was highest-ranking. Their oaths were not always taken lightly, as can be seen from a 1582 entry in the Tamon’in Nikki. The author, a Kofukuji priest, tells of Oda Nobunaga beheading Takeda Katsuyori, notes an eruption of Mt. Asama, and relates that “recent typhoons, hailstorms, lightning fires, and upside-down rainstorms occurred because the emperor had banished the [protective] deities of those states that opposed Nobunaga.”

The emperor and court had historically prayed to the national deities for the state’s welfare in times of pestilence or crisis, as in the thirteenth century when Japan faced Mongol invaders.

In Tokugawa times, a reigning emperor’s person was believed so sacred that no physician might examine it and no blade might touch it. Shaving, hair-cutting, and nail-clipping were taboos until after abdication; instead, handmaidens bit off the reigning emperor’s hair, beard, and nails. Imperial authorization was needed to deify Tokugawa Ieyasu as “Toshō dai-gongen.” Only the court could confer kami name, status, and court rank; and once conferred, only the court could revoke these. In 1615, Edo petitioned the imperial court to strip Toyotomi Hideyoshi of his deity status and it razed his Hōkoku Shrine in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto. But Kanzawa Teikan (1710–95), a Constable in the bakufu’s Kyoto Magistracy, criticized his superiors of the previous century on the grounds that: “A de-

23. Hora Tomio, Tennō jushinsei no kigen (Tokyo: Azeckura Shobō, 1979), pp. 93–123. The original source for this, however, is somewhat questionable. Hora bases his assertion on a work entitled Tankai written by a samurai named Tsumura Masataka sometime between 1775 and 1795. Tsumura prefaced his work by saying that much of what he records “is hearsay and may be contrary to fact.” Yet both Hora and Fukaya Katsumi argue that these assertions about the reigning emperor are credible. See also Fukaya, “Kinsei no tennō to shogun,” in Rekishi-gaku Kenkyūkai, ed., Köza Nihon rekishi 6: Kinsei 2 (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1985), p. 49.
25. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
ity’s name is decreed by imperial edict. How can a warrior house, based on its own wants, destroy this deity’s shrine, founded by the emperor?” 26

Matters related to the national divinities were a court monopoly, as these had been throughout Japan’s history and remain today.27 Thus, Emperor Ōgimachi (r. 1560–86) could issue an imperial message asking that Western Christian missionaries be expelled from Kyoto in 1565, even though Miyoshi Nagayoshi and the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshiteru had already granted them permission to proselytize in the area.28 In the early modern era, just as in earlier eras, members of the imperial family and court nobility filled high-ranking posts in Japan’s religious orders. Though subject to certain bakufu restrictions, Kyoto continued to issue court ranks to powerful temples and Shintō shrines, and to grant prestigious court titles such as Chief Abbot (zasu or bettō) or Saint (shōnin) to the Buddhist clergy as well as similar titles to Shintō priests. And, just as in earlier eras, the emperor and his court prayed to Japan’s myriad gods and buddhas for the shogun’s health and longevity and for the realm’s peace and prosperity.29

No doubt partly for such reasons, Tokugawa Hidetada and Iemitsu acknowledged “subject” (shin) status toward a “sovereign” (kimi) emperor.30 The imperial palace and its environs in Kyoto constituted a miniature ritsuryō state unto itself, where bakufu authority did not fully penetrate. The sacrosanct Inner Palace remained intact, where “highest nobles” (kugyō) of Ranks One to Three performed state ceremonials and filled nominal government posts such as Ministers of State (daijin); Great, Middle, and Lesser Counsellor (dai-, chū-, shō-nagon); or Court Councillor (sangi).

Kyoto as a whole enjoyed certain special immunities and privileges under Tokugawa law due to its sacred status as “the imperial city.” When Saikaku’s tireless rake, Yonosuke, drove his ox cart into Kyoto, he noted “with grateful reverence” that “you can get away with things not permis-

27. Murakami Shigeiyoishi holds that performance of religious Shintō rituals, not status as a living god, has been the core of the emperor system throughout history; thus, the Occupation made a fatal mistake in simply forcing the emperor to renounce his divinity while retaining his palace rituals. Murakami, Tennō no saishi (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsō, 1977), pp. 1–8 and 217–18.
sible elsewhere because this is His Majesty’s domain.”

Or, as another of Saikaku’s characters reckoned, Awataguchi was part of Kyoto: “The imperial city is venerable, so no one can punish us even if we sit up straight and sing through our noses [when daimyos pass by].” Due to the presence of the emperor and court in Kyoto, commoners could ride vehicles, which was normally forbidden to their status; and they could be insolent rather than cringe in the dirt before their feudal betters. Way-clearers and vertically held spears were forbidden to daimyo retinues in the imperial capital region, and some daimyo found these and other restrictions so irksome that they bypassed the Kyoto area whenever possible.

The emperor and court retained significant prestige in early modern Japanese society; and they enhanced the social standing of daimyo and shogunal houses by granting court ranks, office titles, and noble pedigrees incorporated in personal names or adopted as imperial lineage names. For example, the Chushingura hero Ōishi Yoshio was an Elder (karō) in Akō domain. As such, he could not very well go by just his given name. So he adopted the office title “Kuranosuke,” literally “Assistant in the Bureau of Imperial Palace Warehouses,” which was supposed to come with Junior Sixth Rank Upper Level. Muro Kyūsō explained this peculiar Japanese naming practice as follows in his account of the Chushingura incident, Akō gi jin roku:

According to Japanese custom, . . . persons who hold imperial office are addressed by their office titles. But even those who do not hold office might still assume a title name; some [like Ōishi] adopt the ideographs of an office title. Or, others call themselves according to the order of their birth in relation to siblings.

As Muro here indicates, even people who did not actually hold imperial office in Japan’s ritsuryō government wanted to be addressed as if they did.

Imperial Honors and Pre-Tokugawa Warriors

To understand why title names were coveted for their prestige in Tokugawa times, we must recall that the warrior houses’ climb to socio-

33. See the head notes provided by Teruoka and Higashi in Nihon koten bungaku zenshū 38 for Ichidai otoko, and by Noma in Nihon koten bungaku taikei 48 for Oridome.
political preeminence in Japan was historically tied to the imperial court. Medieval war tales graphically depict how this court-warrior relationship emerged. Let us look at a key episode from the *Hōgen monogatari*. In 1156, the forces of Taira no Kiyomori, who support Emperor Goshirakawa, are attacking Retired Emperor Sutoku’s Shirakawa Palace, defended by Minamoto no Tametomo:

“Who’s defending this gate? Name yourselves! We are men of Ise—Itō Kagetsuna from Furuichi, and Itō Go and Itō Roku. We are underlings of [Kiyomori,] the Provincial Governor of Aki.” On hearing this, Tametomo replied, “Even your Lord Kiyomori is an unworthy opponent. The Heike are descended from Emperor Kashiwabara [Kammu], *but that was long, long ago.* Everyone knows we Genji are only nine generations removed from Emperor Seiwa. I am ‘Pacifier of the West,’ Hachirō Tametomo, eighth son of Tameyoshi, who is ‘Police Lieutenant on the Sixth Avenue.’ He is a grandson of Lord Hachiman [Yoshiie], seven generations removed from Imperial Prince Rokuson [Tsunemoto, the first Minamoto]. If you are called [a trifling name like] ‘Kagetsuna,’ be gone!”

This calling out of one’s name before battle was not what it seems to us moderns: either a quaint ritual formality, or a “formulaic technique of composition” used by chanters to enchance their tale-telling. Instead, naming one’s name had practical significance as a means of status verification—somewhat like the exchanging of name cards by businessmen today. For these early medieval warriors, the only indices of status were noble birth or imperial ranks and titles denoting office-holding in the *ritsuryō* government. The lineage names, or kabane, of Fujiwara, Tachibana, Minamoto, Taira, and, later, Toyotomi, were bestowed by the emperor and court. Tametomo here boasts Minamoto, or Genji, superiority to the Taira, or Heike, based on thicker blue blood. Tametomo was but nine generations removed from Emperor Seiwa; Kiyomori was eleven removed from Emperor Kammu, as everyone knew. So if Kiyomori himself was unfit to engage Tametomo, a mere underling (rōtō) like Kagetsuna was even less worthy.

Naming his name also gave Tametomo a chance to parade all the imperial office titles that the Genji boasted. He took for himself “Pacifier of the West” (chinzei) because of his exploits in Kyushu, though this had not

35. William R. Wilson translates the italicized phrase as “over the years they have degenerated.” See Wilson, tr., *Hōgen monogatari* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1971), p. 36.


been authorized by the court. Tameyoshi, his father, had received the title hōgan, or “Police Lieutenant,” for his years of service to the court on the Sixth Avenue in Kyoto. By contrast, Kagetsuna could, as an Itō, claim descent from the I-se no Fuji-wara. But Itō and his brothers lack court rank and title; they can name only personal names or number names like “Five” (Go) and “Six” (Roku). So the best Itō could do was to announce himself as the follower of someone who did hold a high imperial title—the “Provincial Governor of Aki.” That is why Tametomo snorts, “If you are called [a trifling name like] ‘Kagetsuna,’ be gone!”

One named one’s name also to make sure that the opponent was about equal in status. When an underling challenged a high noble to battle, he had to apologize, “Though I am a nobody, . . . .” For if a nobleman were to fight a lowly nameless opponent, victory brought little glory and defeat brought great shame. Thus in the Heike monogatari, Taira no Noritsune is admonished, “Don’t slaughter so many base foes; you’ll only add to your sins.” That persuaded him to go after the enemy general. Conversely, Minamoto no Yoshinaka is urged to flee for his life, not fight to the death, because: “It would be a ghastly disgrace if you are cut off by the foe and slain by some base underling.”

At lower levels of early medieval society as well, the only avenue of social mobility was to acquire a “name” from the court. A provincial warrior or other local notable would typically travel “up to” Kyoto and serve as a gate-keeper or watchguard at the imperial palace, or (as in Tameyoshi’s case) as a police constable in some part of the capital city, or as a menial in some nobleman’s household. In return, that “person who served” (samurai) received from the imperial court a low-ranking title that he proudly retained for life and named as part of his name—such as “Middle Palace Guard” (bei), “Outer Palace Guard” (emon), or “Assistant” (suke).

To high-ranking Kyoto nobility, of course, a base title name like “Rokubei” would evoke contempt. Yet even this lowly imperial title lent the menial an aura of nobility after he had completed his stint of service at the capital and returned “down to” the provinces. His title name enabled him to contract an advantageous marriage, form alliances with local magnates, occupy privileged shrine or temple posts, and raise his social prestige in other ways. Medieval documents show that the heads of local shrine guilds (miyaza) assumed imperial title names such as “U-majirō,” “Sec-

ond in Charge of the Right Division, Palace Bureau of Horses,” or “Gon-
suke,” “Provisional Assistant.” Some people combined these title names
with imperial lineage names, as in “Gen-nai,” a contraction of “Genji no
U-doneri,” or “Household Servant of the Minamoto.” 41 In later eras, this
practice of adopting imperial title names would be diffused even further
through society, admittedly with some diminution in socio-political value.
But a certain prestige factor remained.

Originally, court rank and office were distinguished, and a strict rank-to-
office concordance was followed under the ritsuryō system. For example,
Minamoto no Tameyoshi’s title of “Police Lieutenant” in the Kebiishichō
was distinct from, but pegged to, Senior Sixth Rank. 42 Initial appointments
and all promotions or demotions of officials were supposed to conform so
that, for example, a Grand Minister of State (Dajōdaijin) would also hold
Senior First Rank. “Highest” nobles were the kugyō, who held Ranks One
through Three. “High” nobles held Ranks Four and Five. “Lesser” nobles
held Ranks Six to Ten. And each noble simultaneously held an office cor-
responding to his rank. The key cut-off points, then, were Ranks Three
and Five.

An imperial audience in the Courtiers’ Hall of the Inner Palace, the
honor known as shōden, was a privilege reserved for the highest and high
nobility, collectively called “the Heavenly Exalted” (tenjōbito). Minamoto
no Yoshie (1039–1106), later revered as the tutelary deity of all warriors,
was the first member of his class to win this privilege. But first he had to
achieve the meritorious exploit of quelling revolts on Japan’s northeastern
frontier. Naturally, the high and highest nobles bitterly opposed allowing
an imperial audience to anyone of such mean status, and they hatched plots
to thwart this encroachment on their position at court. 43 But warriors and
commoners in the following centuries would consider this privilege of im-
perial audience at the Inner Palace one of the greatest possible honors that
bestowed immense social prestige.

This craving for the prestige derived from court rank and office and
from a real or pseudo blood link with the imperial house intensified over
time among warriors, as these honors gradually became accessible to those
in the lower strata of society. Up through the Kamakura era, the court no-

41. Sonobe Toshiki, “Chūsei sonraku ni okeru miyaza tōyaku to mimun,” in Nihonshi
kenkyū, No. 325 (September 1989), pp. 47–82. “U-doneri” is a contraction of “uchi-doneri,”
hence, the “nai.”

42. Wada Hidematsu (Tokoro Isao, ed.), Shintei kanshoku yōkai (Tokyo: Kōdansha
Bunko, 1983), pp. 150–53. First published in 1902 and since revised, this work remains the
best general introduction to Japanese court ranks and titles.

43. For opposition to Minamoto no Yoshiie’s imperial audience in 1078, see the Chūyōki
diary entry by Nakamikado no Munetada quoted in Takeuchi Rizo, Nihon no rekishi 6: Bushi
bility bound warriors to low rank. But not only that, Kamakura-era warriors themselves remained within their humble limits for fear of divine retribution. Given the pervasive fear of gods and buddhas characterizing the early medieval era, warriors thought it prudent to heed the *Heike monogatari*’s admonition that “the gods permit no irreverent ambitions” (hirei). Many of them truly believed that the Taira clan fell because Kiyomori ignored Shigemori’s plea to “observe the reverent decorum [reigi] that precludes disobeying an imperial edict.” As the Priest Saikō charged, Kiyomori had “overstepped his family’s bounds by advancing to [Rank One and] the post of Grand Minister of State.”

Relatively few Kamakura-era warriors took court rank and office title, and both bakufu and court authorization were needed for them to do so. Their ranks were low, mainly Rank Six or below, and their offices were limited to military, not civil, posts. The Hōjō regents, for instance, contented themselves with Junior Fourth Rank. Even the first shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo accepted nothing higher than Junior Third Rank and the military post “Major Captain in the Right Division, Imperial Palace Guard” (udaisho). But nevertheless, Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293–1354) argued that the Minamoto fell by 1219, after but three generations, because of Yoritomo’s impudent craving for a high court rank forbidden to his status.

By Muromachi and Sengoku times, however, the warrior class had lost many of its earlier inhibitions, so rank- and title-inflation became more acute. It is in this sense, then, that the age was characterized by “the lowly overcoming the exalted,” or gekokujō. Upstart warriors directly petitioned the court for high rank and for prestigious civil offices, not just military posts which were their due. Thus, Mōri Motonari (1497–1571) in 1560 acquired the title “Master of the Imperial Palace Kitchen,” or Daizen no daibu. And until the Meiji Restoration, Choshu’s daimyo would be addressed as “Daizen-dono.” Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, after becoming Chief

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44. For hirei, see Takagi et al. eds., *Nihon koten bungaku taikei 32: Heike monogatari jō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1959), p. 122, in the context of Fujiwara no Narichika’s coveting of high rank; and also p. 172, in the context of Kiyomori’s disrespect for emperor Goshirakawa. For reigi in Shigemori’s admonition, see ibid., p. 172. This indicates that in medieval Japan, the Chinese concept of *li* meant specifically observing one’s inferior status. For Saikō’s indictment of Kiyomori, see ibid., p. 155; and also, Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida, tr., *The Tale of the Heike* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 92.


(chōja) of the Genji, deprived the Nakano and Kuga court families of their titles, “Chief Abbot [bettō] of the Junna and Shōgaku Monasteries.” Yoshimitsu climbed to the pinnacle of success—Grand Minister of State with Senior First Rank. But he, after all, was still an authentic Minamoto descendant of Emperor Seiwa. By contrast, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and their ilk bought or forged genealogies to establish the imperial lineages needed for high rank and office. Exemplifying gekokujo at its sublime worst, Ieyasu engaged in dextrous genealogical acrobatics to claim descent from both the Fujiwara and Minamoto as circumstances required.47

Some daimyo, such as Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), did return their higher-level ranks or titles to the court; yet this should be seen as a genuine act of deference rather than an attempt to create their own legitimacy apart from the imperial court.48 Many of Hideyoshi’s daimyo vassals attained Ranks Two and Three and corresponding Great and Middle Counsellor status; they included Tokugawa, Maeda, Ukita, Mōri, Uesugi, Date, and Shimazu. By 1588, as many as 23 daimyo had gained Junior Fourth Rank Lower Level with Imperial Court Chamberlain (jiju) status. In that year, they were presented before Emperor Go-Yōzei at Hideyoshi’s Jurakutei Castle, where he extracted oaths of fealty from them in exchange for this honor of an imperial audience.49

**Imperial Honors and Tokugawa Daimyo**

Tokugawa Ieyasu, then, was but one of many equally high-ranking daimyo in 1600; and after his victory at Sekigahara he naturally wanted to elevate his house above his daimyo rivals. But he could not take away the high court ranks and titles already granted to them. This issue was resolved to a large extent in 1614–15, when Ieyasu crushed the Toyotomi-led forces at Osaka. That eliminated many of his high-ranking rivals and also gave him an excuse for confiscating, reducing, or relocating fiefs held by those

48. Cf. Herman Ooms, Tokugawa Ideology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 28–29 and 168–69. This warrior act of returning rank or title goes back to Minamoto no Tameyoshi and should not be seen as a rejection of imperial honor itself. These daimyo did not return all of their ranks or titles; they retained lower-level ones deemed more suited to warrior houses.
rivals who remained. But he, Hidetada, and Iemitsu also overhauled the existing ritsuryō system of imperial honors in a manner advantageous to the Tokugawa family.

First, they cut off other daimyo from Kyoto by creating a bakufu monopoly on the right to petition for prestigious court ranks and titles, which all daimyo continued to covet. Second, these three shogun elevated Tokugawa status relative to other daimyo in the land by granting high rank to the newly created Tokugawa shimpan. The traditional ritsuryō rank and title system was not a crusty relic that the shogun had to tolerate and work around. Instead, they shrewdly exploited it to consolidate their power over the realm.50

In 1606, Edo first ordered that warriors could gain court rank and title only by bakufu petition. Later, in 1611 and 1615, the bakufu decreed that warriors be deleted from imperial court rosters: “Offices and ranks for warriors are to be apart from [similar] court offices for nobles.” This meant that warriors and courtiers could hold ranks of the same number (e.g., junior third lower level) and titles of the same name (e.g., Middle Counsellor). But they did so under different jurisdictions: Edo and Kyoto.51

This decree did not create a totally separate set of merit ranks solely for warriors, as Ogyū Sorai and Arai Hakuseki would later propose.52 But it did end the right of other daimyo to petition for rank and title directly; and because it assumed that Edo could meddle in court affairs or punish court nobles at will, nothing more seemed necessary. Thereafter, the court would


find it virtually impossible to refuse a bakufu petition either to grant or re-voke imperial rank and title. Until 1865, as we shall see, the most that Kyoto could do in protest against a bakufu petition was to stall; or, in an extreme case, the emperor could threaten to abdicate. But neither tactic was a very effective means of asserting imperial political will.

This calculated shuffling of daimyo house-rankings to maximize Tokugawa prestige was largely completed by the end of Ietsuna’s shogunal reign in 1680. Historians do not agree in all particulars about who held which ranks, mainly because changes occurred in the system over time. But such qualifications aside, daimyo house-rankings became indexed to court rank and title roughly as follows.

Only Tokugawa shogun could rise to Ranks Two and One, but Rank One was normally granted posthumously. The shogun were strongly conscious of themselves as heads of the nation’s supreme warrior house, and they wished to differentiate themselves from Taira no Kiyomori and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who had gone on to become courtiers. So they deferred to the court by declining to claim Rank One with Grand Minister of State status while alive. Instead, they claimed lesser court titles—deemed appropriate to warrior houses—that their putative Minamoto forebears, Minamoto no Yoritomo and Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, had held. Thus, each shogunal heir received the titles “Chief Abbot of the Junna and Shōgaku Monasteries” and “Major Captain in the Right Division, Imperial Palace Guard,” which went with Minister of the Right status. These were just as important as the title “shogun,” which traditionally went to the head of Japan’s warrior houses (buke no tōryō). It is in this context, then, that we must analyze disputes among historians about whether or not the emperor’s granting of the shogunal title constituted an “investiture” of power to Tokugawa rulers.

The newly created Tokugawa shimpan of Kii, Owari, Mito, and (in the eighteenth century) Hitotsubashi, Tayasu, and Shimizu were permitted promotion to Ranks Two and Three. As such, the Tokugawa main and branch families displaced powerful tozama rivals such as Maeda, Shimazu, Mōri, and Date, who had enjoyed Ranks Two and Three under Hideyoshi. These powerful castle-holding tozama were permitted to attain Rank Four at most under the new order, though Maeda was allowed occasional promotion to Junior Third Rank.

Key bakufu officials—such as the tairō and rōju, Keepers of Osaka Castle, Kyoto Deputies, or Masters of Court Ceremonial—held Junior Fourth Rank Lower Level and the titles Imperial Court Chamberlain (jiju)

53. Only one Tokugawa shogun received Rank One while alive: Ienari (r. 1787–1837).
or Minor Captain in the Imperial Palace Guard (shōshō). This meant that those fudai daimyo or direct Tokugawa vassals who conducted high-level bakufu administration enjoyed a lower court rank and title than powerful tozama rivals, such as Date, Maeda, Shimazu, and Mōri. Finally, the great majority of daimyo, those with small domains lacking castles or with low fief yields, held Rank Five. Ranks and titles constantly reminded each daimyo of his proper place in the socio-political hierarchy, for he had to use these imperial honorifics whenever he introduced himself to and spoke with or about others, or whenever he signed or addressed documents.

Thus, the eight Tokugawa main and collateral houses, plus Maeda, monopolized warrior kugyō status as “highest” nobility. The death of their daimyo was denoted by the honorific term kōkyō; lesser-ranking daimyo had to settle for sokkyo. Thus the main cut-off point in warrior nobility under the Tokugawa system was Lower Fourth Rank with Imperial Court Chamberlain (jijū) status; anyone below, even a daimyo, did not count for much. A daimyo of Rank Four or above traveled “up to” Kyoto to receive his titles directly from the court. A daimyo of Rank Five or below had to receive these through the bakufu’s Master of Court Ceremonial (kōke).

By its very nature, the post of Imperial Court Chamberlain assumed the privilege of imperial audience in the Inner Palace; that is why it had always been a high civil post not open to warriors in ancient and medieval times. But as Kaiho Seiryō (1755–1817) noted in 1806, high bakufu officials such as rōju, and especially the Kyoto Deputy, asserted that they required this prestigious rank and title because their duties entailed imperial audiences. So bakufu officials saw themselves as carrying on certain key elements of the old ritsuryō bureaucratic order. Finally, advancing from Rank Five to Four meant that a daimyo left the Hall of Willows audience room in Edo Castle for the more esteemed Great Chamber.

This daimyo house-ranking system became fixed by about 1680, with Hitotsubashi, Shimizu, and Tayasu added in the next century. Each daimyo...
would begin at the rank prescribed for his house. A normal one-notch promotion usually took place when he reached his majority; another, perhaps, after he died. Meanwhile, his heir was starting the process anew at the rank originally prescribed for that house. Any non-regular promotions apart from the above required special justification, and these too were limited to one generation. For example, the bakufu in 1710 and 1713 petitioned the imperial court to promote Satsuma’s Shimazu Yoshitaka to Senior Fourth Rank as a reward for his meritorious exploit in bringing Ryūkyū emissaries to attend shogunal accession ceremonies at Edo Castle.57

Though only temporary, such extraordinary promotions were objects of intense rivalry among powerful daimyo, as between Date and Shimazu over Senior Fourth Rank. Daimyo craved promotion because status distinctions among them—their types of dress, houses, and carriages; their audience room in Edo Castle; their procession accoutrements; their spoken and written forms of address; even their handwriting and envelope-folding styles—all varied with court rank and title.

Nambu Shigenobu is a case in point. Although the Nambu house originally held Rank Four, it suffered demotion to Rank Five as punishment for lacking an heir. But at Tokugawa Ietsuna’s 1682 memorial service, a sudden shower threatened to douse Shogun Tsunayoshi—until Shigenobu leapt to the rescue with an umbrella. Tsunayoshi rewarded this meritorious exploit by petitioning to restore Rank Four; and Nambu shed tears of gratitude, swearing “to serve faithfully to repay this great blessing.” He sent an envoy to Kyoto to receive his rank from the court and duly presented 3,000 ryō in “thank you” monies. Nambu’s fief yield remained at 80,000 koku. But he gladly accepted the military corvée requirement for a 100,000 koku daimyo—a 25 per cent increase entailed by his new rank. This promotion was a matter of great pride to the Nambu housemen as well, for they construed it as public recognition that they were conducting virtuous government in their domain.58

Whenever a regular or extraordinary promotion took place, the daimyo in question provided “thank you” monies to the rōju in Edo and to court nobles in Kyoto. The amounts were more or less agreed on, as with Japanese gift-giving on special occasions today. But the rōju, after all, had to be persuaded to petition on a certain daimyo’s behalf, so they were quite open to bribery, as in the case of Sanada Yukihiro. In 1783, Sanada reportedly had to pay the rōju five to six times more money than Matsudaira Sadanobu paid for the same court rank.59 The imperial family and court

nobles in Kyoto, too, profited handsomely from such thanksgiving at promotion time, and much of their income in the early modern era no doubt came from such concealed sources. Unlike the daimyo, they bore no outlays for alternate attendance or corvée duty, so they may have been less ground down by poverty than we usually assume.60

Imperial court ranks and titles were of prime importance because these indicated gradations of intra- and inter-class status recognized throughout Japan. Of course, court rank and title were not the only measures of daimyo status in the early modern period. Indeed, there were numerous similar indices of prestige. Imperial rank and title were linked with these other status indicators, such as domain size, castle-holding, fief yield, use of the Tokugawa’s old “Matsudaira” surname, the right to shogunal audiences, and blood ties to the shogunal house. Thus, Maeda not only boasted the highest court rank among non-Tokugawa castle-holding daimyo, he also had the nation’s largest single-domain fief yield of just over 1.2 million koku and enjoyed close marriage ties to the shogunal house.

But as Matsudaira Hideharu and (much earlier) Kida Sadakichi have stressed, court rank and title took precedence over other status indicators. That explains why Kira Yoshinaka could treat Asano Naganori with utter contempt in the Akō (or Chushingura) Incident. Asano, a 53,000-koku castle-holding daimyo, held Junior Fifth Rank Lower Level. Kira held neither a castle nor a domain and was not a daimyo, but he boasted Junior Fourth Rank and the court title of Minor Captain in the Imperial Palace Guard plus the bakufu post of Master of Court Ceremonial. So Kira’s higher court rank and title permitted him to bully subordinates with impunity, especially when his expertise in court ritual was needed.61

The shogunal family granted its old Matsudaira surname (and pseudo-Minamoto lineage) to certain powerful tozama in addition to Tokugawa blood relatives and vassals, and these families combined it with imperial office titles in their names. For example, the former vassals of Hideyoshi, Shimazu Tadatsune and Date Masamune, had previously gone by the names “Hashiba [i.e., Toyotomi] Shōshō” and “Hashiba Echizen.” But after destroying the Toyotomi, leyasu granted the Matsudaira surname to these two tozama and decreed that they use it, not their real surnames, in public.62 Thus, the Bakumatsu figures whom we modern historians cite as

62. Fukuzawa Yukichi noted that the Hosokawa were reportedly exceptional in having declined to use the Matsudaira surname. See Bummeiron no gairyaku in Fukuzawa Yukichi
Shimazu Nariakira and Date Yoshikuni actually were addressed at that time as “Matsudaira Satsuma no kami” and “Matsudaira Mutsu no kami,” literally, “Provincial Governors of Satsuma and Mutsu,” usually without their given names.63 This held for their vassals too: a Date retainer announced himself as “XX, Houseman of Provincial Governor of Mutsu, Matsudaira” (but a daimyo’s title usually did not correspond to his domain’s geographic location). Choshu’s Mōri Takachika was called “Matsudaira Daizen no daibu,” or “Master of the Imperial Palace Kitchen, Matsudaira” from 1837, when he received Junior Fourth Rank Lower Level. But after the 1864 Forbidden Gate Incident, Edo punished Taka-chika by rescinding his Matsudaira surname and making the imperial court take away his rank, though he did remain Master of the Imperial Palace Kitchen.64

However, the court turned anti-bakufu in 1865. Supported by Choshu and sensing an upsurge in samurai loyalty, it punished the rōju Abe Masato and Matsumae Takahiro, who had opened Hyogo to Westerners despite imperial protests. Emperor Kōmei stripped Abe and Matsumae of their court ranks and provincial-governor titles of Bungo no kami and Izu no kami; and he ordered Edo to consign them to retirement in their home domains. Bakufu officials in Osaka were appalled, saying: “for the imperial court to dismiss Edo officials directly is unprecedented; clearly, this is oppression toward the bakufu.” 65 And they were right. Kōmei’s order flouted Tokugawa decrees, enforced since 1611, stipulating that warrior ranks and titles were beyond Kyoto’s jurisdiction.

Here was a powerful new sanction the court could apply in asserting its political will and authority. What the emperor and court had always granted involuntarily, they now presumed to revoke as they saw fit. From that point on, warrior court ranks and titles became more than just nominal


64. Tanabe Ta’ichi, Bakumatsu gaikodan II (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1966), p. 223, endnote by the editor, Sakata Seiichi. Takachika had also been granted one kanji from the shogun’s name Ieyoshi, and so had been called Yoshichika. The bakufu took away this honor as well, and Mōri therefore went back to being Mōri Daizen no Daibu Taka-chika.

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and formalistic. Edo had knuckled under to imperial will, and a precedent was set for Tokugawa Yoshinobu to return his shogunal and other titles to the court in 1867.

**Imperial Honors and Tokugawa Commoners**

Not only the daimyo and samurai but classes below them as well elevated their social prestige by gaining court rank and title and by claiming fictive blood ties with the imperial house, especially from the Genroku era (1688–1703) onward. In 1708, the puppeteer Kobayashi Shinsuke declared:

A man named Jirōbei was the first jōruri chanter to acquire an imperial provincial-government title [zuryō], that of Senior Clerk in the Kawachi Provincial Government. . . . So puppet play chanters are not of the despised classes. Proof for this is that they are summoned to the imperial court and are awarded imperial provincial governorships.67

Tokugawa entertainers retained the stigma of baseness attached to their medieval shokunin forebears, who, unlike other non-nobles and non-warriors of that age, had neither engaged in agriculture nor lived in fixed settlements. To overcome lingering social discrimination, they acquired or claimed to have acquired ritsuryō titles from the imperial court. One of those most commonly claimed was “Secretary (jō) in the Provincial Government of XX,” and it was often combined with “-dayū,” a title collectively designating holders of the first to fifth court ranks. Jōruri chanters, Kabuki actors, “courtesans” in the gay quarters, sumō wrestlers, and other entertainers incorporated these honorific titles in their names to become, for example, Takemoto Harima no jō Gi-dayū.

Virtually all shokunin came to reside in towns during the Tokugawa period, so we should perhaps think of these specialist professionals as “craftmasters.” They included jōruri chanters, blind usurers, puppeteers, tub- and barrel-makers, metal-smiths, mirror-casters, hunters, woodcarvers, carpenters, hairdressers, confectioners, tea-whisk makers, physi-


cians, yin-yang diviners, sumō wrestlers, and dozens of others. Some of these shokunin suffered discrimination as belonging to “despised,” if not “outcaste,” classes. Like the daimyo, many shokunin linked their genealogies to royal personages in antiquity. Katsura-me, or itinerant female merchants cum prostitutes, for example, traced their lineage back to the mythical Empress Jingu, who supposedly conquered Korea in the third century. Hunters forged genealogies to claim descent from Fujiwara no Kamatari (614–69), or Emperor Kōbun (r. 671–72), or the non-existent “Emperor Kōrei.” The affirmation of such lower-class social climbing by laying false claim to imperial lineages reached extremes in Getsujindō, a Genroku novelist who had one of his protagonists declare: “When all is said and done, we all have identical pedigrees; for, if you go back far enough, who is not descended from Amaterasu?”

Not all classes of early modern townsmen made such regal claims. As noted earlier, there were multiple structures of prestige in Tokugawa Japan. Townsmen organized in kabu nakama and other bakufu-sponsored trade associations were more likely to seek privilege and protection under the new bakuhan order rather than the hollow ritsuryō order, especially early in the period. Some of these merchants may have denigrated as anachronistic the prestige that came with imperial pedigrees or court ranks, and may have defined wealth as the best legitimizer of status. They might declare: “Money determines a merchant’s pedigree. Even if a townsman boasts Fujiwara lineage, and genealogical records trace him to Kamatari, he rates lower than a monkey-trainer if he is poor.” These are the merchants often cited as Tokugawa Japan’s “incipient bourgeoisie.” But their pride and spirit of independence as self-made men were short-lived. By the 1720s and 1730s, these townsmen seem to have resigned themselves to their inferior lot in life beneath the daimyo and samurai under the existing order.

Instead, it was the older shokunin families—those who claimed to have been established in their professions since medieval times—who tended to exploit imperial symbols in order to enhance their social standing. And

72. See Miyazawa, “Genroku bunka no seishin kōzō,” p. 244. He holds that after this eighteenth-century status order became rigid by the 1720s and 1730s, the main rationale Tokugawa townsmen used to claim social equality was Getsujindō’s, cited above: that all Japanese were descended from Amaterasu.
shokunin who belonged to the so-called despised classes were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the old *ritsuryō* system of honors. Just as Hideyoshi and Ieyasu had done earlier, the heads of these groups established institutional links with court families and fictive blood ties with the imperial house or high Kyoto nobility. They set up nationwide guilds centered on imperial lineages and on court ranks and titles, and their organizations closely resembled the daimyo status hierarchy. These groups further argued that imperial symbols of legitimization guaranteed them monopolies in their trades and other legal privileges and immunities.  

For example, in addition to the entertainers and Katsura-me noted above, blind usurers were another class who suffered discrimination in early modern Japan. So the head of the blind usurers’ guild forged genealogical records showing descent from “Prince Amayo, the blind son of Emperor Kōkō” (r. 884–87). According to these records, Kōkō granted Amayo the tax tribute from three Kyushu provinces which was to be distributed among the blind in the capital region. That practice supposedly ended some centuries later. But in return for this lost tribute, blind men in Japan claimed to have gained the privilege of receiving six court ranks: *kengyō*, *bettō*, *kōtō*, *zatō*, *ichina*, and *han*. Each of these ranks was divided into several levels, for a total of 73 grades in all.

The blind men argued that their guild’s commercial ventures enjoyed imperial sanction because the interest accruing from monies they lent went to pay for court ranks granted by the Great Counsellor Kuga family in Kyoto. Due to the august majesty that their ranks and divine lineage accorded, these usurers felt free to threaten or publicly humiliate a daimyo or samurai who failed to repay his loan. Not content with that, they tried to exploit this imperial awe so as to exempt themselves from prosecution after violating *bakufu* or domain laws against racketeering, gambling, and other forms of wrongdoing.  

Their impudence prompted the sardonic and passionately pro-*bakufu* Buyō Inshi (literally “the Recluse of South Musashi”) to decry: “Imperial court rank is a device for making all people insolent, not just clerics and blind men; it is a poison that ruins men and plunders society.”  

In the early seventeenth century, Edo cut daimyō off from Kyoto in order to prevent them from obtaining ranks and titles directly from the im-

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Imperial court; and in the eighteenth century, Edo tried to cut townsmen off from Kyoto for similar reasons. Beginning in 1707, the bakufu ordered that title names granted to townsmen be limited to one generation and forbade the transfer of these imperial honors to other persons. In 1767, Edo issued a nationwide edict that required public registration of title names and urged all domains to issue similar edicts; and two years later, 521 names were listed for the city of Edo. In 1770, the bakufu required that commoners obtain official consent before applying for court titles. By the nineteenth century, however, the situation was clearly out of hand. In addition to legitimate title names actually granted by the court, so many of these were falsely assumed that further attempts to control or restrict the practice were abandoned as futile.76

Emperors appear in 33 of Chikamatsu’s historical plays, which literary and cultural historians label “tennō dramas.”77 Each play in the genre opens with praise for virtuous imperial reigns of bygone eras. In one, Yōmei tennō shokunin kagami (1705), the recently deceased “Thirty-first Emperor Bidatsu” (r. 572–85) is lauded for his “august benevolence” in having granted imperial provincial-office titles (zuryō) to craftmasters in various professions. Out of reverent gratitude, the shokunin back his chosen heir in the ensuing succession struggle. Armed with the tools of their crafts and led by “Kumahei the tub-maker,” they do battle against the wicked Prince Yamabiko in support of the good Prince Toyohi-kazan, who accedes as Emperor Yōmei due to their valorous exploits.78

Chikamatsu’s story is fictional and full of anachronisms, such as placing Genroku-era shokunin in a sixth-century setting and having them stage an uchikowashi-style uprising. But this play and his other popular tennō dramas raise the possibility that certain segments of eighteenth-century Japanese townsfolk, especially in the Kyoto-Osaka region, yearned after the imperial virtue supposedly dispensed in antiquity, and that these commoners might imagine themselves forming illegal militia-like political bands to fight for a loyalist cause.

Imperial Honors: The Modern Transformation

Thus, in early modern Japan, the emperor and court retained sovereign authority in certain key respects. The emperor’s purportedly divine status permitted him and his court to award nationally recognized honors in the

form of imperial ranks, office titles, and pseudo-lineages that were incorporated in personal "names." Certainly by Bakumatsu times, use of the Matsudaira surname was seen as having created fictive blue-blood ties between the imperial and court families, shogunal house, bakufu bannermen, and certain fudai and tozama daimyo. This was because the Matsudaira-Tokugawa claimed direct descent from Emperor Seiwa and, by extension, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu who had founded the imperial line.

The shogunal house reinforced its blue-blood link in every generation from Iemitsu onward by procuring wives and consorts from the imperial family or high-ranking Kyoto nobility. The Tokugawa shimpan and tozama daimyo followed this example. As W. G. Beasley notes, Mito (Tokugawa) Nariaki counted among his in-laws the Nijō and Takatsukasa court families, the Hitotsubashi Collateral House, and the Tottori, Okayama, Uwajima, and Sendai daimyo. Such daimyo-courtier marriage and adoption ties cut across tozama and shogunal house lines and helped create a feeling of imperial kinship among members of Japan's upper classes. That strengthened Bakumatsu proto-nationalism and laid socio-political bases for fostering the kokutai myth of a divinely descended, extended-family state in modern Japan.

The bases for this family state were not limited to the ruling classes, though. Before the Dawn, based on the life of Shimazaki Tōson's father, shows that this same feeling of racial kinship—centered on real or fictive imperial blood ties—also extended to the gōnō class in Japan's countryside. When Yamagami Shichirōzaemon of Sagami, a total stranger, chanced to visit the Aoyama (Shimazaki) residence in Shinano, he noted that the two households boasted identical family crests and knew immediately that they shared a common ancestor. Their genealogical records showed that the Yamagami and Aoyama both were descended from the Miura of Sagami, who, in turn, stemmed from Taira no Yoshishige, four generations removed from Emperor Kammu. It is also worth noting that, as late as the mid-nineteenth century, personal names suffixed by the court-title "-dayū,"
such as Kudayū, were held by “only two people in the eleven post stations of Kiso,” and that this rare honor sparked “dayū-conceit” (dayū jiman) in those who claimed it.  

Japanese peasants, especially those living in remote rural areas far from Kyoto, may not have known much about the emperor as a person or about his divine lineage at the time of the Restoration—as Inoue Kiyoshi has argued. But peasants did know about the imperial ranks and titles that the emperor and court bestowed. As Inoue himself asserts, Satsuma and Choshu forces pacifying the Tohoku region in 1869 had to introduce the emperor to his subjects and inform them of his pedigree in these terms: “The emperor is descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and has been master [nushi] of Japan since the world began.” But, to explain this notion of “master” or “sovereign,” the Sat-Cho forces had to link that distant emperor with something that a Tohoku peasant was already familiar with. So they continued: “Kami in all provinces have shrines with ranks such as Senior First Rank; these ranks are all granted by the emperor.”

Court ranks and titles, plus imperial lineages, served as indices of exaltedness recognized throughout the nation, both within and between classes. As Saikaku put it, “becoming a success in life” (shusse) entailed “extraordinary service to one’s lord to acquire court rank.” Honorific, imperially granted “names” assumed great significance under the Tokugawa system of rigid and all-pervading status distinctions in life. For daimyo and warriors, earning a name was one of the few ways left to enhance peer prestige because battlefield exploits were impossible in an era of peace. For certain groups of commoners, a name guaranteed a monopoly on one’s craft and legal immunities from bakufu or domain law. And for some of the outcaste or “despised” classes, a name helped one to overcome discriminatory social stigmas. Being famous (yūmei) meant to “have a name” granted, if only formally, by the emperor and court.

By and large, the Edo bakufu exploited to its own advantage the emperor’s function of dispensing national honors through such names. But after 1868, Japan’s system of court ranks and office titles was overhauled to benefit the nation’s new rulers, just as it had been in the seventeenth century. In fact, the Meiji state expanded this system of imperially granted honors and made it more rational. The new regime abolished the separate...
category of noble ranks and titles for warriors that the bakufu had decreed in 1611; all ranks and titles for Japanese subjects again came under direct imperial court control.

Court ranks were not only retained, they were awarded posthumously to persons who had achieved meritorious exploits leading to the Restoration—as chronicled in Zōi shokenden. In 1884, the old ritsuryō titles such as Echizen no kami or Harima no jō were “modernized,” or replaced by the European peerage titles of prince, marquis, count, viscount, and baron. Also, a system of military and civil decorations (kunshō) was introduced that enabled the emperor to honor loyal or meritorious subjects. Many Restoration leaders of low samurai birth gloried in their early Meiji government posts, such as Court Councillor (sangi), or in their newly won court ranks, such as Senior Fourth, that only the most powerful tozama daimyo had been privileged to hold a few years before.86

The new system of imperial honors was instituted at the local level too, for early Meiji provincial governors received Junior Fourth Rank.87 This equaled the rank that important bakufu officials had enjoyed, and it surpassed that which most daimyo had held. A five-tiered system of Western-style peerage titles came into being in 1884, as noted above. Who received which title was largely determined by former fief yields and house rankings; but this new form of imperial honors also enabled semi-peasants like Itō Hirobumi to present themselves as “Prince Itō.” Members of the hereditary peerage were appointed by the emperor, not elected by the people, and the House of Peers went on to become a “rampart of the Imperial House.”88 Because court rank and office title denoted high government status, they in effect continued to be prerequisites for conducting diplomacy on behalf of the Japanese state. In 1711, Arai Hakuseki had to gain Junior Fifth Rank in order to meet publicly with Korean envoys; in 1870, Mori Arinori had to recover Junior Fifth Rank in order to become Chargé d’Affairs in Japan’s Washington Legation.89

In the eighteenth century, would-be bakufu reformers such as Arai Hakuseki, Ogyū Sorai, and Dazai Shundai had argued that the Tokugawa shogun should make himself “King of Japan” in name as well as fact. As they presciently realized, the ritsuryō system of imperial court ranks and

86. Kodama, Daimyō, pp. 367–69.
89. Nakai, Shogunal Politics, p. 43; Ivan Parker Hall, Mori Arinori (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 151. Mori had been stripped of his rank and office in 1869 as punishment for having petitioned for legislation to take away the daimyo and samurai right to bear two swords.
office titles, though purely nominal, implied that sovereignty in Japan lay with Kyoto, and so might someday inspire loyalist opposition to the Edo regime. (But Arai Hakuseki himself had accepted these imperial honors.) As the Tokugawa Collateral, Kii Yoshimichi (1689–1713), reportedly declared:

All warriors in the realm today honor the shogunal family as their sovereign [shukun], but in truth that is not right. Rank and office title come from the imperial court. To be called “Minamoto no Ason, Middle Counsellor with Junior Third Rank,” means that one is a subject [shin] of the court. That is why Mito Mitsukuni said, “The emperor is my sovereign; the shogun is my commander.” Should a war break out—like the Hōgen, Heiji, Jōkyū, or Genkō [pitting court against bakufu]—and should the court call for troops, we ought to join.90

Later, in 1759, Yamagata Daini would note: “Rank and stipend come from different sources. . . . [Kyoto] bestows honors but is poor, [Edo] dispenses wealth but enjoys no prestige. And because people cannot gain both, authority is divided. Which side should we adhere to? One must be sovereign, and the other, subject.”91 The early eighteenth century sentiments voiced by Tokugawa Collaterals Mito Mitsukuni and Kii Yoshimichi spread to tozama daimyo such as Matsuura Seizan (1760–1841) later in the century. By the Kansei era (1789–1800), Matsuura too asserted that he was a subject of the imperial court and would side with it, not the bakufu, if the two should become enemies.92

This potential for divided loyalties and for opposition to the bakufu increased greatly with the appearance of scholars of Native Learning such as Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), and their followers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, neither thinker argued that warrior rule should or could be overthrown in order to restore imperial government. To the contrary, both affirmed Tokugawa rule as being in accord with the will of the gods. They, no less than Tokugawa Confucian thinkers, assumed that imperial court decline leading to bakufu rule was historically irreversible. But their ideas increased popular reverence for the emperor and court in other ways.

Hirata Atsutane, for example, asserted that “we are all the emperor’s children; but to have received an imperial lineage name such as Minamoto or Taira means that you are a direct vassal.” 93 Between such pedigreed daimyo and their housemen, “lord-vassal relations may also be created privately; but there is only one deity sovereign in our imperial land—the emperor.” 94 Hirata emphasized the importance of honoring his teachers, so he called them by court title and ancient lineage name: Kada no Sukune Azumamaro, Kamo no Agatanushi Mabuchi, and Taira no Asomi Motoori no Norinaga. 95 Both Norinaga and Atsutane signed their works using these titles. And Atsutane took these honorifics farther, by claiming that all Japanese had imperial lineage names, though they might not know what these were:

Every Japanese has a lineage name originally bestowed by an emperor—such as Minamoto, Taira, Fujiwara, or Tachibana. . . . If you don’t know what it is, you can find out by looking it up through your surname, such as “Hirata.” This is a branch of learning known as “genealogy tracing.” Its practitioners need only know your surname; then they can just about always identify which god or emperor you are descended from. 96

The Japanese government propagated, and ruthlessly enforced belief in, this kokutai myth of Japan as an extended-family state headed by a divine emperor until October 1945. Only then, two months after surrendering—and only after a change of cabinets ordered by MacArthur—did Japan’s government see fit to repeal the last of the Peace Preservation and Police Laws. 97 Until then, all Japanese subjects were enjoined to believe that, if they went back far enough, they could trace their roots to some noble house whose lineage name, such as Fujiwara or Minamoto, had been bestowed by an emperor as proof of direct vassalage. And each noble house, of course, in turn stemmed from some divinity, such as Amenokoyane no mikoto in the case of the courtier Fujiwara, or some imperial prince, such as Rokuson Tsunemoto in the case of the warrior Minamoto. In any case, according to this kokutai myth, all Japanese were descended from Amaterasu herself or from some deity who had loyally served her.

The pervasiveness and tenacity of such myths is attested to by a well-known postwar Communist Party Dietmember, Takakura Teru (1891–1986), who suffered imprisonment four times before and during World

War II. In the August 1946 issue of *Chūō kōron*, he published an article entitled (in translation) “The Problem of the Emperor System and Imperial House.” In it, Takakura felt compelled to disabuse fellow countrymen of their belief in Japan as a family state by exposing the absurdity of that myth:

The genealogies we have at home all show us to descend from an Emperor Kammu, a Fujiwara no Kamatari, a Hachiman Tarō [Minamoto no Yoshiie], or some such personage in antiquity. It is always the name of someone illustrious; no genealogy traces us to a lowly name like “Rokubei of so-and-so.”

The mass acceptance of these twentieth-century *kokutai* myths by prewar Japanese cannot be attributed mainly to military police torture, or even to highly efficient propagation by government organs and compulsory education. The emperor system and values supporting it did not arise out of thin air after 1868; many of its fictions were widely believed in pre- and early modern times.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that we Western historians of Japan have tended to overlook one key reason—but it is not the only reason—why the imperial institution has survived and prospered into modern times. That reason lies in Japanese perceptions of honor and self-esteem as revealed in their assumed names and titles. As can be seen in Britain and in Commonwealth nations such as Canada, monarchical or aristocratic societies have historically placed great value in royal pedigrees or in noble ranks and titles. But Japan perhaps stands out (is “unique”??) for two reasons. First, imperially bestowed indicators of status have remained strong for longer in Japan, while others, such as power or wealth, have counted for relatively less in and of themselves. Second, modern Japanese, at least until 1945, tended to emphasize their supposed racial purity and kinship with the imperial house. By contrast, the British royal family, for example, never needed to hide its German ancestry. As psychologist Kishida Yūji stated in the *New York Times* in 1987, Japan's national identity derives from “the illusion that all Japanese are connected by blood,” and from “the fact [*sic*] that all Japanese believe they are related by blood to the emperor.”

A name, when freely adopted, helps establish a person’s identity in that it shows how he or she wants to be addressed by others. As a rule, people

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incorporate titles in their names, or substitute titles for their names, to bolster their prestige and command respect from society. For Japanese in the early modern era, divine lineages and imperial ranks and titles performed this function of prestige enhancement most effectively. In 1875, Fukuzawa Yukichi argued that the Japanese people had never acquired a spirit of independence and self-worth based on individual achievement, apart from the prestige that derived from noble credentials. Although the mightiest warlords in Japanese history—including the Tokugawa shogun—achieved power through their own effort and ability, they could not justify their rule on those grounds. Instead, as Fukuzawa observed, they remained convinced that “the best way to enhance the honor of their houses” was “to receive rank and title from the imperial court” and “use these to control people below them.”

In contemporary Japan there are lingering remnants of this pre- or early modern (Fukuzawa termed it “feudal”) ethos of “names,” whereby self-esteem and social prestige derive from the holding of government- or company-titles that convey hierarchic distinctions of status. Then, too, the post-war emperor’s non-sovereign status as “symbol” of the Japanese state and people invites comparison to the imperial institution of early modern times—as Hattori Shisō, Ishii Ryōsuke, and others have argued. Court ranks, imperial titles, and the peerage are now gone; and very few Japanese think of the emperor as a living god. But Article Seven of Japan’s post-war constitution empowers him to grant national honors that are still greatly coveted.

For the most part, these honors take the form of decorations of merit (kunshō) that date from early Meiji times and which helped foster popular support for the prewar imperial regime. I would suggest that two imperial functions—granting national honors and performing court rituals such as the daijōsai—have formed the core of the emperor system throughout Japan’s history, and that we have tended to overlook the importance of the first function in particular. One hypothesis as to why no one ever destroyed...
the imperial institution might be that it has provided something highly desired in status-conscious Japanese society: prestige, and, in modern times, money. Even Tōyama Shigeki, a Marxist historian vehemently critical of the emperor system, has to admit that his prewar educational expenses were paid in part from the government stipend that accompanied his father’s Order of the Golden Kite.106 Today, imperial decorations carry no monetary reward. But an audience with the emperor at the imperial palace is still cherished by many Japanese as one’s “greatest honor” and “an honor for my family.”107

Moreover, as Ishii notes, Article Six of the postwar constitution empowers the emperor to “appoint” prime ministers and supreme court chief justices. In November 1952, Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru avowed himself a “subject” (shin) of Emperor Shōwa, who, by logical extension, could only be sovereign (kimi). By this reasoning, which reminds us of Kii Yoshimichi and Mito Mitsukuni, all cabinet ministers are shin in that their official title is daijin, and so they should consider themselves imperial subjects. That may have simply been Yoshida’s personal opinion. But this statement from Japan’s head of state in 1952 contradicts the postwar constitution’s most important democratic stipulation: that sovereignty resides with the people, not the emperor.

Whenever postwar prime ministers worshiped at Yasukuni Shrine before 1976, they held that their acts did not constitute government support of State Shinto—and so did not violate the constitution—because their visits were non-official and they signed the shrine ledger as private individuals. But as of May 1979, Director General Sanada Hideo of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau dropped this fine legal distinction between official and non-official, public and private. Since then, worship at Yasukuni has been legally interpreted as constitutional even when prime ministers sign as “naikaku sori daijin, XX.” According to Sanada, who echoes Muro Kyūsō, “the use of office titles [in names] is a general practice of life in Japanese society. Anyone who holds government office goes by his office title, even when acting as a private individual.”108

Given imperial Japan’s overwhelming defeat and unconditional surrender in 1945, most of us now presume that the emperor’s fall from power is “historically irreversible.” The postwar imperial institution seems impo-

108. Quoted in Miyaji, Tennōsei no sei-jishiteki kenkyū, p. 214. Miyaji himself falls into this cultural trap by citing Sanada as “Sanada Hōseikyoku chōkan,” not by his given name, Hideo.
tent and "defunct" compared with the absolute power it could claim under the Meiji constitution. In these respects, too, parallels may be drawn to the deplorable condition lamented by Emperor Go-Mizunoo in the early seventeenth century. But can anyone categorically state that an imperial comeback—in some form or other—is totally impossible? May we assume that "even myriad oxen could not return the imperial court to the power" it once enjoyed? Perhaps it is still too early to tell just how purely symbolic, formalistic, and nominal the postwar emperor's authority really is. He and his family certainly have seen worse days.