

Lee Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680: Resilience and Renewal*. Harvard East Asian Monograph, 209. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.
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The medieval imperial court was both stronger and more resilient than is usually thought, argues Lee Butler in his new book, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680*. According to Butler, the emperor and aristocrats knew their strengths, and used them to their own advantage. The *sengoku* court survived primarily because warriors found it useful, but he contends that courtiers worked tirelessly to keep the warriors convinced of the court's importance. It functioned as a religious symbol, and as the "arbitrator of religious matters" (p. 104), but even more importantly it was a source of artistic culture, a connection with the past, and "the only institution in the country that enjoyed . . . overarching authority" (p. 58).

Divided into eight chapters, plus introduction, conclusion and three appendices, the book is organized chronologically, but often thematically within each period, which sounds more unwieldy than it is. Butler's topic is complex, and the book's organization reflects that complexity. The text itself is absorbing and readable, and most of the time the structure works well.

Chapter 1 discusses the challenges faced by the court in the course of the Ōnin/Bunmei war, as many, probably most, aristocrats found themselves homeless in the charred city of Kyoto. Butler describes the court at its nadir, with its members largely dispersed and its income disappearing. In an especially welcome section, he also describes the women who were engaged in the court's administration, and how *sengoku* provided them with the extended opportunities that allowed them to become involved.

The second chapter treats aspects of the court's life that made it distinctive and important: the arts, ceremonies, scholarship, and so on. Many courtiers had fled to the protection of daimyo in the various provinces and made their livings by teaching traditional arts like poetry and calligraphy to the new elite. The court continued to hold artistic gatherings, and perform annual ceremonies,

Butler writes, partly to put on a show of normalcy, but also to demonstrate a continued relevance and "adherence to precedent" (p. 97). Members of the court were poor, however, and the show required some improvisation to keep up. Few, if any, courtiers owned all the necessary clothing for the various observances, for example, and Butler shows us networks of courtiers sharing clothes in order to be properly outfitted.

In Chapter 3, we see the impact of *sengoku* on the court most clearly, as many courtiers formed relationships with warriors and promoted their interests at court and elsewhere. Oda Nobunaga's triumphal entrance into Kyoto resulted in a number of changes, but not right away. Only gradually did courtiers begin to prefer residence in the capital, and took up again the pursuit of court rank and titles, which had become somewhat unattractive because of how liberally the court had awarded them to warriors.

The next chapter continues the discussion of the court and its relationships with Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. One of the more intriguing sections deals with the court's efforts at mediation, particularly those times it ordered Nobunaga to make peace with an enemy, as it did, for example, with Honganji. Butler sees this as a way the court increased its capital, as it were, because in negotiating for the two sides, the court also "laid claim to a position of authority . . . a position recognized as superior . . . to the antagonists" (p. 132). Hideyoshi made special efforts to bolster the court and show respect to the emperor, partly because he relied on court rank to maintain his own authority. In spite of his troubles, Hideyoshi remained a warrior, considered a barbarian by the courtiers, and never became an insider at court. One usually thinks of Ieyasu as more distant from the court than Hideyoshi, though Butler argues that Ieyasu was more capable than his predecessor to interact with the court as a courtier. Arguably he identified himself more closely with the court than the other unifiers. He hired aristocratic diviners, for instance, and used rites for the shogunal investiture ceremonies that mirrored those for imperial investitures.

The last four chapters go over the changing relationship of the court with the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Chapter 5 deals with the Court Lady Scandal,

interpreting it as an incident that sorted out the roles of court and *bakufu*. After 1603, Butler says, the authorities of court and *bakufu* were not clearly delineated, and the possibility existed that the court might be involved in political matters. This question was settled mostly through two incidents that pitted the emperor against the *bakufu*.

In 1609, it became clear that a number of the emperor's consorts had taken lovers from the ranks of the nobility, and in two cases, from the lower nobility. No one disputed that the consorts and their lovers had acted reprehensibly, or quarreled with the decision to relieve them of their court ranks. The question of further punishment created a problem, however. The emperor, Go-Yōzei, supposedly had the authority to decide matters within his own court, though he was required to notify the *bakufu*. When he did so, Ieyasu at first responded that the matter should be settled by the emperor, which itself implied that the permission was his to give. Trouble arose, however, when Go-Yōzei insisted on severe punishment: the execution of all involved (five women and seven men). The rest of the court argued that the penalty was too severe, and Ieyasu put pressure on Go-Yōzei to mitigate it. In the end, Ieyasu (and the court) prevailed, and all were exiled except for the two lowest-ranking men, who were executed. A similar struggle occurred a year later over Go-Yōzei's desire to abdicate. Again, the *bakufu* prevailed, and so the court had no choice but to recognize the *bakufu*'s dominance.

In Chapter 6, Butler advances what may be his most controversial finding, a reconsideration of the *Kuge shohatto*, "Regulations for the Emperor and the Nobility". Thus far, the rules have been interpreted as a radical redefining of the purview of the court and of its ties with the *bakufu*, setting limits on the court. The first article is seen as an order to the emperor to concentrate on the arts and scholarship, and leave politics to the *bakufu*. Butler dismisses this interpretation. "Nothing about them is revolutionary, and nowhere do they significantly constrict the court or its activities" he insists (p. 209). He points out as an example that the first article recommends several specific works for the emperor to study, and that they are "political works that offer concrete advice on how

to rule" (p. 209). Furthermore, many of the provisions were simply restating practices that had been introduced earlier, such as separate ranks for courtiers and warriors. What actually redefined the court's position was subtler: Ieyasu took it upon himself to dictate to the court the even in matters within the scope of the court's own business. He even regulated proper dress. Merely the issuance of the regulations, then, constituted the restrictions on the court.

Butler summarizes his conclusions on this issue at the beginning of Chapter 7. He argues that the regulations were "a powerful pronouncement of the need for the emperor . . . [but also] disabling", going on to observe that "politically, [the court] held no mandate to act" (p. 225). The court was not so much told to stay out of government, as it was not given a basis for becoming involved. The bulk of the chapter, however, deals with changes that occurred with relation to particular individuals in the court and *bakufu*.

The final chapter deals with the court after Iemitsu, when all understood it as set apart from government. The court settled down to concentrate on the arts and scholarship. By the second half of the seventeenth century, Butler declares, the position of the court and emperor had been redefined. He insists, however, that the court had a continuing and important role as the center of high culture, at least until the Genroku era when the culture of the commoners blossomed. By then, the world of the court "lacked political and social vitality" (p. 286), and so was outstripped by the townspeople.

In the conclusion, Butler moves to the question of ideology, arguing that its main value was its history, not its mythical origins, which courtiers never mentioned. Ultimately, the warriors wanted to imitate the court: "they adopted its culture and emulated its ways" (p. 296), both enhancing and relying on the court's prestige. Finally, the court survived because of its history, and "its ability to keep that past alive in the present" (p. 296).

The three appendices are lists, the first two essentially glossaries. The first records, in Japanese characters, the books Ieyasu collected while doing background research for the Regulations of the Court and Nobility. The second provides characters for the bulk of Japanese words used in the text. The third, however, is an annotated bib-

liography of the most important courtier diaries used for the study.

There is a list of works cited as well as the endnotes, and an index. This reviewer did not find the index to be wholly satisfactory, as its coverage is spotty. Sections include listings for such items as "fishmongers", "flower-viewing" and "kickball". One searches in vain, however, for "precedence", although its importance is discussed repeatedly in the text. Similarly, "scholarship" lists only two pages in the first chapter, though it also figures in, for example, Butler's discussion of the *Kuge shohatto*. Most of the index consists of proper names and Japanese terms. A more thoughtful index would have been helpful.

Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680 is the first major work in English that takes the late medieval court as its subject. Mary Elizabeth Berry's excellent *Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* makes use of many courtier diaries, and gives us the texture of mid-fifteenth century Kyoto, but the court is not her focus, and Butler's book covers a much longer period of time. For that reason alone, it is valuable. It's a cliché, but this study truly does take its subject out of the shadows and into the light, allowing us to see much that had been dim.

Butler's research is thorough, and he has used an appropriate variety of sources. He takes virtually no interpretation for granted, and this is one of the book's major strengths. In addition, he exposes much of the inner workings of the court, from the ceremonial observances to the women who found a place in court administration in the late fifteenth century.

Some of his arguments will be controversial, especially his re-assessment of the interactions between Ieyasu and the court. The book's weakest part comes in connecting the court and its concerns with the warriors. One gets a detailed understanding of what the court did, and how its members used its various tools to attract the warriors' attention. What remains less clear, however, is precisely why the warriors found the court, its ceremonies and its arts appealing. Adherence to precedent was certainly important to members of the aristocracy, but why would it be important to the tradition-breaking daimyo? In the end, we are told that warriors had always supported the court, and that the relationship had worked, so naturally

warriors would want to continue it.

The question of the court's appeal is, however, very complex, and one suspects that it will take another book (or more) to address it. *Emperor and Aristocracy* takes up new issues of real importance to understanding fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Japan, and handles them with clarity and insight. It is welcome indeed.