Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan

A Political Biography

Stephen S. Large

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Emperor Hirohito and Shōwa Japan

Few historical subjects have aroused as much passionate debate as the Shōwa Emperor, Hirohito. This book, based on extensive research in Japanese and English sources, impartially explores how far Hirohito was responsible for war, why he emerged as a contested 'symbol emperor' in postwar Japan, and his legacy to Japan today.

In reconstructing and evaluating Hirohito's prewar and wartime political role, Dr Large portrays the Emperor's personality, world view and political style while carefully elucidating the Byzantine political context in which he operated, all against the background of momentous crises both within Japan and overseas. The author then examines Hirohito's long career following the defeat of Japan in 1945: his exemption from trial as a war criminal and role during the Occupation; his image-making by the government and the media; his overseas tours, to Europe in 1971 and America in 1975; and contrasting popular reactions to his death in January 1989.

Written for the general reader as well as specialists in Japanese Studies, *Emperor Hirohito and Shōwa Japan* also offers broad insights into the religious and secular nature of imperial authority, power and influence, the political culture of the Japanese aristocracy, the dynamics of the modern Japanese State, and the intricate interplay of nationalism and democracy in Japan since the Pacific War.

Stephen S.Large is Reader in Modern Japanese History at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge. He has published widely in his subject.

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For Laura and Tim

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Series editor's preface

With growing speed, as we move through the 1990s, Japan in her many aspects is becoming a subject of interest and concern. The successes of the Japanese economy and the resourcefulness of her people have long been appreciated abroad. The increasing impact of Japan on the outside world, with uncertainities about her future direction, also generates suspicion and even hostility in the United States, Western Europe and elsewhere. This is now compounded by the fact that, since 1989, events in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe have begun a revolution in the international system, whose outcome is as yet unclear.

The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series seeks to foster an informed and balanced—but not uncritical—understanding of Japan. One aim of the series is to show the depth and variety of Japanese institutions, practices and ideas. Another is, by using comparison to see what lessons, positive and negative, can be drawn for other countries. Much contemporary comment on Japan resorts to stereotypes based on outdated or ill-informed ideas. We believe that many aspects of Japan are little known abroad but deserve to be better understood.

If 1989 marks the beginning of a revolution in international politics, it also saw the death of the most controversial and, outside Japan, best known Japanese individual of the twentieth century. Hirohito, the Shōwa Emperor, was a puzzling figure around whom passionate disagreements continue to rage, both outside Japan and in Japan itself. Did he rule Japan in any real sense or was he merely a figurehead? What were his real views on nation, militarism, war and peace? Did he have leadership ability, potential or actual? Could he have prevented Pearl Harbor and thus the Pacific War? How should we evaluate the issue of his war responsibility, and should he have been brought to trial after the war as a war criminal? Did the retention of the Emperor by General MacArthur after the war in any sense open the door to an eventual resurgence of chauvinistic militarism in Japan?

Dr Large addresses these contentious issues soberly and with the multi-faceted approach that they deserve. He has used the available primary sources in Japanese, including those that have become available since the death of the Shōwa Emperor. His book is a crucial landmark in the study of this fascinating subject.

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Any errors of fact and judgment are my responsibility alone.

CONVENTIONS

In this book, except in the case of Westerners of Japanese ancestry, Japanese names are given in the proper Japanese order, with the surname preceding the given name. Long vowels are indicated by the use of macrons but these are omitted in the case of a few well-known place names, e.g. Tōkyō, Ōsaka and Kyōto.

In keeping with the Japanese custom of referring to a deceased emperor according to his reign name and not his personal name, which indeed was rarely used during his lifetime, Hirohito is mostly identified in these pages as the 'Shōwa Emperor', or the 'Emperor'. The same applies to his modern predecessors, the Meiji and Taishō Emperors.

Introduction

The Crown Prince and Regent, Hirohito, became the 124th emperor of Japan at the age of twenty-five, upon the death of his father, the Taishō Emperor, at 1:25 a.m. on 25 December 1926. This historical transition occurred not in Tokyo but at the Hayama detached palace, located on Sagami Bay south of the capital, where Taishō had spent his last days attended by the Crown Prince, other members of the imperial family, and court officials. In a brief accession ceremony *(kenji togyo no gi)* performed at 3:15 a.m., the new sovereign received the imperial seal and replicas of two of the three imperial regalia which always accompanied the Emperor, the sacred sword and jewel.[1]

While this ceremony took place in the cold of the night at Hayama, a Shintō priest at the imperial palace sanctuary in Tokyo reported to the gods the death of Taishō and the accession of the new emperor (Shikama 1980:439–40). Later that day it was announced in an imperial edict that his reign would be known as 'Shōwa', or 'illustrious peace' (Murakami S. 1983:255–6).[2] In November 1928, after a period of mourning for Taishō, the Shōwa Emperor would perform the more elaborate ancient rituals of the *daijōsai* ('The Great Feast of Enthronement'),[3] in the former imperial capital of Kyoto.

Thus began the Shōwa era which, lasting slightly more than sixty-two years, from 1926 to 1989, is the longest imperial reign on reliable record in Japanese history and the longest in recent world history. During this period, Japan experienced great upheaval and change wrought by the Depression, a series of wars culminating in the devastation of the country and the destruction of the empire, an unprecedented foreign occupation, recovery from the ruins of war, and the country's rapid development as an economic superpower. It is the purpose of this book, intended for the informed general reader as well as the specialist in modern Japanese studies, to explore, within a concise interpretative narrative, the political role and significance of Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989) throughout these momentous national vicissitudes of Shōwa history.

Although he was not by any means always at the center of events in this history, the Shōwa Emperor was one of the most controversial figures in modern times. In particular, the role he played in the decade of Japanese expansionism leading to the 1941–1945 Asian-Pacific War remains to this

day a subject of great debate both within Japan and overseas. But in addition to this question of his 'war responsibility' *(sensō sekinin),* which has dominated most historical accounts, controversy also surrounds the forty-odd years of his reign since Japan's defeat in 1945, as this book, one of the first in Western research to consider his postwar career in some detail, will show.

To illustrate briefly some of the main issues in these debates, on the one hand there are those who portray early Shōwa Japan as virtually the victim of the Emperor *(tennō)* and of the 'emperor system' *(tennōsei),* which 'denotes a framework of power…including the imperial institution as its keystone, the palace bureaucracy, the legal system anchored in the constitution, the military, the police, the courts, the civil bureaucracy, even the political parties, and so forth' (Bix 1982:4). As the Japanese historian, Inoue Kiyoshi, states,

> The man Hirohito was no doubt a sympathetic and courteous gentleman to his family and advisers. But Emperor Hirohito reigned at the summit of an atrocious emperor system fascism and continued to direct both aggressive wars and a system which oppressed the people.
>
> (Inoue 1975:84)

Depicting the Shōwa Emperor as both a willing symbol and active agent of authoritarianism and war, David Bergamini likewise held that Hirohito was instrumental in a ramified 'imperial conspiracy' that led early Shōwa Japan into repression at home and aggression overseas, ending in the Pacific War (Bergamini 1971). A more recent account by the journalist, Edward Behr, is also critical, although unlike Bergamini's, it emphasizes not so much Hirohito's sins of commission as a war leader than his sins of omission, suggesting that he could have done more than he did to prevent war (Behr 1989).[4]

A sequel to these critical perceptions of the Emperor in early Shōwa history is the conviction many share, especially in Japan, that his continuation on the throne and the perpetuation of the Japanese monarchy after the Pacific War meant that the dangers of emperor-centered nationalism and militarism still existed in postwar Shōwa Japan behind the facade of democracy, hence the need to remain vigilant lest Japan be victimized once again by its imperial institution. Irokawa Daikichi typified this concern in 1983 when he wrote, 'To resurrect the Emperor-system in its full power, as some conservative politicians now advocate, is dangerous dallying with illusion…. There is the real possibility that Japan will turn into a new and monstrous miltary power' (Irokawa 1983:138).

On the other hand, there are studies which portray the Emperor as a victim of political elites, in particular the military, who manipulated him for their own ulterior purposes leading to aggression and war in early Shōwa. In these works, he emerges as a reluctant symbol and passive agent of dark forces beyond his control. Thus, drawing a distinction between the Emperor and the emperor system, Charles Sheldon writes,

> what was at fault was not the Emperor but the Emperor system which permitted the abuse by the power-holders of a power greatly enhanced by the general emotional commitment to the myth-laden Imperial institution as a focus for loyalty and patriotism, with its potential for both good and evil.
>
> (Sheldon 1978:34)

From this perspective, rather than directing a 'fascist' regime which plunged Japan into war, the Emperor personally opposed fascism, militarism, and war, although not the maintenance of the empire he had inherited at the beginning of his reign, but all in vain. 'Hirohito's moderateness and liberal attitudes checked, for a while, the military's attempts to control foreign policy in the 1930s, and brought about the end of the Pacific War in 1945', writes another historian, Ben-Ami Shillony, who also sees him in this more positive light (Shillony 1973:95). A similar interpretation is found in Leonard Mosley's popular book, the first full-length study of the Emperor in English, and in books by such Japanese writers as Kojima Noboru and Yamamoto Shichihei, to cite but several (Mosley 1966; Kojima 1981; Yamamoto 1989).

The corollary of these assessments of the Emperor in early Shōwa is that his survival and that of the monarchy after Japan's defeat in the Pacific War is not to be deplored, for it enabled him to contribute constructively to Japan's subsequent revival. John Hall emphasizes this theme when, observing that the postwar popularity of the Emperor was no longer widely based on the kind of extremist nationalism which had predominated earlier, he wrote in 1968,

> The Emperor today stands as symbol, not of some irrational 'superiority' of the Japanese race, but rather as a projection of their own pride in their own achievement as a modern people; not as a reminder of the terrors of war and humiliation of defeat but rather as symbol of Japan's purity of intent to lead the world in working for peace.
>
> (Hall 1968a:62)

Unfortunately, all too often in these debates, the Emperor himself is lost in the mists of generalization and inference. But however one interprets his career, the fact is that there is much that will probably never be known about him and for this reason the controversies concerning his political role and place in history may never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Although this problem of inadequate information may be somewhat relieved as new written evidence comes to light in the years ahead, the point remains that those documents which are now available will always pose special difficulties to historians.

To begin with, they do not include the personal writings of the Emperor himself: for instance, any diary he may have kept, personal letters, and the like. Either these do not exist or they have been classified, making them unavailable to the historian. Certain records of his conversations are also classified and other materials that might have illuminated different aspects of his political

career did not survive the war, owing to their deliberate destruction by Japanese officials or to the effects of Allied bombing. An important exception is a new source, published in 1990, comprising the Emperor's personal account of early Shōwa history: 'Shōwa tennō no dokuhaku hachijikan' (The Shōwa Emperor's Eight-Hour Monologue', hereafter cited as STDH). The circumstances of this document, which was originally recorded in the spring of 1946, are discussed in Chapter 6 of this book.

Because of the dearth of primary materials left behind by the Emperor himself, the historian is forced to rely largely on a core of indirect evidence comprising the memoirs and diaries of court officials, politicians, military men and foreign officials who interacted with the Emperor in one context or another, as well as on Japanese government documents and various secondary sources including biographies, histories, and so forth. Familiar primary sources in this genre include, for example, the memoirs of Harada Kumao, the diaries of General Honjō Shigeru and Kido Kōichi, and the memoranda of General Sugiyama Gen, along with many others. These have been augumented recently by the diaries, published in 1990, of General Nara Takeji, Makino Nobuaki, and two of General Tōjō Hideki's private secretaries. These new materials, and the above-mentioned record of the Emperor's 1946 'Monologue', are especially valuable when used together in researching Shōwa Japanese history (Large 1991a).

In general, these core materials are informative and their authenticity is not in serious question.[5] However, they often omit valuable information at crucial points in Shōwa history, they inevitably reflect the bias of their authors and their contents are often susceptible to different interpretations. Where a given source is the only one available on a particular matter, and hence cannot be cross-checked, these problems are especially formidable.

To compensate, some books on the Shōwa Emperor (in particular Bergamini's) have relied a good deal on oral evidence gleaned from interviews with Japanese who, however, either because they declined to be identified or because the author for whatever reason decided not to identify them, yielded information which cannot be verified by using written evidence. The value of oral history notwithstanding, problems of verification have led to the decision not to undertake interviews, and instead to rely on as wide a range of written primary and secondary sources as possible, in researching this book.

Finally, there is much that is unknown in particular about the Emperor's political career during the long span of Shōwa history since 1945 when, under the new constitutional framework established during the Occupation of Japan, he became a 'symbol of the state' divorced from direct participation in the daily affairs of government. To be sure, the significant and complex role he played as a contested symbol in Japanese politics after 1945 can be detailed. But because he seems to become an increasingly abstract figure in the 'long postwar' of Shōwa history (Gluck 1990:3), less precision is possible where his specific political activities are concerned. It is in this sense that less is known about his postwar than his prewar and wartime political career.

Yet while, for all of these reasons, he remains something of a 'shadow emperor', it is still possible to clarify his historical role, perhaps with more objectivity than is found in many earlier studies now that the Shōwa period has ended and can be viewed as a whole. In pursuing this objective, the chapters that follow relate the Shōwa Emperor to the political context in which he operated in considering three important questions which apply to his entire reign. First, as the incumbent monarch, how did he perceive his function and role in Japanese political life? Second, how did he act upon his perceptions at critical junctures when he and the nation were tested? And third, without implying that he figured prominently in everything that happened or that he invariably had a decisive impact on events, what were the political consequences of his actions?

The governing assumption here in approaching these questions is that political figures are neither completely free agents nor are they completely determined, in what they think, say, and do, by their environment; 'Not even a man as powerful as Louis XIV was free in any absolute sense of the word. No more was he "absolutely determined"' (Elias 1983:30). Therefore, as Steven Lukes suggests, the study of power includes the interplay of 'external' and 'internal constraints' on a political actor. Whereas 'external constraints' in the environment limit or exclude options available to him, thereby limiting what Lukes defines as 'opportunity', the actor's 'internal constraints' limit or exclude options 'which are unacceptable to, beyond the capacity of, or even inconceivable' to the subject. That is, they limit the subject's 'ability' to respond to 'opportunity' (Lukes 1977:10–13). Accordingly, a given political career may be understood as comprising 'a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits, which in consequence expand and contract over time' (Lukes 1977:29).

With these assumptions in mind, it is important now to indicate, in necessarily general terms, how history had shaped the Emperor's political environment by the time he took office, in December 1926, when the Shōwa era began.

THE SHŌWA INHERITANCE: IMPERIAL AUTHORITY, POWER AND INFLUENCE

From ancient times, the Japanese sovereign was held to be an *akitsumikami,* or 'manifest deity', the lineal descendant of the legendary Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Ōmikami, and her divine progeny. According to the myths of Shintō ('the way of the gods'),[6] she gave the sacred sword and jewel, along with the third part of the imperial regalia, the sacred mirror, to her grandson, Ninigi no Mikoto, before he descended to the Japanese archipelago. Ever since then they had been handed down through the generations from one sovereign to the next as symbols of imperial authority deriving from Amaterasu (Bock 1990:36–7).

But to the extent that this image of 'manifest deity' connoted that the sovereign would truly rule on the basis of his (and in a few early instances, her) essentially religious authority, it was misleading, for in fact few Japanese sovereigns were able to do so. Instead, historians agree that the primary function of the emperors was 'sacerdotal or religious' in character and that it eclipsed their secular political role (Webb 1968:15). Serving principally as 'chief priests' or 'shaman kings', they were indispensable for their performance of such annual rice-crop rituals as the *kannamesai* and the *niinamesai,* to propitiate the gods in ensuring a good harvest (Mori 1979:529–30). This ritual association of the emperor, the gods, and the land was one of the distinctive features of Shintō, Japan's indigenous religion.

The sacerdotal functions of the emperor continued to predominate even as, beginning in the seventh century, the monarchy acquired new Chinese dimensions which ostensibly strengthened the political hand of the sovereign. Neither the subsequent development of a Chinese-style capital nor the adaptation of Chinese-style institutions of imperial rule, could obscure the reality that the emperors, with several exceptions, were politically impotent. In the late Heian period (794–1185), the Fujiwara Regents held sway at court and from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) onwards, real secular power remained in the hands of the shōguns, whose political domination reflected the paramount position of the *bushi,* or samurai, class.

As to why the monarchy survived at all in these politically unfavorable circumstances, 'It may well be that the loss of real power by the Emperor and his retention chiefly of ritual sovereignty served in the long run to protect the Imperial House from destruction' (Hall 1965:154). More precisely, what ensured this survival was the sovereign's 'legitimating function' by which he, through his religious authority, historically conferred legitimacy on elites who ruled Japan in his name (Webb 1968:64), and for whom he was a 'symbol of elite unity' (Hall 1965:154). Thus, by the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) the imperial institution had long since been reduced to being 'one of the state's adornments' (Webb 1968:223). The emperor was esteemed for the most part as a patron of the aristocratic arts at the imperial court in Kyoto and as a 'sacred legitimizer'. Otherwise, politically, he was virtually a captive of the shōgun who governed Japan from Edo.

Despite his political powerlessness, however, during the Tokugawa era the emperor was increasingly seen in Confucian terms as 'a symbol of virtue. He was a physical reminder…that society was founded on universal principles of order and morality' (Webb 1968:182–97). This perception of the emperor drew heavily from precedents in China where historically, at least in theory, the sovereign had personified moral and ethical perfection which was to be emulated in government affairs and social life generally (Webb 1968:16–18). Significantly, it gave rise to the belief, which continued into modern times as a hallmark of Japanese nationalism, that the 'imperial way' *(kōdō)* was essentially moral in character.

The opening of a secluded Japan and the imposition of the so-called

'unequal treaties' by the Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century dramatically produced new circumstances which were to greatly change the political position of the monarchy. The emperor was politically 'rediscovered' and made the symbolic focus of the armed movement to overthrow the Tokugawa shōgunate so that a new central government capable of saving Japan from foreign exploitation could be established. In this context the rebel slogan, *sonnō jōi* ('revere the emperor and expel the barbarians') signalled the emergence of the imperial court after centuries of political obscurity.[7] Then, once the destruction of the shōgunate was accomplished in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, with the emperor transferred from Kyoto to the shōgun's castle in Tokyo, formerly Edo, there began the modern transformation of the Japanese monarchy through the 'invention of tradition',[8] blending certain elements adapted from Japan's historical legacy and others adapted from the contemporary West. It was these which constituted the Shōwa inheritance with respect to imperial authority, power, and influence.

Their synthesis is most evident in the Meiji constitution, promulgated by Emperor Meiji on 11 February 1889. A hybrid of traditional Japanese and modern Western influences—the latter mostly reflecting Prussian precedents—the constitution ascribed extensive imperial prerogatives, or *taiken,* to the emperor which served notice that he would henceforth rule, as well as reign over, Japan.[9] Article IV began, 'The Emperor is the Head of the Empire, combining in Himself the rights of sovereignty'. Articles V–VIII elaborated his supreme legislative powers, including for example his power to convoke, open, close, and prorogue the imperial Diet, to dissolve the lower house of representatives and to issue imperial ordinances 'in place of law'. In addition, article XI, it should be stressed, gave him 'the supreme command of the Army and Navy'. Article XIII further empowered him to declare war, make peace, and conclude treaties; article XIV stated, 'The Emperor proclaims the law of siege'; and so on.

The point is worth elaborating that these comprehensive powers, which signified an 'absolute monarchy' *(zettai ōsei)* were grounded on the emperor's traditional religious authority, now reclaimed and firmly embedded in the law of the land (Nakano 1987:133). In promulgating the constitution, the Meiji Emperor declared, 'The rights of sovereignty of State, We have inherited from our Ancestors', in a 'lineal succession unbroken for ages eternal'. This claim to divine lineage was reiterated in article I of the constitution, 'The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal', and in article III, 'The Emperor is sacred and inviolable'. That the sovereign would serve as the spiritual 'pivot' of Japan was intended by the government leaders who were responsible for drafting the constitution, including, above all, Itō Hirobumi (Toriumi 1980:113). In short, the emperor was the sacred pillar of the *kokutai,* or 'national polity'.

This religious image of the emperor was one of Japan's most potent 'modern myths' (Gluck 1985). For the Meiji leaders, it buttressed 'the German historicist theory of the organic state which they had chosen to be the basis of the first

constitution' (Powles 1976–7:34). In the Meiji period (1868–1912) and thereafter, the idea that the monarch was a 'living god' was expressed in the lofty language of successive imperial rescripts. It was also expressed in the rituals of State Shintō at the Ise Grand Shrine and other imperial shrines, including the palace shrines where, for example, the harvest rites were still performed by the emperor each year, along with many other rites.

These rites, supervised by the board of ceremonies in the imperial household ministry, or Kunaishō, were conducted out of public view, but because 'it is central to its potency as a symbol that it is remote, set apart, omnipresent as the ultimate…means of succor' (Edelman 1967:5–6), the ritual distance of the emperor from the people only deepened their awe of him. The overall result was a fusion of monarchy and nationalism through the 'mythologization of history and the historicization of myth', in what was, in effect, an 'immanental theocracy' (Kitagawa 1974:226). As John Coleman writes, 'State Shintō was a civil religion of nationalism' in which the deification of the emperor resembled the apotheosis of the Roman emperors (Coleman 1970:72).

The process, beginning in Meiji Japan, whereby the 'invention of tradition' made the emperor the symbol of the modern Japanese state and of modern Japanese nationalism, emphasized many sub-symbols of imperial authority and power. Yasukuni Shrine, established in Tokyo in 1869 to enshrine the spirits of Japan's war dead in the service of the emperor, is one important example. Others included various national festival days, such as Kigensetsu, celebrated on 11 February to commemorate the accession of the first emperor, Jimmu, and the historic founding of the empire; the national song, 'Kimi ga yo', the words of which praised the eternal nature of imperial rule;[10] the national flag, Hi no maru, which likewise denoted the sacred majesty of the emperor, as brilliant as the sun; the honorific titles, and the decorations and medals *(kunshō),* which he bestowed on officials and dignitaries as blessings of imperial rule; and finally the custom of reign names *(nengō),* which suggested that even a given period of historical time was the emperor's possession.

Of course, not every Japanese citizen believed in the 'modern myths' of imperial supremacy projected by these sub-symbols and more generally by the nationalist ideology of the emperor cult, especially as it was cultivated in the schools and the army (Tsurumi K. 1970:99–137). But the vast majority of the population came to take these myths very seriously and in any case what counts in the end is that because he theoretically legitimized not only the state but the entire social, political, and moral order as the fountainhead of imperial rule, publicly, 'The Emperor played the role of a god and the people played the role of subjects' (Katō 1974:211). This was true in Meiji Japan. It was also true in Taishō (1912–1926) and early Shōwa Japan (1926–1945).

Yet, it was equally true that where the emperor's powers were concerned the Meiji constitution contained a profound contradiction, attributable in the first instance to Itō Hirobumi, for it incorporated both the notion of

absolute monarchy, discussed above, and that of limited monarchy. Over the years this ambiguous amalgam was to provoke intense controversy among constitutional theorists who interpreted the constitution variously. In fact, so great was the confusion that by Shōwa, 'No authoritative voice or body could have said…exactly what the Emperor's position was in relation to the major functions and problems of government' (Maxon [1957] 1975:8).

In his comments on the constitution, Ito held that because the emperor is the' "pivot" which sustains our country…the first principle of our constitution is the respect for the sovereign rights of the Emperor'. Significantly, though, Itō added: 'But at the same time, in order to prevent the danger of abuse in the exercise of these sovereign powers, clear checks and limits have been established. The ministers are thus held responsible, so power may not be abused' (Pittau 1967:177–8).

This principle applied in particular to those administrative imperial prerogatives categorized as *kokumuken,* or 'prerogatives in the duties of state', which required the advice of ministers of state (Shinobu 1967:666). Specifically, article LV stated, 'The respective Ministers of State shall give their advice to the Emperor and be responsible for it. All laws, Imperial Ordinances and Imperial Rescripts of whatever kind that relate to the affairs of State require the counter-signature of a Minister of State.' Replying to the question, 'Was the Meiji Constitution so formulated that the Emperor could exercise power on a personal basis?', Yasuda Hiroshi points out that this article was deliberately intended 'to prevent the possibility of any arbitrary or personal exercise of will by the Emperor and to make the cabinet a pivotal state organ'. The result was not a system of personal rule by the sovereign but a 'bureaucratic monarchy' in which his principal function was to legitimize bureaucratic rule (Yasuda 1990:40–1).

Besides the principle that cabinet ministers were responsible for advising the emperor in formulating government policy, there were other major qualifications of imperial power in the constitution. Article IV asserted that the emperor exercises the rights of sovereignty 'according to the provisions of the present Constitution', that is, not in an unlimited, absolute sense, and article V read, 'The Emperor exercises the legislative power with the consent of the Diet', which again qualified his legislative prerogative. Regarding imperial ordinances which he could issue 'in place of law' when the Diet was not sitting, article VIII stipulated, 'Such Imperial Ordinances are to be laid before the Imperial Diet at its next session, and when the Diet does not approve said Ordinances, the Government shall declare them to be invalid for the future'. Article IX added, in part, 'But no Ordinance shall in any way alter any of the existing laws'.

Taken together, these articles reinforced the concept of limited monarchy with respect to the sovereign's *kokumuken,* including his administrative prerogative in military affairs as stipulated in article XII which reads, 'The Emperor determines the organization and peace standing of the Army and

Navy.' In practice, this meant that he would do so upon the advice of the army and navy ministers in the cabinet.

In contrast to the emperor's *kokumuken,* his supreme command prerogative, or *tōsuiken,* provided for in article XI, was distinguished by the fact that it did not depend upon or require the advice of ministers of state and was not part of the cabinet's jurisdiction. Rather, he exercised this prerogative with the advice and assistance of the army and navy chiefs of staff. As in the Prussian military system, which the Japanese adapted to their own circumstances, the chiefs alone were responsible for preparing and acting upon matters of strategy and military operations, as the regulations governing their offices clearly stipulated. Moreover, their independence from the cabinet in this regard was enhanced by their right of 'direct access' *(iaku jōsōken)* to the emperor when reporting to him on their policies, including the strengthening of the armed forces, for which they sought imperial sanction. Once sanction was granted, they then reported to the cabinet through the army or navy minister (Masuda 1990:78).

In theory, this 'independence of the supreme command' *(tōsuiken no dokuritsu)* greatly accentuated the emperor's 'absolute' powers at the expense of the limitations on his power discussed above. But in practice it was always uncertain as to whether the emperor or the chiefs of staff held the initiative, or had the final say, in exercising the supreme command prerogative. To anticipate a major problem which became especially acute in the Shōwa era, 'there was no clear definition regarding either the scope of the right of supreme command or the person responsible for exercising it' (Masuda 1990:79).

Because of the tensions it contained between absolute and limited monarchy, the Meiji constitution was a most controversial document. Itō Hirobumi had to defend his qualifications of imperial rule from critics on the privy council before the council finally ratified his draft (Pittau 1967:179–80). Then, well after these objections were overcome and the constitution was promulgated in 1889, controversies erupted over the nature and scope of the emperor's powers (Banno 1990a). Significantly, though, after an initial period of uncertainty, the Meiji Emperor himself made it a point to fully comply with the concept of limited monarchy, thereby ensuring that his extensive prerogatives were exercised 'only on the advice and consent of the heads of the various state organs and of the elder statemen' who governed Japan in his name (Toriumi 1980:114). He consistently 'refrained from taking the initiative in handling state affairs', although in private audience he did not hesitate to press ministers to explain specific policies when he was personally unhappy with their advice (Toriumi 1980:117).

During his reign, from 1912 to 1926, when Japan entered a more democratic phase of political and social development typified by liberal party rule and the proliferation of popular social movements, the Taishō Emperor likewise deferred to his ministers of state, sharing as he did his father's reluctance, as a constitutional monarch, to interfere in state affairs. In his case, however, constant ill health also accounts for Taishō's political self-restraint. Afflicted with the

residual effects of meningitis which he had suffered as a child, he was both mentally and physically unfit for most of his reign.

Nevertheless, however much the Meiji and Taishō Emperors personally complied with the notion of limited monarchy, the people venerated them as absolute monarchs because of their public image as all-powerful rulers possessing sacred authority. The Meiji Emperor, in particular, was idolized. After his extensive tours throughout Japan, many of his subjects 'enshrined places where he rested or venerated things he touched' and offered rice cakes to his image when praying to their own ancestors before the altar at home (Mori 1979:551). When he died in 1912 he was widely honored as a proud symbol of modernity, including constitutional government as well as the nation's industrial progress and acquisition of empire (Gluck 1985:215–16). But the outpouring of popular affection in mourning his death also manifested a religious reverence for Meiji which the 'invention of tradition' had cultivated in his era.

The Taishō Emperor was less esteemed. However, notwithstanding his physical and mental debilities, which resulted in his withdrawal from political affairs and the appointment of Crown Prince Hirohito as Regent in 1921, he, too, was generally regarded as an 'animate flag' (Kawai 1960:74). To illustrate, in a rare national survey of industrial workers carried out by a Tokyo Imperial University team in 1923, of 3,500 replies to the question of who was the 'greatest person' they could think of, 739 recorded Taishō, placing him at the top of the list, ahead of even Emperor Meiji, the Buddha, and many other luminaries (Nakamura M. 1986:128–9).[11]

Altogether, the contradictory concepts of absolute and limited monarchy in the Meiji constitution contributed to a situation in which the emperor 'was an absolute monarch to the people, but within the ruling class he was treated in terms of the tacit understanding…that he was a constitutional monarch' (Kuno 1978:63). Whatever the perception of his role, however, the reality in practice was that he had little political power in his own right and in this respect, his position resembled that of Japanese sovereigns down through the centuries. For example, he appointed the prime minister, but only on the recommendation of his closest advisers at court. He had virtually no say in the appointment of cabinet ministers and did not attend cabinet meetings. It was unclear whether the emperor could veto cabinet policy but in any event convention dictated that he did not do so in Meiji and Taishō Japan.

The fact was that his prerogatives were delegated, to the cabinet in the case of his executive prerogative and to the Diet in the instance of his legislative prerogative. His power to make treaties was exercised by the foreign ministry and his power to make war and peace was likewise exercised by his government. Furthermore, as explained, his administrative powers with respect to the military were exercised by the army and navy ministers in the cabinet and his prerogative of supreme command, again in practice, was exercised by the army and navy chiefs of Staff. As was true of emperors in the past, therefore, the modern Japanese emperor was to reign, but not rule.

Rather, his chief function in government was still the performance of the monarch's traditional 'legitimating function'. An important theoretical underpinning for this role was the imperial house law *(Kōshitsu tenpan),* promulgated on the same day as the Meiji constitution. This law established succession through the male line to the emperor's oldest son (article I). Its other sections governed virtually every aspect of court affairs, ranging from procedures of accession and 'coronation', honorific styles of address used at court and provisions for a regency should the emperor be gravely incapacitated, to the management of the emperor's hereditary estates and expenditures, which were defrayed from the national budget but administered by the imperial household ministry. However, the law's main effect for the purposes of this discussion was that by it, 'the imperial house was placed in a transcendental but symbiotic relation to political power', giving the emperor autonomy from the government and placing him 'above politics', in a position to bestow legitimacy on his government and its policies through his supreme authority without being responsible for those policies himself (Titus 1974:46).

In his study of the Japanese monarchy during the Tokugawa period Herschel Webb writes,

> One must be especially on guard against falling into the error, fostered by the surface meaning of contemporary accounts of the matter, of speaking of 'imperial decisions' where one means decisions made by the emperor's ministers.... There has been a persistent legal fiction that the court's decisions emanated from the emperor.
>
> (Webb 1968:122)

Webb's observation applies equally to the emperor's position as sacred legitimizer in the Shōwa inheritance. The emperor formally declared the policies of his government as the 'imperial will' but could not impose his own, personal will, on state affairs; he 'was the transmitter, not the independent judge of the Imperial Will' (Titus 1974:40). In this sense, he was a 'transcendental prisoner' of the political system (Titus 1974:16).

To recapitulate, the emperor's situation, by Shōwa, was paradoxical in the extreme: he possessed supreme religious authority but little political power as a reigning, but not a ruling, monarch. To employ different imagery, as symbol of the nation he was the 'pole star' (Titus 1974:5), or the 'sun' (Bix 1982:4), of government in Japan but was about as remote from actual power as these celestial metaphors suggest. He was called 'Emperor'.[12] Yet if the term conjures up images of Caesar, the Russian Tsar, or the German Kaiser, it was a misnomer. Perhaps 'Mikado', even with its Gilbert and Sullivan connotations, would have been better, for he was far more the 'exalted gate' of government, a symbol of power, than the wielder of power.

Imperial influence, as distinct from authority and power, is quite another matter, however. It has been suggested elsewhere that while power is the capacity to apply sanctions in exercising authority, influence, based on prestige,

relies not on sanctions but on the ability to manipulate perceptions of alternatives in the course of decision-making in order to obtain a desired result (Bell 1975:21–8, 75–80). By its subtle nature,

> influence appears at once to be more pervasive and potentially more precise than power. Its bases are not *control* of the environment but *knowledge* about the environment and an insight into the decision-making process by which individuals choose how to act…
>
> (Bell 1975:76, italics Bell's)

It is a central task of this book to investigate how, and with what intentions and effects, the Shōwa Emperor endeavored to exert political influence. Here, however, the general question arises, how much influence did the modern Japanese emperor have?

Potentially, he had considerable influence, due to the process of 'working through the court', whereby competing elites jockeyed to obtain ritual sanction for a given policy in declaring it as the imperial will (Imai 1973:56). This provided him with opportunities to influence decisions before a consensus was reached, which he would duly ratify as 'sacred legitimizer'.

To reiterate, Emperor Meiji frequently endeavored to influence government leaders when he questioned them at court about their policies and in that he was often successful, he was no mere 'puppet' (Toriumi 1980:115–16), The Taishō Emperor was less influential but during his reign, the greater political pluralism of 'Taishō democracy' and the growing sectarianism of institutions involved in national decision-making made the court an increasingly important clearing house of policy resolution. Therefore, by Shōwa, the emperor, whose political activity was largely confined to the private zone of the court, was in an enhanced position to register informal influence on policies that he would sanction.

It should be appreciated, however, that no emperor could exert imperial influence autonomously. Like any sovereign, he was enmeshed in a 'network of interdependence' (Elias 1983:230) with others at court whose advice constituted another 'external constraint' on his activity. Of particular importance here were the following: the grand chamberlain, who constantly attended the emperor and scheduled his appointments; the lord keeper of the privy seal, who served as the emperor's chief adviser on political affairs; the imperial household minister, who supervised the palace bureaucracy; and the chief aide-de-camp, supplied by the army, who provided liaison between the emperor and the military. In addition to the holders of these court posts, who changed from time to time, another figure was crucial in advising the emperor in the Taishō and early Shōwa periods. This was the *genrō* ('elder statesman')' Prince Saionji Kinmochi, who will figure prominently in these pages.

It was through these advisers that government officials and foreign envoys were routed to the emperor when they came to court. He especially relied upon them to bridge the court because of the political separation of the

emperor and the government and equally, the physical situation of the imperial palace in central Tokyo. Built on the ruins of the Tokugawa shōgun's fortress, and cut off from the city by walls and a moat, the palace compound of 240 acres constituted a closed world unto itself.

At the center of this world stood the main palace complex, the construction of which had begun in 1880. Occupied by Emperor Meiji in 1889, it contained the personal living quarters of the emperor and empress, several grand halls for important ceremonial and formal functions, the emperor's library and other rooms where he held audiences, and many smaller rooms for attendants, ladies-in-waiting, and so forth. Nearby in the spacious palace grounds of gardens and pine trees was located the imperial household ministry building. Elsewhere, a prominent landmark was the Nijūbashi double bridge facing the Marunouchi district. It was here that the emperor greeted the people, who flocked to the imperial palace plaza beyond, on ceremonial occasions and at the New Year.

In sum, the emperor acted politically as part of a collective group at court and, in large measure, his influence was an expression of this group's collective interests. Yet, the will to exert influence, for whatever ends, and the manner in which it would be registered in different situations, also depended fundamentally on the personality, temperament, and political world view of the emperor himself. Since in the case of the Shōwa Emperor these factors, and the resultant 'internal constraints' which he later imposed upon the application of imperial influence, were part and parcel of the Shōwa inheritance, this account now turns to his personal preparation for service on the throne.