

Brief Historical Background

However odd it may appear at first glance, the Japanese way of life can be easily explained by the country's traditions and customs derived from the past. Therefore it seems appropriate to present a brief summary of some peculiarities of Japanese history, government system and terms used in this book.

According to official historiography, the Imperial House of Japan is the oldest continuing hereditary monarchy in the world. It has 1,500 years of history. The mythological chronicles of the eighth century *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720) state that the first legendary Emperor Jimmu with the blessing of the gods took the throne in 660 BC. However, the Japanese historians believe that the imperial dynasty was formed much later — in the third or fourth centuries AD. In the middle of the seventh century, the Japanese emperors accepted the title *tenno* (literally “heavenly sovereign”), and since then the phrase “we rule the world as the gods’ descendants” was used in every emperor’s edict. The divine origin of the emperor’s image manifested itself in almost absolute sanctity: for centuries it was forbidden to depict the image in paintings or describe it in words. Unlike European monarchs or ordinary Japanese families, the Imperial dynasty had never had its own family name. Even a skillful investigator will not be able to detect any human qualities in a succession of Japanese emperors’ names and that is logical — direct descendants of the gods were not supposed to possess any.

In the beginning of the eighth century, the Imperial House of Japan and system of government were reorganized according to the Chinese model in a strictly centralized order. During that period the

Emperor acted both as the country's ruler and high priest and originator of the worship of goddess Amaterasu who was believed to have given birth to the first emperor of Japan. However, that period when the emperors enjoyed the fullness of social and religious power was comparatively short.

Flourishing of the bureaucratic system of governance and absence of real threats from the outside world resulted in the rise of the aristocracy, especially the Fujiwara clan. This tradition of having powerful allies from influential clans close to the throne was born in Japan a long time ago. Until 456 the clan of Katsuragi remained the major ally of the Imperial House, and it was then succeeded by the Heguri clan which was in power until 498. The Otomo clan kept its influence until 539, and then it yielded to the clan of Mononobe that was succeeded by the Soga family in the second half of the century. In 645 the shintoistic clan of Fujiwara pushed its way forward to the throne.

Soon after the system of regents had been introduced in Japan, *tenno* lost their power and turned into sacred and symbolic figure-heads. The clans, who had in their hands political and military power, clashed fiercely with each other for the reigning authority so the favorites would change from time to time. The divine status of the emperor, however, remained unquestioned. The concept that the emperor could or could not rule but should always be at his place had been embedded for centuries in the minds of the citizens of the Yamato country — an ancient name for Japan.

The strengthening of provincial feudal lords' influence as well as the spreading of Buddhist temples forced the emperors to look for new ways of keeping their power. Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129), who fought against the growth of power of dominant land-lords, became the first emperor to ostensibly abdicate the throne in favor of a monastery, a curious maneuver called *insei*. In fact he continued to rule the country but did not take any official rank. Emperor-monks remained the most powerful landlords and controlled almost half of the land in the country; they had armed troops and guards of public order at their personal disposal.

The system of private landownership developed in Japan in the eighth century, bringing with it the first landowners. Because of frequent disturbances and clashes, many armed themselves very quickly to protect their land. Landlords formed their own armed units, with some naturally becoming leaders. This practice spread quickly especially in remote rural areas. Some noble aristocratic clans upon receiving plots of land far away from the capital joined the class of warriors, as did, for instance, the well-known clan of Taira. That was how the warrior caste was formed, which played a crucial role in the history of Japan later as first mentioned in the chronicles of the ninth century. Units of professionally trained warriors, always armed and alert, were also of great use for aristocrats inveigled in endless conspiracies and intrigues against each other. Even the emperors would use the services of distinguished warrior clans. The warriors serving the court aristocracy named the future caste of leaders from the verb *samurau* which means “to serve” and gave us the well-known word, “samurai”.

For several centuries, the ancient Japanese country of Yamato sought to subdue the neighboring Ezo tribes that inhabited the north-eastern territories of Honshu Island. From time to time the emperors would send troops led by a commander who was called “shogun”. Shoguns were appointed from noble and distinguished warrior clans close to the Imperial House. Like many other words, the name of this title was borrowed from the Chinese language (*jiāngjūn*, meaning general). With time, this military rank acquired a more pompous description: “great warlord, conqueror of barbarians” (*sei taishogun*). By the beginning of the 10th century, the Ezo tribes had weakened and ceased to threaten the country of Japan; the campaigns against them stopped and commanders were no longer appointed. The rank *sei taishogun* was forgotten for some time and when it was later revived, it had acquired a fairly different meaning.

In the 12th century, Imperial authority (and also the power of Fujiwara regents) started to fade; in fact, the country was ruled by different warrior clans that had grown stronger in the course of inter-clan clashes. At the end of the 12th century the first commander posts

were held by warrior clans of Taira (descendants of Emperor Kammu who ruled the country from 781 to 806) and Minamoto (descendants of Emperor Seiwa who reigned from 858 to 876). In 1184 the Minamoto family had the crucial superiority and Yoshinaka Minamoto (1154–1184) entered Kyoto, an ancient capital of Japan, with a massive army. The Taira clan and their allies had to flee to the south of the country. Actual power over the country was almost entirely in the hands of Yoshinaka Minamoto. He was the de facto ruler of the country, but he remained de jure an impostor as he did not have the Imperial mandate for the post of Chief Commander. Therefore in 1184 he had the Emperor grant him the title *sei taishogun*. Together with the highest warrior rank, Yoshinaka Minamoto was granted the sole right to gather and train the army, this giving him a considerable advantage in clashes with rival clans.

Nevertheless, his cousin, Yoritomo Minamoto (1147–1199) managed to amass his own army and later defeated his relative. He then completely defeated the Taira clan and led a campaign against the north-eastern tribes, thus ending their independence. This accomplishment led him to demand the highest warrior rank from the Emperor, which was granted in 1192. Since then, the rank *sei taishogun* (later used simply as shogun) was no longer given for temporary commanders but for a constant military head of the country who would pass it to his heirs. For almost seven centuries from 1192 to 1867, the title shogun was a subject of inheritance in the clan, though it was formally granted by the Emperor. During these seven centuries Japan had three shogunates with several clans bearing this highest rank.

Kamakura shogunate (*Kamakura bakufu*, 1192–1333)

Minamoto clan (1192–1210), three shoguns.

Fujiwara clan (1226–1252), two shoguns.

Imperial princes (*shinno*) (1252–1333), four shoguns.

Kyoto shogunate (*Muromachi bakufu*, 1338–1573)

Ashikaga clan (1338–1573), 16 shoguns.

Edo shogunate (*Edo bakufu*, 1603–1867)

Tokugawa clan (1603–1867), 15 shoguns.

From 1573 to 1603 Japan did not have shoguns and the country was ruled by warlords Nobunaga Oda (1534–1582) and Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1536–1598). They had full power like all the preceding shoguns but did not formally possess this title.

While the shoguns were busy ruling the country, the Imperial House was entertained by pompous ceremonies, performances of ancient dances *gagaku*, contests of poets and calligraphers and sporting competitions. The emperors kept only ritual and religious power from the past. The first half of shogunate rule was not peaceful: rival warrior clans and even the emperors regularly made attempts to seize power. In the 14th century Emperor Godaigo (1288–1339) decided to wrest power by starting a war. The attempt failed and the warrior clan of Ashikaga played a major role in this struggle. In 1335 Ashikaga Takauji (1305–1358) confronted the Emperor and soon became a shogun. With a small group of his supporters, Godaigo left for the mountains of Yoshino to set up the Southern Court in competition with the Northern Court in Kyoto. The two courts were facing off each other from 1337 to 1392, until the weakened Southern Court ceased to exist.

It is worth mentioning that during the reign of the Ashikaga clan, the Hojo family received much power. For more than 100 years, its representatives ruled the country as regents for Ashikaga shoguns. They assumed the same role as the Ashikaga clan which had previously ruled the country as servants of the Emperor.

The warrior class attained its greatest power in the era of Tokugawa (1603–1867), when 15 shoguns of the clan ruled the country consecutively after defeating their rivals in battle. As part of the tradition, the new government set up a new capital in the city of Edo (present Tokyo). The end of internecine wars and establishment of a sole government contributed to the rapid development of all aspects of social life. For two and a half centuries, Japan had very little contact with the outside world and developed in isolation. Many of

the habits and traditions which were formed during Tokugawa rule are the basis of the distinctive Japanese culture well-known to the rest of the world.

The Imperial Dynasty managed to regain full government powers only in 1868 after an armed clash with the shogunate. Thus began the Meiji (enlightened rule) era under the reign of a young emperor. At that time when Japan was struggling to defend its independence, the revival of imperial power ignited the renaissance of deep-rooted traditions in the national government system. In February of 1889, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan was adopted, announcing Japan a constitutional monarchy. The Emperor and his court moved to Edo and renamed it Tokyo since the capital city of the shogunate and the capital city of the Emperor were to have different names. Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) became the first powerful and legitimate Emperor of Japan after a long break, meriting special attention in the modern history of Japan. During his reign, the country achieved a striking revolution in its development by industrializing all aspects of life according to the Western model. Japan's victories in its wars against China (1894–95) and Russia (1904–05) boosted the international image of this Asian country which had been regarded as backward until then.

In 1926 Emperor Showa (1901–1989) took the throne and brought about the greatest upheaval. During his rule Japan initiated aggressive invasions against her Asian neighbors and occupied their territories; Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by an atom bomb; Japan lost World War II. On the eve of 1946, Emperor Showa publicly renounced the divine origin of the ruling dynasty. The legend which had been carefully tended for more than 12 centuries had ceased.

The change of government was documented in the new Constitution of Japan which came into effect in May, 1947. Under its provisions, the Emperor of Japan is “the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people.” Since then all sovereign power has resided with Japanese nationals who are referred to as “the Japanese people” in the Constitution. The Emperor exercises purely ceremonial and

formal functions — approval of appointments and dismissals suggested by the government, endorsing documents, receiving ambassadors' letters of credence and giving awards. All activities of the Emperor connected with the state are to be performed in accordance with the advice and approval of the Cabinet.

After the death of Emperor Showa on 7 January 1989, his eldest son Akihito acceded to the throne. He is the 125th Emperor according to Japan's traditional order of succession. In 1991, his eldest son Naruhito was declared the Crown Prince of Japan, heir apparent to the throne.

As a whole, the monarchical system of Japan has rather successfully adjusted to present democratic rule, though Japanese democracy still has a long way to go. The Imperial House is not viewed as a key element of Japan's political system; despite this, it still plays a significant role in society. The Japanese people display a generally positive attitude to the Imperial dynasty, regarding it as a special part of their national history and culture.