

Nation-Building Through Imperial Images Fragility and Charisma of Emperor Meiji's Public Persona

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Abstract This article explores the complex construction of Emperor Meiji's public image, from a calculated fragility that promoted national unity to the projection of modern imperial charisma. It examines the extensive Meiji period regime of censorship of imperial representations in various forms, such as portraits, photographs, statues, and currency. The fact that the Emperor was forbidden to compose love poetry and the highly selective publication of his poems during his lifetime likewise emphasises the state's control over the imperial persona and paints a vivid picture of the multifaceted image-crafting efforts surrounding Emperor Meiji.

Keywords Meiji Restoration. Imperial taboo. Fragility. Theatre of power. Public sympathy.

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One is not duchess
A hundred yards from a carriage
(Walter Stevens, *Theory*, 1917)

“The King’s a thing..”.
“A thing my lord?”
“... of nothing”.

(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1599-1601)

1 Introduction

What makes an emperor? The answers historically given to this question closely reflect peoples’ religious world views, moral hierarchies, and the most potent historical-cultural signifiers available in a civilisation’s repertoire. From Queen Elizabeth’s (1533-1603) court of allegorical representations of virtue, where “nothing took place unburdened with parable”, to Hayam Wuruk’s (1334-89) Indonesian court as a copy of the cosmos, with its king as a mediating image between gods and men (Geertz 1983, 129-30), performances of power have abounded in extraordinary variety throughout human history. Likewise, from Hans Christian Andersen’s children’s story “The Emperor Has No Clothes” to Ernst Kantorowicz’s extraordinary discussion of medieval political theology, “The King’s Two Bodies”, literary treatments and studies of representations of power, with its complex relations to authority and legitimacy, have yielded libraries.

The personal and ideological costs of constructing the “theatre of power” and the charisma of a ruler have perhaps been less explored. The PhD Symposium on *Fragile Selves*, hosted by Ca’ Foscari University of Venice from 2 to 4 March 2022, explored notions of fragility and fragile selves from a cross-historical and interdisciplinary perspective in a wide range of topics, from discrimination against sexual and cultural minorities, the legal status of women in fourteenth-century Italy, to literary and cinematic representations of cultural identities. For my part, I would like to pose the question of those political and cultural agents whom society does not allow the display of a fragile self, and to consider whether, at the same time, a carefully crafted appearance of fragility has been, and continues to be, a useful political tool for engendering public sympathy and cementing national consciousness.

This article is a historiographic review and, to some extent, a critique of previous historical scholarship on the life and person of Emperor Meiji.¹ The aim is to explore the construction of the public,

1 Given the Meiji government’s ambitions for colonial expansion and their fulfilment during the Meiji period and up to 1945, the use of the translation ‘emperor’ for the mid to late Meiji period could be reluctantly justified. Nevertheless, I would like to contextualise my use of the term for other historical periods. Similar to the political context in which the term *tennō* 天皇 originated (Japan’s desire in the seventh century to declare itself equal to

imperial persona of Emperor Meiji by the Meiji oligarchs, using existing scholarship to highlight the constraints placed on the emperor, the censorship of criticism and public portrayals of the emperor, and the occasional use of manufactured fragility as a political tool to elicit sympathy and cooperation. The constraints imposed on the imperial persona as a symbol and tool for the nascent nation-building efforts shed new light on the world view of the Meiji state-builders, who, while inconsistent in – and often at odds over – their portrayal of Emperor Meiji, consciously moved from one end of the spectrum of the “imperial performances” to the other, from the persona of an ordinary man to that of a manifest deity.

The young emperor’s transformation took place in the first decade under the guidance and according to the agenda of Meiji state-builders such as Kido Takayoshi 木戸孝允 (1833-77) and Ōkubo Toshimichi 大久保利通 (1830-78), who had access to the young Mutsuhito (the later Emperor Meiji) through court nobles such as Iwakura Tomomi 岩倉具視 (1825-83) and Sanjō Sanetomi 三条実美 (1837-91). From their nominal use of imperial legitimacy – approaching Max Weber’s (1968, 56) notion of a “hereditary charisma” – in bringing about the Meiji Restoration to their conscious shaping of a public imperial image, their task unfolded as a process of trial and error, similar to the parallel ongoing formation of political forms of organisation and national identity. Image construction ran parallel to censorship efforts and image control. To recall Ohnuki-Tierney’s observation that different military governments assigned different meanings to the emperor, the ability of the Meiji state-builders “to move the Emperor up and down the scale of humanity-divinity was possible because of the fluid conception of Japanese culture” (1991, 208-9). To this end, his fragility was exchanged for a construction of institutional charisma according to the needs dictated by circumstances.

China in the famous letters by Suiko Tennō 推古天皇 [554-628]), its translation as ‘emperor’ then (and in our time) reflects a similar desire to simulate equal status with the great powers of the twentieth century that were expanding their empires at the time. To translate *tennō* simply as ‘king’ or ‘sovereign’ would have been to admit an inferior position, and so the translation continued well into modern times, although the country’s name was changed from “empire” to “state” in the post-war period. While the use of the English term “emperor” in state treaties and decrees for the 15-year-old ‘reinstated’ Mutsuhito after 1868 can also be seen as the beginning of an effort at image-building for foreign nations, it is also a continuation of the translation practice, as a letter from Commodore Perry in 1853 also refers to Japan’s “two emperors”: the secular *shogun* and the sacred *tennō* (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 8). The use of the term thus predates the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. As Hall has argued (1983, 11), avoiding the use of the translation term “emperor” raises several other issues regarding the complex of terms, from political titles to specific terminology and adjectives used to describe the *tennō*’s family and its activities, as additional terms would remain untranslated. For the sake of readability, I will use the terms “emperor” and “imperial”, while being aware of their shortcomings and problematic history. I thank Klaus Antoni for his valuable input on this topic.

In the following sections, I will broadly introduce the political and cultural context of the Meiji Restoration² and sketch the understanding of the emperor's role before the Meiji period. Following, I will discuss several examples pertinent to the construction of the imperial image, between fragility, censorship and imposed limitations. The instances chosen are discussed chronologically to facilitate understanding. They comprise an early imperial decree asking for the people's cooperation, a rare example of harsh criticism of the "boy-emperor" published in 1868 before the national press censorship was instituted; the choice of whether to allow photography of the emperor or the reproduction of his portrait on national bills and coins, and the selection of his poems printed against his will during his lifetime in newspapers and school textbooks, particularly during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05).

2 Meiji Era's Inherent Contradictions

In world history, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 ranks as a revolutionary watershed, on a par with the American and French Revolutions. It was a time of immense social, political, and cultural upheaval felt by all societal layers. The samurai factions from the Satsuma and Chōshū domains overthrew the shogunate government, which had lasted more than 250 years, with the emperor as a symbolic authority-granting figure. The revolution was precipitated by the arrival of the famous 'black ships' of Commodore Perry, in 1853, through which the United States of America ultimately forced Japan to open and maintain trading relations. In Japan's case, the new era was described by its state agents³ as a "Restoration", signifying the

² The term 'restoration' as a designation for the political events and regime that came to be after 1868 has long been found a misnomer (Shillony 1990, 299). Prominent historian of the Meiji period, W.G. Beasley (1972), distinguishes between its initial phase of restoration and its main phase of renovation or reform. The first one is anchored in the well-established concept *chūkō* 中興 of the political philosophy of East Asia and seen in the imperial edict *ōsei fukko no dai gorei* 王政復古の大本令 (August Command Restoring Imperial Rule). While it can be argued that 'renovation' would be a far more appropriate translation given the modern, reform-oriented developments of this period, and better corresponding to the Japanese scholarly term in use, *ishin* 維新, I have opted, for the sake of clarity, to employ the term 'restoration' since it has become widespread practice in the English language scholarship of this period.

³ According to Jansen (2002, 334) the edict of January 1868 announcing "a renewal of all things" and the end of the military government was composed for the court noble Iwakura Tomomi by his Shintō advisor and ghostwriter, Tamamatsu Misao (see below on the Letter to the People written in the emperor's name in April 1868). Additional input was given from Satsuma leaders, particularly Okubo Toshimichi (Jansen 2002, 334). In a more general sense, concerning the whole Meiji period, Gluck states that there was no single group with an official status as myth-makers to the Meiji state, but instead

pretext of an alleged return to the ancient imperial rule (*ōsei fukko* 王政復古) of the emperor system (*tennōsei* 天皇制), but also as a “revolution” or “renovation” (*ishin* 維新), thus embodying a profound contradiction. The leaders of the new Meiji state claimed to reinstate the current emperor, Meiji, called Mutsuhito, a then 15-year-old youth, as the *de facto* ruler of Japan. In doing so, they modelled their governmental functions and political rituals on those of an idealised eighth century Japanese antiquity, while at the same time moving in line with unfolding global trends in nation-state construction.

At the beginning of the Meiji period, there was little social cohesion that did not amount to a common national identity, with a population that was generally indifferent to the machinations of political power (Fujitani 1996, 7; Jansen 1986, 5; Steele 2003, 64-6). Fukuzawa Yukichi summarised this problem in his 1873's *Bunmeiron no Gairyaku* 文明論之概略 (An Outline of a Theory of Civilisation), stating that “in Japan there is a government but no nation (*kokumin*)” (text by Fukuzawa translated by Dilworth and Hurst; Dilworth, Hurst 2009, 187). Therefore, Japan's condition was that of a fragile, nascent state, fearful of being colonised by Western powers, aware of its technological disadvantage, and having suffered the humiliation of the “unequal treaties” with the Western powers in 1858.

Thus, one of the most famous and studied periods in Japanese history, the Meiji Era experienced major innovations such as the abolition of the four-class system, the adoption of a constitution and a parliamentary system, the introduction of compulsory education, the building of railways, and the installation of telegraph lines. In addition, at a time when most Western powers were reforming their armies and navies, Japan established a strong new national army and navy. The resultant tension between the incredible technological and social renovation of the period and its guiding principle of a return to the forms and morals of an idealised antiquity (an attempt that was quickly abandoned in the case of forms of political organisation) is best summed up by Marius Jansen's observation that “with the exception of the ideological underpinnings of the throne and Emperorism, antiquity was something of a void into which modernity could be inserted” (2002, 459).

The period can also be understood as having the longest lasting influence on the definition of Japan's national character and what it meant to be Japanese. The following section briefly examines the evolution of the roles and understandings of pre-modern Japanese emperors and delves into the sources of the Restorationist ideology of the Meiji period.

an array of people from government central ministries such as Home, Education and to a lesser extent, Army, Agriculture and Commerce, who were involved in ideological enterprises (1985, 9-10).

3 Imperial Image in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

It is difficult to do justice to the complexity of the changing roles of Japanese emperors throughout history, but in an over-simplified way it is possible to trace a line of continuity that remained constant, centred on their little-changing religious and symbolic functions. Since the early Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 CE), the early agrarian leaders, like the early emperors, were magico-religious leaders whose political power “rested on the ability to invoke supernatural powers to ensure good harvests” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1991, 200). In the eighth century, the imperial system reached its zenith. Its legitimacy and religious authority were codified through the compilation of mythical historical chronicles⁴ that laid out the creation myth of Japan and the one of the emperor’s descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The following centuries saw the fall of the imperial house and the rise of the warrior and *bakufu* supremacy. But even during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), the emperor was seen by many as the country’s ultimate source of divine legitimacy: he symbolically invested new shoguns⁵ and the court’s ties with Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines became stronger than ever. This sacred authority, which only the emperor could bestow, meant that many intelligent people of the time continued to believe in the ability of the emperor and the court to invoke the power of gods, Buddhas and spirits, and many political figures nourished the fear of being branded “an enemy of the Emperor” (Wakabayashi 1991, 29).

For several hundred years before the Meiji Restoration, Japanese emperors were confined to the seclusion of the imperial palace, and in 1615 the Tokugawa regime (*bakufu*) decreed that the emperor and court should confine themselves to cultural, ceremonial and religious affairs (29). Scholars have shown that they were virtually unknown to the people, and the few existing popular beliefs about the emperor tended to be non-political and rooted in folk religions. After studying popular legends about emperors and imperial princes, the ethnographer Miyata Noboru argued that in some areas of Japan, belief in emperors overlapped with folk belief in *marebito*. Emperors were believed to be sacred beings who visited the village world and supposedly granted assistance to the people in the form of benefits such as the creation of sacred rivers, special bountiful crops (such as chestnuts with “imperial teeth marks”), or protection from natural dangers (Fujitani 1996, 7). The persistence of such beliefs into the

⁴ The Chronicles of Japan, *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (720) and The Records of Ancient Matters, *Kojiki* 古事記 (711-12).

⁵ Military commanders who from 1192 until 1867 ruled Japan, although they were nominally subordinated to the emperor.

Meiji period is evidenced by anecdotes surrounding Emperor Meiji's imperial tours between 1869-73, in which peasants are said to have carefully gathered the soil he stepped on, believing that the earth thus consecrated would have healing properties (Griffis 1915, 261).

Except for the areas around the imperial capital of Kyoto, the complete unfamiliarity of the people with the emperor can be seen in other instances, such as the lack of incentive for peasants to fight in the last vestige of resistance against the new Meiji government, the Satsuma Rebellion (1876-7), because they did not know who the emperor was.⁶ Similarly, on the occasion of the emperor's journey to Edo,⁷ the craftsmen and makers of the woodblock prints commemorating it surmised that the emperor was Shōtoku Taishi 聖德太子,⁸ a deity of popular Edo folklore (Fujitani 1996, 7).

However, a very influential group of intellectuals and scholars in the Tokugawa period were by no means lacking in political conception and historical knowledge of the emperor. The rise of the Mito School (*mitogaku* 水戸学)⁹ and the *kokugaku* 国学 native studies movement, which sought to rediscover and affirm a Japanese identity (also in opposition to Chinese culture)¹⁰ through the study and

6 Quoted in Fujitani (1996, 7), elderly women were saying that “even though it's said that the Emperor's taken the place of the shogun, what kind of person is he (*dogan hito ja*)? Must be the one in the *kyogen* play who wears the gold crown and the full-sleeved robe with gold brocade”.

7 Today known as Tokyo.

8 Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 (574-622) was a regent and politician who served under Empress Suiko, renowned for modernising the government administration and for promoting Buddhism in Japan. Over several centuries a devotional cult arose around his figure, with special emphasis on the protection of Japan, the imperial family and Buddhism.

9 The Mito School of the Tokugawa period shared much of the *kokugaku* precepts of nationalistic Shintō, with the addition of ethical maxims of neo-Confucian social ethics (thus their lack of opposition to Chinese culture). The slogan *sonnō-jōi* 尊王攘夷, “Revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians” embodies the combative phase of the Mito School (1860-3).

10 During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, between late seventh century and ninth century, the Japanese state was greatly influenced by Chinese state philosophy and adopted its models of government (known in Japan as the *ritsuryō* 律令, ‘system’). Japan was also the recipient of Chinese culture and aesthetics, and it increasingly adopted religious thought systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism, which were brought to Japan concomitant with the introduction of the Chinese writing system. The effect of this cultural and political influence from the mainland continued to be widely felt until the eve of the Meiji period, with the *kanbun* 漢文 of classical Chinese serving as the written language of the cultured elite and that of government documents (Inoue 1993, 163). The more far-reaching changes in government administration modelled on Chinese concepts of governance are known in Japanese history as the Tanka Reform, which, among other measures regarding bureaucratic administrative order, population registration and taxation, established a new principle of imperial governance and a permanent imperial city (Totman 1981, 24). The influence of Chinese culture and literature was so long-lasting that some contemporary Meiji writers have gone as far as

translation of ancient texts of Japanese literature and history, placed the imperial house at the centre of their world view a hundred years before the Meiji Restoration. Key ideas of the national ideology that emerged after the Meiji Restoration can be traced back to the so-called “Restoration Shintō” (*fukko shintō*), and the *kokugaku* scholar Hirata Atsutane’s 平田篤胤 understanding of Japan as a *shinkoku* 神国, “Land of the Gods”, and the emperor as an *arahitogami* 現人神, a deity presently visible as a human being. Atsutane’s concept of *fukko shintō* formed the central ideological and intellectual tenet of the Restoration movement. The core principles of this ideology were the unbroken line of emperors as descendants of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and the uniqueness and supremacy of the Japanese national policy, or *kokutai* 国体. These beliefs are reflected in various tenets and edicts issued by the emperor and the government from the early Meiji period (Antoni 2016, 178).

In addition, the philological works of the renowned *kokugaku* scholar Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801), who had a large following at the time, up to a thousand disciples, exerted an immense influence. He redefined the emperor as a direct link to the ancestral deities (*kami* 神) watching over Japan and as a kind of icon of the primordial Japanese community, and he propagated the idea of a return to the divine age (Burns 2003, 13, 76). Closer to the Meiji Restoration, the works of Aizawa Seishisai 会沢正志斎 (1781-1863)¹¹ contributed core elements to the nationalist ideology and rhetoric of the Meiji period: the idea of the national body, *kokutai* 国体,¹² and the importance of the unity of religion and government, *saisei itchi* 祭政一致.

Although most political and cultural interest groups, from prominent Meiji leaders to the people at large, tended to agree in their assessment of the emperor as an authority-granting symbolic

stating that, in the Tokugawa period, the production of Chinese poetry (*kanshi* 漢詩) in Japan may have exceeded the amount of verse composed in Japanese (Yaichi 1909, 424).

11 Aizawa Seishisai was a representative of the highly influential Mito School. His importance to the Meiji Restoration is evidenced by the fact that he was posthumously honoured by Emperor Meiji when he accepted a handwritten edition of Aizawa’s programmatic work, *Shinron* 新論 (New Theses), on the occasion of his visit to Mito in 1890. Furthermore, Aizawa was also posthumously awarded a rank of nobility.

12 The history of the concept of *kokutai* 国体 is too extensive to be examined in detail here. In the sense established by Aizawa’s *Shinron* 新論 (New Theses) in 1825, and which became dominant for most of the Meiji period and beyond, *kokutai* or Japan’s national polity consisted of the supposedly unique fact of being a “divine land” (*shinkoku* 神国, *kami-no-kuni* 神の國) founded by the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and ruled by her direct descendants on the basis of her divine mandate to her grandson Ninigi-no-mikoto and all subsequent human emperors to rule the land of Japan for all time as a single dynasty. Thus, the divine emperor (*tennō* 天皇) as a descendant of Amaterasu became the personification of Japanese identity (Antoni 2016, 375).

figure,¹³ this did not prevent them from exercising flexibility in modelling the emperor's role and image. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the emperor himself played the role of a vessel onto which ideas about governance, national character or religious world view could be projected. As a result, the Meiji state-builders' ideas of the emperor's representation and role varied widely, as best illustrated by the long and contentious debate over the first imperial audiences granted to the representatives of foreign powers.¹⁴ Scholars have also long pointed out the dangers of using terms such as "the imperial court", "the Western clans", "the anti-shogunal movement" to cover heterogeneous conglomerations of individuals, or the fallacy of viewing the agents of the Meiji Restoration as representing a class of lower samurai (Sakata, Hall 1956, 34), when in fact they were not a cohesive group compared to those behind the Chinese and Russian revolutions, with no similar organisational structure or explicit ideology (Westney 1986, 2). However, it is not the purpose of this article to detail the specific ideas of individuals regarding the depiction of the emperor, but rather to highlight what can be seen as general patterns of simulation and censorship of imperial fragility in a national context throughout the Meiji period.

13 This is seen in historical facts such as the dissidents of Tosa hatching a plan to kidnap the emperor and use him as a political "jewel" amid domestic turmoil in 1868 (Jansen 2002, 336).

14 The proposed visit of the Duke of Edinburgh in 1869 provoked a vigorous debate in the Japanese government on the question of exposing the emperor to foreign royalty. According to Harry Parkes, British envoy to Japan, the progressive faction maintained that the emperor's reception should be mainly in accordance with the customs of other nations; the conservative faction regarded as injurious to the imperial dignity any practice that could be regarded as an admission of equal rank with a foreign prince (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 14-15).

4 **Beginnings of Imperial Images: Emperor Meiji and the Restoration**

On the brink of the Meiji period, the seclusion and highly ritualised, symbolic nature of Emperor Meiji's life can be glimpsed in a description by William Elliot Griffis,¹⁵ where he remarks:

The Mikado¹⁶ was never allowed to set his foot upon the ground, and the heir apparent was usually carried from room to room. When he went beyond the Palace grounds, [...] to see spring's cherry blossoms or autumn's polychrome foliage, he was shut within the vehicle from the gaze of any and all eager eyes, by thick curtains of split bamboo. [...] In other words, the Mikado's life in the Palace was that of a puppet, the wires being held by others. Personality was reduced as nearly to an abstraction as possible, and individuality was extinguished. (1915, 90)

The easy access and control of the emperor by the Satsuma and Chōshū factions, facilitated by Iwakura Tomomi's presence at court, aided the coup that brought about the Meiji Restoration. In a famous scene, on 3 January 1868, Iwakura Tomomi handed the young emperor the decree declaring the Imperial Restoration, while soldiers guarded the palace gates to prevent interruptions. Even the Meiji leaders were divided over the new forms of government, and the deliberations took place in the presence of the emperor on the night of 4 January, but without his participation. His contemporaries and historians considered him too young, at 15, to have any role in the unfolding events. To paraphrase the Japanese historian Nishikawa Makoto (2018, 25), one must wonder how the young emperor must have felt to hear himself discussed but not consulted.¹⁷

The other date regarded as the beginning of the Restoration is the promulgation of the Charter Oath (*Gokajō no Goseimon* 五箇条の御誓文) on 6 April 1868. A ground-breaking document, drafted in part by Kido Takayoshi, the Charter Oath was seen as something

15 William Elliot Griffis (1843-1928) was one of the first foreigners employed as advisors by the new Meiji government (*oyatoi gaikokujin* お雇い外国人). He helped organise schools and taught physics and chemistry in Japan between 1870-4. On his return, he published extensively on Japan, attracting much interest in the West.

16 Term for the emperor in the Meiji period, which became widespread through its use in Scheuchzer's English translation of Engelbert Kämpfer's 1727 *History of Japan* (Kornicki, Antoni, Hugh 2019, 8).

17 In the young emperor's presence, councillor Yamauchi Yōdō insisted that Yoshinobu, the last Tokugawa shogun, be allowed to attend the deliberations and criticised the "sinister activities of nobles" who were attempting to obliterate the shogun's achievements in the name of the emperor, whom they called "a mere child" (Keene 2002, 121).

akin to a constitution for the new government, outlining its guiding principles in terminology both vague and liberal enough to serve as a basis for future political interpretation and usage. The first article, which proposed the establishment of deliberative assemblies and the decision of all matters by “wide discussion”, served to placate the old-school Tokugawa conservatives at court, while the fourth article simultaneously repudiated the Tokugawa Era in the familiar syntagma of renouncing the “evil customs of the past”. Articles two, three and five represent the more liberal content of the Oath, guaranteeing the freedom of the common people to pursue their vocations, the participation of all classes in government and the pursuit of knowledge throughout the world.

According to Breen (1996, 428), the proclamation ritual of the Charter Oath played a role at the time as significant as its content, marking in one fell swoop the emperor’s transition from an “attendant at the political centre” to a “political leader possessed of will and authority”. The previous emperor-centred rituals of the pre-modern court were now transformed into public state rituals that gave the emperor’s political role a new context and renewed sacred authority. With the emperor still hidden behind a panel during the ceremony, 30 councillors took a vow of allegiance in front of him, and after he left, another 400 courtiers signed the document, a ritual affirmation of authority that must not have sat well with many of the disgruntled participants. The ideals of Restoration Shintō outlined above were also incorporated into the ceremony, as the proclamation included Sanjō Sanetomi, who, on behalf of the emperor, reported the contents of the Oath to the ancestral deities, to whom he ritually offered *saka-ki* branches in accordance with Shintō practice.

Faced with such an overt display of ritual and political authority, the letter distributed in the emperor’s name to the people the very first day afterwards is perplexing at first glance. This letter is very unlike anything previous emperors would have written, and seems to serve as an exhortation for a rapprochement between the emperor and his people, a decidedly modern plea for the people’s cooperation and an announcement of the emperor’s renouncing of the passive role assigned to him in previous times. In the text, the military shoulders the blame for the unfortunate distance between the emperor and the people which makes it impossible for the emperor to know the people’s feelings.

The following is a fragment of Donald Keene’s translation of the letter (2002, 140-1), while the original is to be found in *Meiji tennō ki* 明治天皇紀 (1: 649-52).

Ever since, quite unexpectedly, We succeeded to the throne, young
and weak though We are, We have been unable to control Our ap-
prehension, day and night, over how We are to remain faithful to

Our ancestors when dealing with foreign countries. It is Our belief that when the authority of the court declined in the Middle Ages and the military seized power, they maintained on the surface worshipful respect of the court, but in reality their respect intentionally isolated the court, making it impossible for the court, as the father and mother of the entire people, to know the people's feelings. In the end, the Emperor became the sovereign of the multitude in name only. That is how it happens that although awe of the court today is greater than ever before, the prestige of the court has diminished correspondingly, and the separation between those above and those below is as great as that between heaven and earth. Under these conditions, how are We to reign over the country? Now, at a time of renovation of rule of the country, if even one of the millions of people in this country is unable to find his place in society, this will be entirely Our fault.

The letter goes on to emphasise the emperor's decision to throw himself into the governance of the country as his "heaven-sent" mission, and to offer as a shining example the personal rule of the ancestors of ancient times, the closeness between them and the people, whose reciprocated love bestowed heaven's blessings upon the land. While Keene sees the main point of the letter in the expressed desire for closer contact between the emperor and his people, I approach the text from its sympathetic dimension, for its uncharacteristic public revelation of a constructed private self of the emperor.

The author of the letter may have been Tamamatsu Misao 玉松操 (1810-72),¹⁸ as it is unlikely to express the true thoughts and feelings of the young emperor. In it, the now-familiar cultural signifiers of Restoration politics (return to the imperial rule of the ancestors, the emperor as father and mother of the people, inheriting the "evils of the past" and safeguarding the Land of the Gods) are interwoven with a revelation of the constructed fragility and openly admitted precariousness of the newly defined imperial role that the emperor, though by his own admission "young and weak", is preparing to fulfil despite "the pain and suffering it may entail". The first two thirds of the letter describe the current situation and the emperor's desire to resume personal rule over the country, for if he were to spend his days in a peaceful existence in the palace, forgetting the "hundred years of grief", the country would be scorned and the ancestors would be shamed.

18 A learned, former Shintō priest and *kokugaku* scholar who served as Iwakura Tomomi's 'brain' and is credited with drafting the Rescript on the Imperial Restoration (*ōsei fukko no shōchoku* 王政復古の詔勅; Keene 2002, 115).

Toward the end of the letter, the true purpose of gaining the cooperation of the people in bringing about the Meiji Restoration is emphasised, as they are admonished not to be surprised at the emperor's involvement in the government, but to support him. Failure to do so would be due to their ignorance of the danger threatening the Land of the Gods and would cause the emperor to lose his ancestral patrimony. The issue of the desired cooperation of the people is publicised with emotional vocabulary such as the rhetorical question quoted above: "Under these conditions, how are We to reign over the country?". This culminates in a final appeal to the people to "give due consideration" to the emperor's wishes and to join him in putting aside private thoughts for the common good and the security of the Land of the Gods.

The general tone of the letter places the emperor in a position dependent on the goodwill of the people as he undertakes the immense task he perceives as his ancestral duty. The constructed image of fragility due to youth and inherent weakness in the face of a heaven-given mission that may entail hardship and sacrifice serves to harness the power of public sympathy as a political force. The emperor's apparent interest in knowing the feelings of the people and growing closer to them serves to cement their sympathy through flattery, while the frequent references to the spirits of the ancestors to be pacified or made proud reinforce the idea, articulated in Restoration Shintō thought, of the emperor as a medium between the ancestral deities and the people. In other words, the circle of a mutually beneficial relationship is drawn: in return for the people's support of the emperor, his governance of Japan would bring them security, international glory, and the blessings of the ancestral deities who watch over the Land of the Gods.

A comparison of the two documents issued on the same day, the five-article Charter Oath and the emperor's Letter to the People, reveals striking differences in both intent and content. If the Charter Oath serves as an approximation of a first constitution of Japan, declaring public assemblies and all classes high and low united and involved in decision-making, the emperor's letter places most of the burden of government on the emperor himself (with only a mention of the help of "officials and *daimyo*?"). The former served to appease the Tokugawa *daimyōs*, before military victory over them was assured; the latter sought to gain the cooperation of the people for the Restoration and to justify it in their eyes. The former was outlined as a political document embodying contradictory goals and manoeuvring around vague and dry vocabulary, while the latter contained clear exhortations, emotionally charged language, and the redundant infusion of religiously infused ideological tropes.

I believe that the two documents, by contrast, portray the beginning of the long-term dual nature of imperial image-making in the Meiji

Era. Early on, the image of the emperor constructed for the people was distinct from the image of his largely ceremonial, authority-granting role presented to the Meiji elites. This echoes a metaphor used by historian Kuno Osamu 久野収 for late Meiji portrayals of the emperor:

The Emperor appears to the people as an absolute sovereign, while in actual political and administrative affairs he is understood in the institutional theory as an existence within the constitution. The former is a “manifest religion” (*kengyō* 顕教) widely taught to the people, while the latter is an “esoteric religion” (*mikkyō* 密教) known only to the ruling elite. (Nishikawa 2018, 14; Author’s transl.)

This paragraph examined the role of the emperor at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, contrasting two documents in terms of their functions in shaping the public image of the young emperor, including a rare, early instance of a constructed portrayal of imperial fragility to generate public sympathy and thus people’s cooperation. I will now turn to Meiji’s most intense, transformative phase of becoming a modern monarch.

5 Imperial Tours and Image Limitations

Perhaps nothing illustrates the contrast between the different image-making philosophies and symbolic performances of the Tokugawa and Meiji governments more starkly than their approach to pageantry and the visibility of power. If the Tokugawa government employed what Timon Screech has poetically termed “an iconography of absence” in an attempt to make politics invisible (2000, 111), the Meiji oligarchs in the early 1870s favoured an ideological representation that emphasised the direct relationship between the emperor and the people (Gluck 1985, 73). On the rare occasions when the shogun left Edo Castle, efforts were made to clear the streets and vacate the second floors of houses along the way, so that no one would be able to look down upon the emperor crossing the area. When Emperor Meiji continued his imperial progress, his entourage numbered more than two thousand people, and his schedule included ceremonial visits to public and civic places such as schools, workshops, and military arsenals. If the shoguns eschewed public coronations, the traditional Shintō rite of the emperor’s enthronement, *Daijōsai* 大嘗祭, became a national, religious event. If there were a total of three imperial tours during the 260 years of the Tokugawa period, Emperor Meiji made 102 imperial excursions (*gyōkō* 行幸) outside the capital during the 45 years of his reign.

This increased exposure of the young emperor in the first half of his reign earned him the moniker of “Emperor in motion” (*ugoku tennō* 動<天皇) by historians (Murai 1999, 79). According to Gluck,

from 1868 to 1881 the new government “invoked the imperial institution as the symbolic center of the unified nation” (1985, 73). At the initiative of Ōkubo Toshimichi, the emperor was to be “brought down from the clouds” and made known to the people. At the same time, the imperial tours served the additional purpose of showing the emperor his country and of removing him from the imperial court, with its old-fashioned nobility and an environment traditionally characterised by court ladies in strictly prescribed roles and close to the emperor. Such was the importance attached to imperial tours that one-fifth of the new government’s total budget was spent on them (Craig 2014, 48), and they remained the dominant form of public imperial pageantry until the 1880s.

The Meiji government also intensified its efforts to present the emperor as the sanctifying legitimator of its authority by implementing the “unity of rites and government” (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致) that it proclaimed in the very first decrees of the Restoration, making the performance of rituals an inseparable part of government. Takashi Fujitani (1996) has examined in detail the processes by which the “theatre of power” of the Meiji period was constructed, highlighting the national holidays, mnemonic sites (monuments, statues, and shrines), and Shintō rituals that were instituted as “a device for remembering a mytho-history that had never been known”, a kind of collective cultural memory in the making (Fujitani 1996, 12-13). Murakami Shigeyoshi tellingly pointed out that the architects of the modern imperial institution had invented numerous court rituals that were extended on a national scale, among which eleven of the thirteen emperor-centred, archaic-seeming rituals had no historical precedent (quoted in Fujitani 1996, 13).

While the mechanics of the Meiji state-builders’ imperial pageantry and active image-making have been extensively studied, I would like to turn my attention to two incidents related to the imperial tours that are worthy of closer examination, as they represent the first instances of censorship decisions made by Meiji leaders when confronted with an unforeseen event that was potentially damaging to the emperor’s public image: rare press criticism of the young emperor in the print media in 1868 and Japan’s first “paparazzi” photograph by commercial photographer Raimund von Stillfried.

5.1 Political Satire and Meiji Press Censorship

The siege of Edo Castle began in May 1868, one month after the proclamation of the Charter Oath. The stronghold of the former Tokugawa shogunate was eventually surrendered peacefully through the skilful mediation of Katsu Kaishū 勝海舟 (1823-99), but discontent was high in the city, and the population was cynical about the ruling elites, be they

the old *bakufu* government or the new Satsuma and Chōshū factions. Their ambivalent attitude could be glimpsed in the short-lived pro-Tokugawa newspapers that sprang up in the benign, lax period after the fall of the Tokugawa regime and its censorship laws, but before the new Meiji government implemented censorship measures.

As William Steele (2003) has shown, by February 1868 as many as 20 newspapers were regularly informing Edo citizens of political (as well as local, humorous) events, and political satire also played a central role. The press capitalised on the general sense of excitement and popular support for the Tokugawa government. Also motivated by financial gain, it vilified the Satsuma and Chōshū factions and exaggerated Tokugawa victories, as such articles sold best. In media such as the largest newspaper, the *Chūgai shinbun* 中外新聞 (whose sales often exceeded 1,500 copies per issue), we find an unflattering description of the young emperor at the time of the imperial army's advance on Edo as a "small boy of indolent character" and a "prisoner in the hands of the mutinous southern *daimyō*" (Steele 2003, 68).

The newspaper *Kōko shinbun* 江湖新聞, founded in April 1868, was likewise critical of the new government, as its creator Fukuchi Gen'ichirō 福地源一郎 (1841-1906) called Satsuma and Chōshū a "second *bakufu*" and declared that the political authority lay not in the hands of the imperial court. In another article titled "On Strength and Weakness" (*Kyōjaku ron* 強弱論), he laid out his most explicit justification of resistance – that Japan must be saved from the usurpers of imperial government – and his belief in the ultimate victory over the Restoration government. He went so far as to say that "the Emperor does nothing" and called for the establishment of a parliamentary form of government. His articles later led to his arrest on 23 May and a brief imprisonment.

Satirical prints, or cartoons, are also a useful means of gauging people's feelings about the contemporary political context. The prints were produced until the late Tokugawa period, varied in quality and were sold cheaply on the streets. They served as social and political commentary and reached a peak around the time of the surrender of Edo Castle (Steele 2003, 73). The content of one print from the same period was particularly antagonistic and cynical towards the ideology of loyalty to the imperial house:

Are we afraid of being called an enemy of the court? NO!
Is there a way to escape humble submission? NO!
Does the Emperor know anything? NO!
Is honour due to the pseudo-princes? NO!
Is respect due to wearers of imperial armbands? NO!
[...]
Does righteousness exist between high and low? NO!

Is there a path leading to loyalty and fealty, benevolence and virtue? NO!¹⁹

By 15 May, the new government was in full control of Edo and imposed stricter censorship regulations. Just one day after the publication of Fukuchi Gen'ichirō's article, the Council of State issued Dajōkan Decree 358, which stated that all books and reprints would require official permission before printing. Subsequent decrees prohibited the unauthorised publication of newspapers and established penalties for violators. In one fell swoop, all pro-Tokugawa and non-government-sponsored newspapers were eliminated. Based on the Tokugawa licensing precedents, the government enforced a press-prohibition policy that would remain unchanged, except in tone and degree of specificity, for the next 75 years (Huffman 1997, 45).

As for the unrest in Tokyo, Ōkubo Toshimichi's solution of using the emperor's public presence as a means of pacifying the people and reasserting the authority of the new government worked to the satisfaction of the Meiji leaders in the long run. The imperial capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo), and in honour of the emperor's coming of age on 27 August, the name of the epoch was changed from "Keiō" to "Meiji", following the Chinese tradition of naming epochs based on the length of an emperor's reign. The name "Meiji", which means "era of bright reign", also gave rise to further satire, as a mocking rhyme popular in Tokyo at the time interpreted it maliciously: "Read from above it may mean bright rule, but read from below it means ungoverned by anyone (*osamarumei*)" (cf. Steele 2003, 84). However, in a surprisingly creative twist of public relations management, an unnamed official decided that large quantities of sake would also be distributed to the population to commemorate the emperor's arrival in Tokyo, which seemed to further soothe the spirits of the people.

5.2 The Mikado Photograph Affair vs. Imperial Portraits

The trial-and-error nature of imperial image-making in the Meiji period is perhaps most vividly illustrated by what Yokohama newspapers called the "Mikado Photograph Affair" in 1872. On the occasion of the emperor's visit to the Yokosuka Naval Yard, Raimund von Stillfried, an Austrian commercial photographer, took an unauthorised photograph of the emperor and his suite and advertised it for sale a week later [fig. 1]. After skilful diplomatic negotiations on the part of Mutsu Munemitsu, then governor of Kanagawa Prefecture, the photographs

¹⁹ Translated in Steele 2003, 76.



Figure 1 Baron Raimund von Stillfried, *His Imperial Majesty the Tenno of Japan and Suite*. 1 January 1872. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Emperor_Meiji_Inaugurating_Yokosuka_Arsenal_Jan_1_1872.png

and their negatives were confiscated. The incident, however, had far-reaching implications for the government's policy of representing the emperor. As Luke Gartlan (2016, 73-100) has shown, there is a direct causal link between the illegal photograph and the subsequent total control that was enforced over the possession, display, and distribution of photographs of the emperor, as well as the official commissioning of imperial portraits by Japanese photographer Uchida Kuichi 内田九一 (1844-75).

Looking more closely at the context in which the photograph was taken, several significant details could be said to have contributed to the chain of reactions it triggered. If von Stillfried is to be believed, this was the first day that the emperor performed an official act outside of his palace, appearing before the people for the first time without the formalities that had previously been observed. Like his European counterparts, on 1 January 1872, the emperor placed the imperial seal of authority on the Arsenal, built by French engineers, by laying the foundation stone of a new dry dock. As a souvenir of the visit, he received a golden hammer made by French officials. If the visit lacked the formality and degree of rigidity of previous staged imperial events, it would further explain the panic of Meiji officials at the appearance of photography [fig. 1].

Contemporary testimony, such as the official report of the Austro-Hungarian Minister resident in Japan, Baron Heinrich von Calice, as well as the travel diary of the Austrian globetrotter Josef von Doblhoff, established that von Stillfried took the photograph, titled “His Imperial Majesty the Tenno of Japan and Suite”, hidden aboard a ship in an adjacent dock by directing his camera lens through a hole in the ship’s sail as the emperor’s entourage paused beside the dock (Gartlan 2016, 88). But what was so disturbing about the photograph to Meiji officials?

The photograph shows the emperor seated on a low chair, dressed in court robes, pleated formal pantaloons, and a gold headpiece, with a folded fan in his hand. The figure to his right is the Chancellor of the Council of State, Sanjō Sanetomi, and to his left are two foreigners, one of whom is identified in the caption as the director of the Yokosuka Arsenal, François Verny. The clandestine nature of the photograph’s execution is evident in the relaxed, unfocused postures of the subjects, who either look away from the camera or appear to be engaged in conversation. There are 24 men in the group, most of them dressed in Western clothes. While the contemporary viewer, accustomed to sensational paparazzi photographs of celebrities ranging from actors to royalty and heads of state, may find nothing scandalous or remarkable in this photograph, it is arguable that there is no trace of majestic authority either.

Building on Luke Gartlan’s observations, I further believe that from the perspective of the Meiji leaders, both the candid nature of the photograph and the manner in which it was executed may have signalled in print for all to see a damage to imperial prestige and mystique, a lack of control over imperial representation, and a lack of authority over foreigners who had long sought to circumvent Tokugawa restrictions on photographing representative, authoritative sites such as Edo Castle. Add to this the widespread mystique that still surrounded the person of the emperor, and the fact that the people’s custom of not looking directly at the emperor or crown prince in person was maintained until the end of the Asia-Pacific War, and the audacity of the foreign photographer would have been all the more galling.

As a result, the officials tightened their control over subsequent photographs of Emperor Meiji and their display, going so far as to confiscate even the negatives of the official portraits taken by Uchida in 1872 and, on the occasion of their widespread distribution to all prefectures, to stipulate that they be displayed only on special occasions. Furthermore, the exhibition of the photographs in 1873 included a police presence to ensure the appropriate level of piety on the part of the viewer. As Gartlan (2016, 99) astutely noted, in the newly created and tightly controlled public space, the portrait played the role of “imperial cynosure by proxy”, extending “the experience of majestic spectacle throughout the nation”.

This would later converge into the ritual veneration of the sanctioned imperial portrait, *goshin'ei* 御真影 (lit. 'the venerable shadow'), from 1890, when it was distributed to all schools along with the Imperial Rescript on Education. According to Ohnuki-Tierney (2020, 172), however, the fact that most public and private schools acquired a copy of the imperial portraits did not result in students seeing them very often, since they were housed in a small wooden structure in the form of a Shintō shrine whose doors were opened only during ceremonial times. Thus, the emperor remained invisible to the people. Nevertheless, the scandal surrounding the Christian professor Uchimura Kanzō's 内村鑑三 alleged refusal to bow before the framed rescript in 1891 sparked a fierce debate over the compatibility of Christianity and state Shintō. Similarly, as late as 26 March 1903, 21 November 1909, 12 September 1923, and 3 February 1927, articles in newspapers such as the *Asahi shinbun* praised school directors who perished in fires while trying to rescue the rescript and the imperial portrait from burning buildings (Tseng 2020, 312). The nationalist fervour that gripped the young nation manifested itself in the degree of internalisation of the ritually and violently taught demonstration of respect or even worship for the "August Emperor" represented by his imperial portrait, reinforced by lingering superstitions and quasi-religious reverence.

While the Meiji leaders learned to tolerate political satire directed at them after the turmoil of the tumultuous 1870s and 1880s subsided, accepting it as an integral part of civil society, not even the slightest hint of parody of the imperial institution was tolerated. This is illustrated by the case of the rogue journalist Miyatake Gaikotsu 宮武外骨 (1867-1955), an avid reader of the *Marumaru chinbun* 團團珍聞, who was imprisoned in 1889 after printing a cartoon parody of the Constitution Proclamation Ceremony, in which an emperor-like figure resembled a skeleton²⁰ (Duus 2001, 980-1) [fig. 2].

This section has shown the Meiji leaders' desire for total control over the photographic representation of the emperor and its visualisation by the people, and their desire to eliminate any possibility of an unfavourable portrayal in which human fragility might be observed. At a time when portraits of monarchs and their families were sold by the millions in France and Britain as *cartes de visite*, photographs of Emperor Meiji were banned from private possession (Gartlan 2016, 99). However, as Alice Tseng has shown, Meiji leaders

20 The skeleton supposedly represented a pun alluding to the newspaper editor's name, Gaikotsu. The illustration and its accompanying article, titled "Promulgation Ceremony for the Sharpening of the Ready Wit Law" (*Tonchi kenpō happushiki* 頓智研法発布式), reflecting the magazine's name, *Journal of the Society of Ready Wit* (*Tonchi kyōkai zasshi* 頓智協会雑誌), were considered offensive enough to punish everyone involved and shut down the journal (Marks 2010, 174).

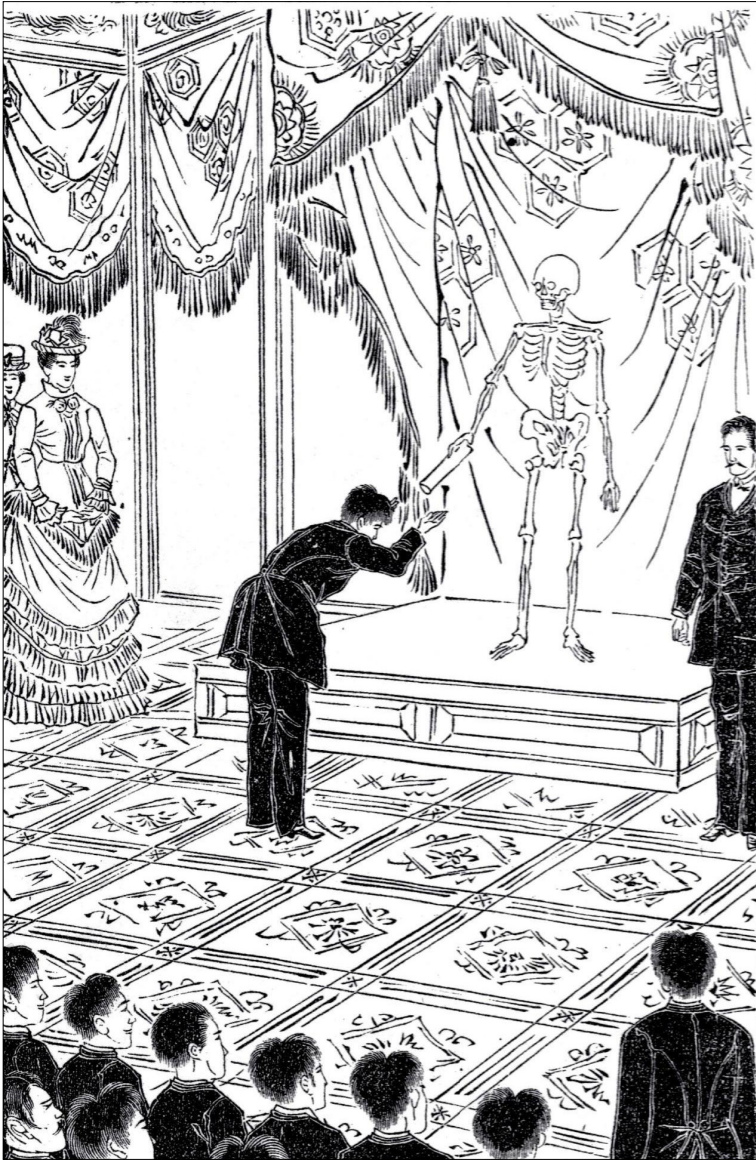


Figure 2 Miyatake Gaikotsu, *Promulgation Ceremony for the Sharpening of the Ready Wit Law*.
Source: *Journal of the Society of Ready Wit (Tonchi kyōkai zasshi 頓智協会雑誌)*, 28, 4, March 1889.
Picture title in Japanese: *Tonchi kenpō happushiki 頓智研法発布式*

were soon forced to realise the value of photography as a medium, and magazines such as *Fūzoku gahō* 風俗画報 (Illustrated Magazine of Japanese Life; started in 1889), *Taiyō* 太陽 (The Sun; started in 1895), and *Kōzoku gahō* 皇族画報 (Illustrated Magazine of the Imperial Family), a supplement of *Fujin gahō* 夫人画報 (Lady's Graphic; started in 1905), regularly featured portraits of the imperial family (except the emperor) and members of the social elite to widespread readers' interest (Tseng 2020, 323-4).

The absence of additional portraits or photographs of the emperor is noticeable, however, as he entered the second period of his reign, known as "the quiet Emperor" (Murai 1999, 79), when he was slowly replaced in public view by his sanctioned imperial portrait (of 1890) and attained a perpetual youthful, majestic image in the collective national identity. The next section will examine another type of imperial symbolic absence from national representation: Meiji banknote design and patriotic statues.

6 Mutable National Symbols and the Sacrality of Imperial Representation

Duus (2001, 983, 989) argued that from the Meiji period onward, political cartoons played the complex and contradictory role of being both a weapon of political criticism (against Meiji officials, once a healthy civil opposition had developed) and a tool for "constructing a national imaginary whose legitimacy and authority were never questioned" (in times of perceived external threat, especially during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars). However, Duus also touched on the mutability of national representative symbols, noting that "there was no Japanese equivalent of Uncle Sam, John Bull, or Marianne", and that the few attempts to portray the Sun Goddess Amaterasu as a symbol for Japan, in the way that the neoclassical goddess Britannia represented the British Empire by the artist Kitazawa Rakuten, were quickly abandoned. According to Duus, the image of Amaterasu as a symbol did not prove popular, perhaps because "it was faintly incongruous to see the imperial ancestress so tangibly embodied in flesh" (2001, 985). The depiction of the emperor was not an option because of the imperial taboo that was prevalent in society at the time. Therefore, the national symbols depicted varied from a moustachioed gentleman, a manly worker, or Japan as "Miss Rising Sun".

A similar but less differentiated variant, which also omitted the possibility of imperial representation, is the case of the iconography decorating the newly printed national banknotes. In the 1870s and 1880s, the mythical Empress Jingū 神功皇后, who supposedly reigned in the third century, was used as a representation of the new nation-state, serving as an ideal representative not only of Meiji Japan but

also of the Meiji emperor. Trede (2008) has shown how she was variously imagined in her mid-nineteenth-century popular representation as a goddess, a “martial mother endowed with supernatural qualities”, a cross-dressing warrior who blurred gender categories, and as a symbol of Japanese interests abroad through her successful invasion of Korean kingdoms, according to mythical historiography, or as a virtuous wife, according to the eighteenth-century Mito School portrayal of her, which focused more on her secondary role in relation to her husband and child, Emperor Ōjin 応神天皇. In this way, she fulfilled several roles consistent with the values promoted by Meiji ideology, from virtuous womanhood to military competence to the feminine re-imagining of Japan as a nation outlined by *kokugaku* thinkers such as Motoori Norinaga. The feminine attributes of virtue and motherhood were combined with the more masculine warrior stance in much the same way that Emperor Meiji was described at the beginning of the period as both “father and mother of the nation” (as seen in the 1868 decree cited above).

However, I would like to draw attention to the decision-making process regarding the design of the banknotes that led to the choice of Empress Jingū as the national symbol. According to Trede (2008), Thomas Kinder’s 1872 proposal to depict Emperor Meiji on banknotes was rejected, despite the fact that he was only following Western examples. Although it was believed that printing photographic portraits, usually showing the head of state in an oval frame, was effective in preventing counterfeiting, in Japan it was not considered appropriate to use Emperor Meiji’s portrait. Surprisingly, the next suggestion came eight years later from Emperor Meiji himself, who put forward the legendary first human emperor, Jinmu Tennō 神武天皇, as a suitable symbol for banknotes.

The Ministry of State rejected the idea as blasphemous because “the Emperor’s image would be defiled by being touched by ordinary people” (Suzuki Masayuki, quoted in Ohnuki-Tierney 2020, 170). The Japanese also generally regarded money as spiritually as well as physically polluting, as evidenced by the contemporary custom of washing one’s hands after handling money and the fact that the merchant class was the lowest in the Tokugawa class hierarchy because of its involvement with money (Ohnuki-Tierney 1989, 28-9). However, it is the justification for the rejection of the proposal by the imperial advisor Motoda Nagazane (1818-91) that sheds further light on the perception of imperial augustness in the Meiji Era. Motoda claimed that:

The image of an imperial ancestor would become soiled through its being handled by all manner of people; moreover, the value of the notes would rise and fall, thus suggesting the rise and fall of the Emperor so represented. (quoted in Trede 2008, 63-4)

This perception lay at the root of the reason why no emperor or empress was depicted on such an everyday medium in the Meiji period and beyond. Interestingly, it was only because the Meiji government adopted the Tokugawa-era decision of the Mito School historians to exclude Empress Jingū from the emperor's lineage and refer to her as an interim regent that she was deemed suitable to serve as a national symbol in the manner described above. Like Shōtoku Taishi (574-622), she lacked the iconicity of a sanctified empress (Trede 2008, 66).

While the legendary first emperor, Jinmu Tennō, might have been considered too majestic a symbol to be depicted on banknotes, the cult that grew around his persona as a symbol of the supposedly unique, unbroken imperial line was supported by the appearance of numerous statues throughout the country (Brownlee 2014, 183-7). Other legendary figures, such as Yamato Takeru, were also depicted in statues such as the one erected in Kanazawa in the 1880s. Nevertheless, Sven Saaler has shown that of the more than 900 statues of various public figures erected in Japan between 1880 and 1940, the lack of representation of the reigning emperor stands out as a conspicuous feature of public statuary in modern Japan. The only sanctioned statues of Emperor Meiji were made after his death, and until 1968 not a single statue of him was displayed in an outdoor public space (Saaler 2017, 5-6).

As one of the few studies of the absence or indirect representation of the Japanese emperor, I will devote the following paragraphs to a discussion of Ohnuki-Tierney's (2020) book chapter "The Invisible and Inaudible Japanese Emperor". In it, the author proposes an interesting, if confusing, connection between the religious nature of the emperor as a deity in the Shintō pantheon and a vessel for an imperial soul transmitted through the unbroken imperial line, and the Shintō notion that it is "the soul (*tamashii* 魂) that defines and identifies deities" and other beings of the universe.

Drawing a parallel between the imperial soul and the purported invisibility of the souls of Shintō deities, or of important deities of the Shintō pantheon itself (whether physically, the unseen character of Amaterasu Ōmikami in the Inner Shrine, or textually, in Kawai Hayao's interpretation of the Kojiki centred on the "empty centre" theme of Shintō folk religion), Ohnuki-Tierney seems to suggest that the reluctance to directly depict Emperor Meiji and his perceived invisibility in image and word share a common core with Shintō practices and views regarding the conceptualisation and representation of Shintō deities and their souls. She concludes by stating that "the notion of soul in Japan necessarily precludes the externalization of the imperial soul" (2020, 166), where externalisation is defined as the expression of "an idea or concept either as an object, including signs and symbols, or as sound or speech" (155). The first statement could

be interpreted as the impossibility of representing the imperial soul and thus the emperor, which makes the idea of imperial symbols of power infeasible and removes the nature of the emperor as a “sacred legitimator”. The following chapter in the book is titled “Non-Externalization of the Emperor”, but just a few pages later, Ohnuki-Tierney examines national symbols for the emperor such as the phoenix, dragon, and crane on Japanese stamps printed as early as 1871. Terminological inconsistencies aside, the author’s approach sheds further light on the possible origins of the so-called “imperial taboo”.

While Ohnuki-Tierney approaches her analysis from the perspective of religion and anthropology, I would argue that the Meiji state-builders’ skilful political use of the imperial persona as a conferral of legitimacy would play as much or more of a role in the degree of representation and presence of Emperor Meiji in nation-building efforts and governance. Moreover, the existence in the Meiji period of persistent popular superstitions or folk beliefs about the emperor, on the one hand, and quasi-religious reverence for him, on the other, qualified him all the more as a malleable vessel to hold within the “metaphysical core of the nation”. Because of his ambivalent nature, the emperor could thus be brought forth, humanised or deified, as circumstances demanded and as the Meiji custodians of the imperial image (Gluck 1985, 73) saw fit to employ his person, between a humanised, modern, and benevolent monarch, the patriarch of the nation, and a manifest deity - *arahitogami* 現人神 - embodying Japan’s *kokutai* 国体 of an unbroken line of imperial descendants of Amaterasu and ensuring the peace of the Land of the Gods. Beginning in 1904, for all these facets of the imperial persona, there was a sympathy-evoking, ideology-condensing medium that could express them in appropriate response to political events and to the heart’s content of Meiji officials, and that was imperial poetry.

7 The Emperor Meiji's Voice: Imperial Poetry

This section examines Meiji officials' use of Japanese *waka* 和歌 court poetry by and for the emperor in nation-building efforts, particularly during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). I examine the emperor's poems in terms of the role of the New Year's Imperial Poetry Contest *utakai hajime* 歌会始²¹ in building an imagined community, the ideologues' decisions to limit the emperor's poetic activity, and their selection of poems to publish against the emperor's wishes. The ideologues chose to make accessible the poetic content that served the purpose of highlighting the emperor's emotional fragility (due to his supposed concern for his people, thus evoking public sympathy and unity) and content that reinforced the religious-ideological components of the Restoration's nationalist rhetoric outlined above.

Throughout the Meiji period, there were almost no public appearances or means of communication that facilitated Emperor Meiji's communication with the people, beyond the imperial scripts written in his name, which expressed the will of the government in highly formalised, lofty imperial terms. Ohnuki-Tierney (2020) suggests that this quality of the "inaudible Emperor", along with the lack of developed public oratory in Japan, should also be interpreted in the context of Japanese religious beliefs about the power of the soul of language, *kotodama* 言霊. In my opinion, similar to the idea of the emperor's lack of visibility stemming from Shintō religious beliefs about the invisibility of the souls of gods, here, too, the Meiji oligarchs' preference for the emperor's absence of direct communication was crucial. Moreover, what Ohnuki-Tierney does not address is the political role played by the publication, after 1904, of carefully selected hundreds of imperial poems (*gyosei* 御製) by members of the Meiji period Imperial Household Agency (*Kunaichō*), more specifically the Imperial Bureau of Poetry (*Outadokoro*).

The Imperial Bureau of Poetry was established in 1869 as part of the court ministries brought back to life, in an attempt to bestow

21 The Imperial Poetry Competition, or Imperial Poetry Reading, dates back to the middle of the thirteenth century or earlier. The name *utakai* refers to a party dedicated to the composition of poetry on a given theme, and such gatherings were often held on various occasions as early as the Heian period. Those held by the emperor were called *uta-gokai* 歌御会. Beginning with 1502, it was established as a regular New Year's court event and continued intermittently until the modern period, with almost annual occurrences in the Edo and Meiji periods (Tagaya 2017, 213-16). The Meiji Era *utakai hajime*, continued through the early years of the Meiji period, despite domestic and international unrest. It was organised in 1869 ostensibly at the request of the young Emperor Meiji. Initially, it stayed true to tradition and allowed only courtiers and those close to the emperor to submit their verses. In 1872, however, participation was gradually opened to junior court officials, *hanninkan* 判任官, and in 1874 to all Japanese subjects, regardless of class, age or gender (Miyamoto 2010, 187-200).

upon the new government a veneer of the prestige of the imperial rule in the Nara period (710-94).²² Like many other Meiji government institutions, it too underwent several transformations until its final organisation form in 1888, when Takasaki Masakaze 高崎正風 (1836-1912), the emperor's advisor and tutor of *waka* poetry, became its leader²³ until the end of his life in 1912. The majority of Outadokoro's members in early Meiji came from Satsuma and Chōshū and were part of the widespread political and cultural networks of Shintō and *kokugaku* scholars. They often occupied other political posts at the same time and were repaid with entry into the newly created aristocracy towards the end of their careers, thus representing an intersection between the "field of power" and the "cultural field" (Bourdieu). Their duties included editing the *waka* poems of the imperial family and the court nobles and ladies, offering literary criticism, and compiling literary anthologies. In addition, starting with the Russo-Japanese War, many of Outadokoro's members were active in composing war songs and school songs for indoctrination purposes.

Outadokoro's most enduring legacy, however, which has been carried into the modern era and continues to this day, is the revival of the New Year's Imperial Poetry Competition (also called the "Reading") in 1869, *utakai hajime* 歌会始, and its expansion into a national event open to all Japanese, in 1874. The competition was used to build a bridge between the emperor and his people, as the imperial poems, the poems of nobles and officials, and the selected poems of commoners were published side by side in all major newspapers throughout the Meiji period, in a poetic and political construction of the nation as an 'imagined community'. Akira (1990, 322) has described the New Year's Imperial Poetry Competition as a performance of the "man-of-letters Emperor", in which the emperor is portrayed at the apex of the cultural hierarchy.

Emperor Meiji was in fact a truly prolific poet, with more than 90,000 poems attributed to him. His education as an imperial prince also relied heavily on mastery of Confucian classics, calligraphy, *waka* poetry, as was the custom for princes and emperors before the Meiji period (Keene 2002, 3). However, out of this extraordinary number of poems, one genre of poetry was missing after the tenth year of the Meiji period (1877), namely love poetry. In an article on 6 April 2004 in *Asahi Shinbun*, literary critic and writer Maruya Sai'ichi 丸谷才一 (1925-2012) stated:

22 For more information on the Meiji period's Imperial Bureau of Poetry, see Tsunekawa (1939), Miyamoto (2010) and, in the English language, Tuck (2018, 147-91).

23 Incidentally, 1888 was also the year Takasaki became a councillor on the newly-established Privy Council (*Sūmitsu-in* 枢密院). He was also, like the majority of early Meiji court officials, a native of the Satsuma province.

As a result of the Satsuma Rebellion, the Meiji government decided that the army must be the Emperor's army and the Emperor must be the commander-in-chief. It would be unacceptable for the Emperor to be weak because it would set a bad example. They decided that the Emperor must be proud and solemn, and they forbade him to compose love poems. Therefore, the Emperor stopped composing love poems, even when composing poems on a set topic.²⁴ (Maruya 2004; Author's transl.)

Maruya goes on to call this literary censorship of the emperor a "barbaric act" that constituted "one of the most severe literary suppressions and perhaps the greatest upheaval in the history of Japanese literature", since the emperor's love poetry was the foundation of the classical works of Japanese literature, the imperial poetry anthologies from *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集 to *Shinkokinwakashū* 新古今和歌集, and most emperors up to Emperor Kōmei 孝明天皇 and Emperor Meiji (for the first ten years of the Meiji period) had always composed love poems. Leaving aside Maruya's denunciatory pathos or Mamiya Kiyoo's 間宮清夫 opinion that prohibiting modern emperors from composing love poems was tantamount to prohibiting them from loving and living freely (Mamiya 2013, 20), I believe that the Meiji government's censorship of the emperor's private literary endeavours shows the lengths to which they were willing to go to protect the imperial charisma from any appearance of fragility.

Of the vast number written, no more than 8% of his poems were made known to the world during his lifetime (Tanaka 2007, 20), and of these, excluding his submissions to the Imperial Poetry Competition, the majority were published during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), due to the actions of the leader of the Imperial Bureau of Poetry, Takasaki Masakaze. The timing of these first widespread publications of imperial poems can be explained by the very heightened nationalistic wartime atmosphere that reached its peak during the Russo-Japanese War, and the by then more developed and established tradition of using *waka* poetry as *shōka* 唱歌 (school hymns) and *gunka* 軍歌 (military poetry) for purposes of ideological dissemination, in classrooms and in the newspapers, going back to the years before the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95; see Eppstein 2007). While we do not have precise information about Takasaki's motivations or his ability to get the imperial poems out to the press before 1904 (e.g. during the Sino-Japanese War), it is likely that he was influenced by observing the growing role of *waka* poetry in the newspaper columns at

24 The word in the original Japanese here is *dai'ei* 題詠, and it refers to composing poems on a set topic (usually of traditional Japanese aesthetics) in the context of a poetry gathering (*uta-awase* 歌合) or for example the Imperial Poetry Competition *utakai hajime*.

the time (which he helped steer), and that his own position at court and in the Poetry Bureau was more stable in 1904 than it had been in 1894, allowing him to take this initiative.

Historians have shown how Emperor Meiji was made to retreat from public view in what is termed the period of the “quiet Emperor” (*shizukana tennō* 静かな天皇) from 1886-1912, as he was being increasingly replaced with the image of his imperial portrait and he fulfilled strictly ceremonial purposes in public life. His last grand imperial tour took place shortly before the opening of the Meiji Parliament and his major political contribution was lauded as having graciously bestowed upon the people the imperial Constitution of 1890. His other achievements were said to have transcended politics and enhanced the nation. As Gluck (1985, 84) described it,

Politics was too ambiguous an endeavor to identify with the symbolic ‘jewel’ that was the Emperor, and in the ideological presentation to the people his imperial heart was made to lie elsewhere.

At the time of the Russo-Japanese War, however, he returned to the role of wartime commander-in-chief and was portrayed, in part through his poems and accompanying editorials, as a sympathetic ruler, a father of the nation whose deep concern for the dangers and hardships of soldiers and the pain of families on the home front gave him little rest. The emperor’s poems submitted to the New Year’s Imperial Poetry Competition were generally of a conventional nature, giving little insight into his feelings and following the aesthetic principle of compositions on a given theme of the *waka* literary genre. Therefore, Takasaki Masakaze took matters into his own hands and leaked about 100 imperial poems that he was in a unique position to access to the newspapers (Tanaka 2007, 20). Significantly, this “leakage” was facilitated by high-ranking Meiji statesmen of the time, signalling their approval and active participation in the use of poetry to strengthen national consciousness.²⁵

If one believes the later testimony of members of the Imperial Poetry Bureau at the time, Inoue Michiyasu 井上通泰 and Chiba Taneaki 千葉胤明, Takasaki acted against the will of the emperor and out of an ideological conviction that it would be a very good thing for the world and humanity (Chiba 1938, 38) and that the poems would greatly “lift the spirits of the people on the home front and raise the morale of the generals at the front” (Inoue 1932, 4). Takasaki thus explicitly

25 Takasaki leaked the poems to Tanaka Mitsuaki 田中光顕, Minister of the Imperial Household and a “zealous worshipper of Meiji Tennō” (Saaler 2017, 6), Tokudaiji Sanetsune 徳大寺実則, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal of Japan, and Iwakura Tomosada 岩倉具定, councillor on the Privy Council (Tanaka 2007, 20).

chose among the emperor's poems those that best gave the people access to his emotional life, including his fears and worries, in order to simultaneously enhance the emperor's reputation as a "paragon of statecraft and solicitude" (Gluck 1985, 89) and humanise him for the purpose of fostering better national unity in wartime.

Many of the poems remained famous and were invoked at later points in Japanese history, such as the following poem published on 7 November 1904, in the *Kokumin Shinbun*,²⁶ often subsequently interpreted as a proof of the emperor's pacifism:

*Yomo no umi mina harakara to omou yō ni nado nami kaze no tachisawagu ramu*²⁷

Where all within the four seas / Should be as brothers / Why is it that waves and wind / Should rise and cause such tumult?²⁸

For the purposes of this section, I will focus on several poems published during this period that illustrate the Meiji myth-makers' willingness to portray the emperor in a carefully staged fragility on the one hand, and their use of *waka* poetry to reinforce religious components of the Restorationist national ideology that would later be called *tennōsei* 天皇制, the ideology of the emperor system.

As a leitmotif of constructed, acceptable fragility, some newspapers of the time²⁹ portrayed the emperor as suffering from cold in unheated rooms in the imperial palace, wearing only a thin shirt out of solidarity with Japanese soldiers at the front, while hiding the true fragility of his failing health. This served the purpose of making the people sympathetic to the emperor and thus raising their opinion of him. As Adam Smith once noted, sympathy is a particularly fine "detector of virtue", capable of measuring it in nuanced and subtle ways (quoted in Altamirano 2017, 370). Consider the following poem, whose accompanying editorial also emphasised the emperor's great solidarity and his suffering from cold, published by the *Yomiuri shinbun* on 3 November 1904:

*Nezame ni mo omoitsuru kana ikusabito mukaishi kata no tayori ika ni to*³⁰

²⁶ The influential newspaper under the chairmanship of Tokutomi Sohō 徳富蘇峰 came to be considered a "government's mouthpiece" after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5).

²⁷ The Japanese original transcription is: 四方の海みなはらからとおもふ世になど波風の立さわぐらむ。

²⁸ Translation by Donald Keene (2002, 645).

²⁹ *Kokumin shinbun* (1905, 1); *Yomiuri shinbun* (1904, 3).

³⁰ In Japanese, 寢覚にも思ひつるかな軍人むかひし方の便りいかにと。

I wonder, / While awake or asleep, / If I'm hearing news / From
where the soldiers have gone. (Author's transl.)

Another poem also published in *Kokumin shinbun* on 7 November 1904, reinforced the image of the emperor as a father of the nation, united in sympathy with other fathers left behind on the home front:

*Kora wa mina ikusa no niwa ni idehatete okina ya hitori yamada
moru ramu*³¹

All his sons have / Quit their home, on their way to / The theater
of war / Only the old man is left / To guard the hillside paddies.³²

According to a member of the Imperial Poetry Bureau, Chiba Taneaki (1938, 40), after the publication of this poem, the Bureau received countless pictures of old people in their farmlands from readers who identified with the content of the poem because they had lost sons in the war. This poem, also published in the article of 7 November 1904, indirectly portrayed the emperor as a medium between the ancestral deities of whom he was a descendant and the Japanese people:

*Chihayaburu kami no kokoro ni kanau ramu waga kunitami no
tsukusu makoto wa*³³

The people's heartfelt sincerity / Of our country / Surely fulfills
the wishes / Of the mighty gods' hearts.³⁴

At the same time, the poem illustrates the idea of Japan as the Land of the Gods (*shinkoku*) by depicting a relationship of identity between the hearts (or minds) of the *kami* (deities) and those of the people, with the emperor as the intermediary who ensures the eternal connection through the (supposedly) unbroken imperial line of divine descent. The emperor as a mediator who prays to the *kami* to ensure the safety of the country is a common motif in later imperial poems, which often refer to the *kami* guarding Japan, the age of the gods (*kamiyo* 神代), or the teachings of the *kami* (*kami no oshie* 神の教).³⁵

31 In Japanese, こらはみなくさのにはに出ではてて翁やひとり山田もるらむ。

32 Translation by Donald Keene (2002, 645).

33 In Japanese, ちはやぶる神のころにかなふらむわがくに民のつくす誠は。

34 This type of poem was termed by Sasaki Nobutsuna a “didactic poem”, *kyōkunteki* 教訓的, poems in which the emperor thought of the nation, revered his ancestors, and was compassionate towards the people (quoted in Uchikoshi 1999, 90).

35 To be sure, traditional *waka* poetry vocabulary also incorporates tropes which are Shintō-imbued and reference the *kami*, but the frequency of their appearance in the

The connection between imperial *waka* poetry and the government's fostering of national consciousness against the background of state Shintō was further strengthened through *Kokumin shinbun*'s later publications (1905-12) of the emperor's poems on the dates of the newly created national holidays, many of which centred on the imperial house: the Emperor's Birthday, *tenchōsetsu* 天長節 (3 November), the National Foundation Day, *kigensetsu* 紀元節 (11 February),³⁶ and on the national holiday celebrating the anniversary of Japan's legendary first emperor, Jinmu Tennō-sai 神武天皇祭 (4 April).

As mentioned above, more of the emperor's poems were published during the Russo-Japanese War than during the rest of his lifetime. The war thus marked the beginning of his reputation as a "poet saint" (*kasei* 歌聖) on which subsequent ideological and indoctrination efforts would build, as Meiji ideologues and their Shōwa period (1926-89) counterparts incorporated his poems into reading and ethics textbooks and daily school rituals. At a time when the popularity of *waka* poetry as a literary genre was waning in the face of the poetic movements of the new schools of haiku and *shintaiishi* (free verse), *waka* became even more closely associated with the imperial house than before.³⁷

That these later efforts were also aimed at further perfecting the imperial image of a strong modern monarch, while avoiding any perceived unfavourable fragility, can be seen in the process of selecting his poems for the imperial anthologies that proliferated after his death. Mamiya Kiyoo (2013) has explored how the renowned Japanese literary scholar Sasaki Nobutsuna 佐佐木信綱 (1872-1963) impressed upon the selection committees that the inclusion of love poems in the anthologies would damage the image of the emperor as the ruler of a strong nation and would detract from the desired "manly dignity" of a *Kaiser*-like monarch. For this reason, the pre-war imperial anthologies did not include love poems, and even in the case of the post-war anthologies, when most of the editorial committee members wanted to include more than 30 love poems, Sasaki Nobutsuna strongly opposed the idea, so only seven poems were included as a compromise (Mamiya 2013, 15).

In summary, in this section I have shown how the Meiji government used and limited the emperor's poetry to eliminate the appearance of

few poems published on the occasion of national holidays suggests a conscious political choice towards ideology-bearing tropes.

36 The date of the holiday and of the promulgation of the constitution was chosen to coincide with the mythical foundation date of Emperor Jinmu's ascension to the throne (K. Antoni, Y. Antoni 2017).

37 It is generally believed that *waka* poetry, as a literary genre with extraordinary continuity, was able to maintain its vitality for more than 1,000 years not only because it existed as a literary expression in the narrow sense, but also because of its character as a "ritual" that could be linked to politics and religion (Suzuki 2017, 12-13).

unmanly fragility (falling in love), to portray the emotional fragility of an emperor as a father of the nation who was concerned about the fate of Japanese soldiers, and to reinforce the image of the emperor as a medium between the *kami* deities watching over Japan and its people by selecting poems that contained religious-ideological tropes.

8 Conclusion

In this article, I have traced the historical development of Emperor Meiji's portrayal by Meiji state-builders and politicians, as well as the constraints placed on him by his advisors in their search for an appropriate image of a modern, *Kaiser*-like monarch. Scholarship on Emperor Meiji's "theatre of power" is replete with studies of rituals and symbols of power, "invented traditions" in Hobsbawm's terms. In my review of existing scholarship, I have moved away from the problematisation of his actual political role and authority, the "pageantry" of his court, and emphasised the nuances and variety of his presentation (or lack thereof) to the people.

I underlined and compared two instances of manufactured fragility: the letter distributed to the people on 7 April 1868, in the name of the emperor, and the newspaper articles and poems suggesting the precarious condition of the anxious emperor suffering from cold out of solidarity with Japanese soldiers. I suggested that this portrayal of fragility served as a political tool to elicit public sympathy in times of upheaval, such as the Meiji Restoration (1868) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). Only acceptable facets of a fragile self were presented to the people: on the one hand, youth and weakness attributed to inexperience, which was presented as understandable and simultaneously justified the advisory position of the Meiji leaders, and on the other hand, the vulnerability of an anxious emperor as "father of the nation" who endangered his health out of a moral principle of solidarity with the soldiers he himself had ordered to the front.

In addition, this article has reviewed several known and researched cases of censorship and control that illustrate the trial-and-error process of the Meiji government's use of the imperial image. As in the case of political satires and cartoons against the emperor, and in the case of Baron von Stillfried's unauthorised photograph, new government censorship laws were enacted immediately after such unpleasant events occurred. While the ban on photography became more lax during the Meiji period as it applied to other members of the imperial family, and implicitly to the future Emperor Taishō 大正天皇, the differentiated nature of censorship in the political sphere, where the Meiji oligarchs learned to tolerate satire directed at themselves but never at the emperor, laid the foundations of the imperial taboo into the modern era. Similar to the decision-making processes that led to the

deliberate refusal to depict Emperor Meiji (or any emperor) on banknotes and to have statues depicting him, this imperial taboo was likely rooted in part in the desire to maintain the people's religious perception of the emperor as a manifest deity and medium to Japan's ancestral deities, and in part in the Meiji leaders' borderline obsessive control of the dignity and charisma of the imperial image for their own benefit.

In post-war Japan, a new expression and indeed a new manifestation of the imperial taboo appeared. The so-called "chrysanthemum taboo" (after the imperial crest, a chrysanthemum) crystallised in the 1960s on the occasion of several right-wing writers and publishers deemed guilty of transgressing the imperial honour (Field 2011, 22). Field initially attributes the survival and development of the chrysanthemum taboo to the agenda of the American occupation, whose goals overlapped with those of the conservative Japanese leadership, making it difficult to problematise war guilt in general and imperial responsibility in particular (2011, 46). Despite post-war scholarship denouncing the ideology of the imperial system, the government suppressed union activity and educational reform in the interest of economic growth. In doing so, it also strengthened the right-wing agenda that perpetuated the chrysanthemum taboo. On the few occasions when people broke the imperial taboo, such as when a novelist published a short story in which members of the imperial family were murdered, or when the mayor of Nagasaki questioned the responsibility of Emperor Shōwa 昭和天皇 (1901-89) for war crimes, the consequences were swift, shocking, and brutal.

Conversely, the representation of the emperor in the modern era has also allowed for an increasing display of humanity, be it the avidly chronicled courtship of the current Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako, the retirement of Emperor Akihito, or the abdication of Princess Mako in the event of her marriage to a commoner. The individual and fragile selves of world leaders are allowed to be more visible in the climate of developed countries that increasingly value individuality and freedom of choice. The extent to which the emperor as an individual enjoys a greater degree of freedom in personal pursuits or life choices is debatable, but a departure from previous, restrictive imperial protocol can be seen in tendencies such as Emperor Shōwa's passion for marine biology to the point of organising a laboratory in the palace, and Emperor Akihito's uncharacteristic withdrawal from political life for personal reasons.

Further studies could explore the dynamic tensions in Japanese public life between the limitations imposed on the imperial self and the self-censorship of the people's free speech for fear of right-wing extremist retaliation. In an age of free press and critical thought, it is still true, as seen in the examples outlined in this article, that ideologies such as that of the emperor system can represent both internal psychological constriction and enforced external political subservience.

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