

Imperial Significance during the Formation of Early Modern Japan; 1467-1680

Research Thesis

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In the mid-sixteenth century, Emperor Ogimachi (1517-1573) of Japan issued various imperial decrees to local provincial warlords who had established influence among their rivals. One such warlord who received an imperial decree, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), had just recently established control over Ise province. Ogimachi congratulated Nobunaga on his success, requested the restoration of valuable imperial lands in Owari and Mino, and asked for a donation to help restore court structures and support court ceremonies. Nobunaga could not resist the influence of an imperial decree and as such responded favorably to Ogimachi. Nobunaga ordered that various court lands be returned, thereby slowly recovering imperial revenue, although in small increments, from the devastation of the persistent warfare of the time period known as Sengoku.¹

The Problem

Nobunaga responding to an imperial decree with respect and gifts is typical of the relationship between the military warlords known as daimyo during the Sengoku (1467-1568) era of Japanese history. The actions of the emperor and imperial court in relationship to the military warlords have been downplayed by historians through Sengoku and two following periods of Pacification (1568-1616) and Tokugawa (1603-1868). During these time periods, the emperor and court established a mutually beneficial relationship with the military warlords that often enabled the court to have more social and political influence than is typically believed by historians.

¹ Lee Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan: 1467-1680 Resilience and Renewal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 146-47.

Historical Background

The period of Sengoku was a time of frequent civil strife between local daimyo who were fighting for autonomy and influence in their respective small domains. Sengoku Japan was drastically different from previous periods in Japanese history as the near century of low-level warfare far outlasted all other military conflicts and oversaw the transfer of political power from the central administration to local autonomous zones.² The Sengoku daimyo, attempting to establish influence and autonomy, cast confusion and doubt over the continued significance of one of the longest-lasting characteristics of Japanese culture: the emperor and imperial court. As these military warlords gained influence, the imperial court needed to project an influence that would allow self-preservation and thereby developed a pattern of issuing imperial decrees for donations or support and granting court rank. The imperial court's status would also be challenged in the following historical periods, when the emperor and courtiers were thought to be under the dominance of nationally prominent warlords, notably Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), and members of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868).

The Pacification period presented a different challenge to the emperor and court from the rising influence of three daimyo. Commonly seen to have initiated from Nobunaga's march on Kyoto in 1568, the Pacification period is aptly named, as Nobunaga and his successors Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) brought substantial territory under their political control and "pacified" the country from the fractured warfare that had defined Sengoku. As Nobunaga and his successors established their country-wide influence, the emperor and court focused their efforts on appealing to just the three key leaders.

² Mary Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.

Culminating with the establishment of a new military government under Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603, the Tokugawa period ushered in a lasting peace that would define the future role of the imperial court. In 1615, Ieyasu promulgated the *kuge sho-hatto*, or laws for the court, which eliminated the court's ability to grant rank without Tokugawa approval and seemingly ended the court's ability to project influence through the methods it developed throughout Sengoku and Pacification.³ The court continued to adapt, however, and relying on a historical function as a legitimating body, the emperor and his court successfully retained significance that can be interpreted to have lasted through modern history.

The Argument

Each of these three periods in Japanese history, Sengoku, Pacification, and Tokugawa, presented challenges to the future significance of the emperor and imperial court. The political chaos of Sengoku and Pacification and the establishment of a new military government in Tokugawa introduced political rivals who could have dismantled the court. Contrary to the perceived notion of ineptitude in initiating significant action, the court not only outlasted these rivals, but projected a political and social influence that revitalized it in a prominent position as a cultural head of society.⁴ The Emperor and his court developed methods that drew on historical precedent such as the requests for support and the granting of court rank in an effort to establish a symbiotic relationship with the many local daimyo.

Although the emperors of these periods are typically perceived by historians to have possessed limited ability to initiate significant action, some of their activities may have been overlooked. Early on in the Sengoku period, the imperial court was impoverished from warfare

³ Herschel Webb, *The Japanese Imperial Institution in the Tokugawa Period* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), 59-64.

⁴ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 287.

and destruction, though by the time of the formation of the Tokugawa government, the court had regained a significant portion of its wealth and was upheld by the new Tokugawa leaders as an important socio-cultural body. The imperial court achieved this success through multiple functions; relying on its historical function as a legitimizing body, the granting of court ranks and titles, issuing imperial decrees and requests for support that restored wealth and land of the court, and by consistently adapting to a changing political climate. Though the imperial court lacked the manpower or strength to compete with the military might of the daimyo, it could leverage its historical prestige and legitimacy to enhance its position. A chronological review of the emperor's actions during Sengoku, Pacification, and Tokugawa will reveal the methods by which the emperor and court adapted to the political challenges of the time. The reliance on granting court rank and title through a historical precedent of legitimization helped the court to flourish into the revered institution it is today.

Literature Review

The significance of the emperor and court as an active political and social unit from Sengoku-through-Tokugawa is a topic that still needs more attention. Earlier English studies of Sengoku through Tokugawa Japan focused almost entirely on the functions of the warriors, while research and literature on the imperial court was limited. As interpreted by several historians, there was a dominant theme of warrior manipulation of a weakening court to achieve national eminence. Herman Ooms 1985 work on *Tokugawa Ideology* exemplifies the view of the warriors holding advantage over the court. Ooms discusses the actions of Nobunaga towards the court as having “feigned submission, but in fact bypassed and controlled the emperor and shogun, thus

subjugating them to the new authority with which he was investing himself.”⁵ In her 1982 work on Hideyoshi, Mary Elizabeth Berry indicated that Nobunaga had “chosen to stand outside the familiar governing frameworks and to remove himself from the court” and in so doing, indicated a “refusal to be integrated into powerless bodies that he sought to subordinate.”⁶ In his 1984 work on sixteenth-century Buddhism, Neil McMullin likewise describes Nobunaga’s actions as having “used” the court by “borrowing the Emperor’s authority” for his own advantage.⁷ The actions of Nobunaga as inferred by these examples led to an attempt to overthrow the Emperor and replace imperial authority with his own, before his untimely death in 1582. While the Nobunaga example is the epitome of the early literature reviews, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu were also said to have manipulated the emperor’s position for their own personal gain. These historians clearly indicated the strong will of the warriors holding sway over the court. In recent decades, however, a new view of imperial influence has emerged.

From the late 1980s through the new millennium, scholars incorporated new research and analysis of the significance of the Sengoku and Pacification imperial courts. Several historians, including Lee Butler, Bob Wakabayashi, and Norihito Mizuno have examined the imperial court more thoroughly with analyses of courtier, emperor, and foreigner primary sources during Sengoku through Tokugawa. Many of these historian’s works began to question the absolute supremacy of the warrior’s dominance and examined the role of the court more deeply.

Butler’s 2002 major work on the imperial court is clearly indicative of a new emerging view in which “relations between the warriors and the court, including individual courtiers, were far more extensive than recent scholarship has suggested” and that “evidence that the unifiers

⁵ Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 28.

⁶ Berry, Hideyoshi, 58.

⁷ Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 78-79.

‘used’ the court is neither as abundant nor as obvious as some have argued.”⁸ Bob Wakabayashi, in his 1991 article on the functions of the court, ascribes the granting of court rank and title as a “key reason” for its survival and projection of influence.⁹ Norihito Mizuno’s 2009 work discusses the Tokugawa regime’s classification of “Imperial authority as its source of legitimacy”.¹⁰ These historians have begun to change the discussion of warrior dominance to an imperial court that had the capability to establish influence and took initiative to secure some authority. The following analysis of the court’s actions during Sengoku, Pacification, and Tokugawa by emphasizing the realization of historical legitimacy will solidify the idea of an active rather than passive court.

The argument will be presented chronologically from Sengoku up to the seventeenth century, and will chart the actions of the emperor and court that depict significant initiative. Examples of historical legitimization by pre-sixteenth century emperors will provide context for the historical precedents that the imperial courts of Sengoku through Tokugawa could draw from. Thereafter, how the Imperial court was able to legitimize the Sengoku and Pacification daimyo and Tokugawa shoguns through court rank and title and historical significance will provide the basis of an argument for an active court.

Historical Legitimization

Prior to the sixteenth century, Japanese emperors existed within and sanctioned a secondary form of authority distinct from various warrior bodies. Even with the transfer of

⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁹ Bob Wakabayashi, “In Name Only: Imperial Sovereignty in Early Modern Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 17 (Winter 1991): 30.

¹⁰ Norihito Mizuno, “The Tenno in Early Modern Japanese Policy toward East Asia: The Case of Japanese-Korean Diplomatic Relations” *Journal of Asian History* 43 (2009): 63.

political authority from emperors to military overlords at the end of the Heian period (794-1185), under the Kamakura (1185-1333) bakufu regime, the Imperial court retained a function as a legitimizer of authority. In the words of Andrew Goble, the Kamakura bakufu did not seek “independence or total domination” but rather to “legitimize its prerogatives by agreeing...to an autonomy within the existing political and legal framework.”¹¹ The bakufu never tried to eliminate or replace the imperial institution.¹² The new warrior government, while establishing a degree of political control over matters of defense and land governance, still acted in accordance with the imperial framework and was legitimized by the imperial court. This style of governance continued with the following Muromachi shogunate until its demise within Sengoku.

A central element that enabled the emperor to retain a function as a legitimizer through almost continuous transfers of political authority was the ideology of his divine descent. The *Kojiki*¹³, a central source to Japanese mythology, written in the eighth century, contains elements that claim the emperors of ancient Japan descended from a native sun goddess known as Amaterasu. The influential rulers who are believed to have commissioned the *Kojiki*, either Emperor Tenmu (631-686) or Empress Jito (645-703), had utilized this claim of descent from Amaterasu as justification of a divine right to rule.¹⁴

Coupled with a formation of a Chinese modeled bureaucracy in the eighth century, the emperors established consolidated control through utilizing the mythology of divine descent.¹⁵ The borrowed statecraft from China became known as the *Ritsuryo* system, under which was

¹¹ Andrew Goble, “Medieval Japan,” in *A Companion to Japanese History 2007*, ed. William Tsutsui (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ Donald Philippi, trans. *Kojiki* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1969).

¹⁴ Douglass Fuqua, “Centralization and State Formation in Sixth-and Seventh Century Japan”, In *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*, ed. Karl Friday, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 106-107.

¹⁵ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 10.

constituted a basic body of law for criminal cases and civil and administrative matters.¹⁶ The combination of divine descent and the early Japanese development of centralization supported the installation of a “divine ruler” at the head of society, known as the *Tenno* or ‘Heavenly Sovereign’.¹⁷ As time passed into the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi periods, though the emperors lost complete political dominance in society, the belief of divine descent with the historical basis of the emperor as the head of an administrative body established a profound understanding of the emperor as a source of divine and practical legitimization among members of the aristocracy and warrior classes.¹⁸

The divine legitimization of the emperor was made manifest in the emperor’s bestowal of court rank and title, which were relentlessly sought not only by courtiers, but by warriors of the ruling houses of the Kamakura and Muromachi regimes. The founder of the Kamakura shogunate, Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199), constructed his new warrior government on the basis of imperial legitimization by adopting the title of *sei taishogun* or “great general for pacification of the eastern barbarians” conferred by the emperor.¹⁹ Though Yoritomo and his successors could project political autonomy over land rights and governmental structures, they chose to accept legitimization of their authority from the Imperial house. A similar situation arose with the Muromachi shogunate, in which the founder, Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358), received legitimization from the emperor with the acquisition of Shogun as well. Both of these military regimes held political authority, but acted in accordance with the historical eminence of the always reigning emperor. As can be construed from a change in military government multiple times, the legitimization efforts of the emperor could not prevent a civil war in

¹⁶ Sakamoto Taro, *The Japanese Emperor Through History* (Tokyo: Shobi Printing, 1984), 23.

¹⁷ Douglass Fuqua, “Centralization and State Formation”, 107.

¹⁸ Bob Wakabayashi, “In Name Only: Imperial Sovereignty in Early Modern Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 17 (Winter 1991): 5-6.

¹⁹ Paul Varley, *Imperial Restoration in Medieval Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 11-12.

Sengoku. The daimyo of Sengoku and beyond however, continued to adopt the historical precedent of the Kamakura and Muromachi warriors who chose to receive legitimization from the emperor and court through titles and their concomitant prestige.

Sengoku Legitimization

Sengoku daimyo sought court rank and title in order to legitimate their claim to authority over rivals within their domain and as a source of prestige. The titles that Sengoku daimyo received were typically honorary in nature, rather than functional offices with powers or responsibilities, but were significant because the emperor recognized the local military power and influence of the appointee. For example, Mori Motonari (1497-1571), the prominent daimyo of the Chugoku region of Western Japan, honored the succession of the imperial throne to Emperor Ogimachi in 1560 through offerings of rice for his banquet.²⁰ In return, Ogimachi bestowed upon Mori the title of *Mutsu no kami*²¹, and also granted the office of *Daizen-taifu*²² to his eldest son Takamoto.²³ Mori helped to support the enthronement of an emperor and in return was given a court title, which lent legitimacy to his provincial rule. Another example of this mutualism between the court and the warriors can be evidenced in the actions of Nobunaga's father, Oda Nobuhide (1510-1551). In 1540, Nobuhide made a donation to the reconstruction efforts of the outer Ise shrine.²⁴ As a reward for his efforts, Nobuhide was promoted to the post

²⁰ Asao Naohiro and Marius Jansen, "Shogun and Tenno," In *Japan Before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth, 1500 to 1650*, ed. John Hall, Nagahara Keiji, and Kozo Yamamura (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 253.

²¹ Governor of Mutsu

²² Master of the Palace Table

²³ Ibid, 253.

²⁴ Jeroen Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered*, (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000), 41.

of provincial governor of Mikawa.²⁵ Again, a daimyo's legitimacy and prestige was enhanced from the symbolic, practical, and divine authority of the imperial court through title promotions and acted as a supplement to maintaining control and influence of their respective domains. The daimyo received the emperor's blessing to strengthen their credibility and in so doing aided the imperial court's own cultural significance and vitality.

The imperial court combined granting court rank and title with issuing decrees or appealing to the daimyo for support. As mentioned in the beginning of this study, Nobunaga responded favorably to a decree from Emperor Ogimachi and restored several court lands. The same can be evidenced from Nobunaga's rivals during Sengoku. Though the imperial court did not directly order support through a decree as they had with Nobunaga, courtiers and the emperor appealed to various daimyo for the restoration of court lands. Daimyo who were victorious in regional battles and showed promise of becoming regional powers were supported by the emperor and court nobles.²⁶ Those daimyo who appeared to be gaining influence and power were the first to receive messages and support from the imperial court. The imperial court's messages of support or decrees to restore imperial land served as reminders that the emperor and court could often not be ignored. A similar pattern of granting court rank and targeting influential daimyo continued into the Pacification period.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ John Hall, "Hideyoshi's Domestic Policies," In *Japan before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth: 1500 to 1650*, ed. John Hall, Nagahara Keiji, and Kozo Yamamura, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 197.

Legitimization of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi

The imperial court continued its efforts of legitimating daimyo through court rank and title in the Pacification period, however, its efforts focused on the three unifiers. Nobunaga's military exploits were rewarded by appointment to high imperial office.²⁷ By 1575, Oda Nobunaga had established effective control over his regional domain, had already marched his forces into Kyoto, and appeared to be Japan's dominant military lord.²⁸ The proximity of Nobunaga's forces and influence would have made the imperial court uneasy. The court needed to rely on its legitimizing function to help acquire Nobunaga's support.

Nobunaga's first appointment to Imperial office had come in 1574 when Emperor Ogimachi granted him Junior Third Rank, a middle rank with some renown.²⁹ Following this initial entrance into court nobility, Nobunaga was appointed minister of the center in 1576 and minister of the right in 1577.³⁰ With each of these appointments, Nobunaga offered gifts of gold to the court and helped to restore its war-torn finances. Throughout these years, Nobunaga continued to gain power and as such the imperial court continued to offer rank and title in order to keep Nobunaga within its influence.

On practical terms, Nobunaga's membership in the court aided the court's finances greatly. During Nobunaga's first appointment year of 1575, he instructed that new grants of land be given to many of the court nobles and even cancelled many of the courtiers debts from the Sengoku era. The grants of land Nobunaga gifted the courtiers ranged from 50 to 300 koku, or

²⁷ George Ellison, "The Cross and the Sword: Patterns of Momoyama History," In *Warlords, Artists, and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. George Ellison and Bardwell L. Smith, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 76.

²⁸ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, 109-110.

²⁹ Webb, *Japanese Imperial Institution*, 50.

³⁰ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 155.

units of rice up to 1,000 given to the emperor himself.³¹ Nobunaga also raised taxes in the capital city of Kyoto during 1577, restored portions of the imperial palace, as well as operated toll barriers, of which many of the funds went to benefit the courtiers and emperor.³² Nobunaga's aid to the finances and vitality of the court during these years coincided with his acquisition of court title. The emperor and court were willing to bestow political legitimacy upon Nobunaga, enhancing its own prestige as a legitimizer, and also pragmatically received repairs and donations in return.

Nobunaga's gift giving should be seen as being initiated by the imperial court. An imperial letter sent to Nobunaga in 1557 from Emperor Go-Nara (1495-1557) in which the imperial court acknowledged Nobunaga's increasing status and requested land holdings in Owari and Mino to be restored to the court, suggests that the court requested some if not a majority of the gift giving and assistance from Nobunaga. In response to Emperor Go-Nara's letter, Nobunaga restored the court lands, and continued with a pattern of instructing his vassals to occasionally relinquish historically court-related lands.³³ As can be determined from current sources, no imperial letters or missives were sent to Nobunaga before 1557 and Nobunaga did not initially send favors or gifts to the court until after 1557. Nobunaga's repairs, donations, and acceptance of rank and title continued until 1578.

Nobunaga's climb up through the court ranks ended in 1578 when he resigned all of his court titles and rank.³⁴ Some prominent historians have declared that Nobunaga's resigning of court rank meant that he intended to break away from the historical pattern of imperial legitimization and create his own sphere of legitimate authority. In fact, Herman Ooms surmises

³¹ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 149.

³² Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State*, 77-78.

³³ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 39-40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

that Nobunaga was “secure and shrewd enough...to reject limitation that an outside legitimizing authority imposes on power” and that he “sought to use his power to circumscribe existing authority, which could only be done if he created for himself his own legitimacy without any reliance on traditional authority”.³⁵ Mary Berry writes in a similar fashion by stating “Nobunaga had chosen to stand outside familiar governing frameworks and to remove himself from the court”.³⁶ These historians overlook Nobunaga’s true intentions, however, and are too quick to indicate signs of a weakened imperial court.

Nobunaga’s intentions of resigning court rank may be revealed by interpreting his letter of resignation in 1578.

Although the present posts have been graciously bestowed on me, my deeds of conquest remain unfinished. Therefore, I desire to resign from this office. Once the eastern and northern barbarians are destroyed and the southern and western savages subdued-in short, when the myriad lands are at peace and the four seas tranquil-I will once again follow imperial order and accept high position. I will be the court’s chief support and most loyal minister. Accordingly, I entrust to you a petition: that these important posts be conveyed to my heir, Nobutada.³⁷

According to this letter, Nobunaga appears to not want to surpass the court’s authority as the other historians have mentioned and intend to resume his posts once his military conquests were complete. Nobunaga even stated that he was the court’s most loyal and supportive servant. The fact that Nobunaga allowed for the option of his son to assume his former court rank reveals that Nobunaga would continue to intertwine himself and his family with the imperial court. Nobunaga’s action of returning court titles was not without historical precedent, as other daimyo

³⁵ Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology*, 29.

³⁶ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 58.

³⁷ *Kanemikyo-ki*, Tensho 5/7/12 (1577), As cited in Lee Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan: 1467-1680 Resilience and Renewal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 155.

had done the same before him.³⁸ The act of returning titles and rank had often been an act of deference or respect to the Emperor, rather than an attempt to establish personal legitimization. From acting as a chief supporter of the Imperial court through his donations, repairs, and reaffirmation of court lands, Nobunaga would have been acting out of character to suddenly plot an overthrow of the court. Unfortunately, Nobunaga's abrupt death in 1582 and limited sources prevent a clear representation of his intentions in resigning court rank; however, there is not enough evidence to indicate a sense of wanting to remove the court from influence.³⁹

Nobunaga's successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, was also granted court rank and title. Following the death of Nobunaga, the imperial court lost its strongest ally and needed to focus on another daimyo who could lend credibility to its historical functions. Having quickly defeated Nobunaga's traitorous vassal, Mitsuhide Akechi (1528-1582), and consolidated control over many of Nobunaga's former territory and supporters, Hideyoshi became the clear successor to Nobunaga's legacy. The imperial court understood Hideyoshi's new power and so bestowed upon him the fifth rank and the title of General of the Palace Guards of the Left in 1582. In a similar pattern to Nobunaga, the more success Hideyoshi enjoyed in battle against the remaining daimyo, the higher Hideyoshi would climb in the court ranks, culminating with his ascendancy to the post of *Kanpaku* or regent in 1585.⁴⁰ The historical post of regent was unprecedented for a warrior to hold, and shows how far the daimyo and Imperial court relationship had risen. The imperial court had presented a strong legitimization of Hideyoshi's political control and likewise received the support of Hideyoshi through his desire for court rank.

³⁸ Bob Wakabayashi, "Imperial Sovereignty", 38.

³⁹ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 156-157.

⁴⁰ George Elison, "Hideyoshi, the Bountiful Minister," In *Warlords, Artists, and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. George Elison and Bardwell Smith (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press), 230-231.

Hideyoshi enthusiastically accepted court rank and title. Hideyoshi's enthusiasm derived from his humble origins as a peasant and a desire to remove himself from his restricting background. With every title and rank that Hideyoshi accepted, he became more dignified in the eyes of his vassals and enemies.⁴¹ Court rank could instill in Hideyoshi, due to his barren beginnings, a much more prominent legitimacy than even Nobunaga achieved. Also contributing to Hideyoshi's desire for court rank was the ability to recommend his subordinates for promotions. Several instances of petitioning the court for the promotion of vassals under Hideyoshi, such as Maeda Toshie (1538-1599) being raised from the post of *sakon'e no gon shosho*⁴² to *dainagon*⁴³, or Ukita Hidie (1573-1655) to the post of *sangi ukon'e no chujo*⁴⁴, reveal Hideyoshi's intent of inserting the warriors under his command into the court.⁴⁵ By allowing his subordinates to receive court honors, Hideyoshi could secure a personal debt of respect from warriors who had so eagerly overthrown their superiors in the Sengoku era. Hideyoshi could help prevent the threat of revolt by securing court posts for those daimyo serving underneath him. Hideyoshi's ready acceptance of court rank and title further aided the court's finances as well.

In a similar fashion to Nobunaga, Hideyoshi also made gifts and donations to the court during the years in which he took up court rank. In 1585, Hideyoshi conducted a restoration of the imperial palace as Nobunaga did before him and was granted a promotion to the second rank among the court aristocracy.⁴⁶ When Hideyoshi was invested with the title of *kanpaku*, he conferred many lands and estates upon the imperial court including 1,000 koku of land to a high

⁴¹ Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 188.

⁴² Provisional Lesser Captain of the Palace Gates of the Left

⁴³ Major Counselor

⁴⁴ Consultant Middle Captain of the Palace Guards of the Right

⁴⁵ Ibid, 179-180.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 178.

ranking courtier and 100-500 koku of land to lesser courtiers.⁴⁷ The imperial court again benefited financially from granting court rank upon the current authoritative daimyo and received lands, repairs, and donations in return, along with the increased legitimization of its function as a social and cultural historical unit. After Hideyoshi's death in 1589, a power vacuum resulted in a newly established political order in the Tokugawa Era.

Imperial Transformation under Ieyasu

The successor of both Nobunaga's and Hideyoshi's legacies, Ieyasu Tokugawa was also the recipient of imperial court honors as he gained influence. At the time of Hideyoshi's death, only his young child Hideyori (1593-1615) held any claim to his succession as military lord. Tokugawa Ieyasu, however, took advantage of Hideyori's age and began to consolidate support for his own legitimacy as a successor to Hideyoshi. Ieyasu's drive to replace Hideyoshi culminated with his victory in the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 against forces that were still loyal to the Toyotomi heir. Ieyasu's victory at Sekigahara firmly established his control and authority as the next political hegemon.⁴⁸

The new warrior authority resulted in the imperial court focusing its legitimizing efforts on Ieyasu, as it had with Hideyoshi and Nobunaga before him. Ieyasu, however, was granted the title of shogun, a title that lay claim to authority as a military overlord as the Kamakura and Ashikaga shoguns from before Sengoku. Ieyasu utilized his new authority as shogun to establish a regime that brought peace to a country that had been at almost constant war since 1467. Ieyasu

⁴⁷ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 150.

⁴⁸ Asao Naohiro, "Shogun and Tenno", 259.

and the Tokugawa Shogunate challenged the political posture of the imperial court by intervening with the court's historical authority to grant court rank and title.

Before conferring the title of shogun, the imperial court recognized Ieyasu's position as a new military authority by granting him court rank and title, in a similar fashion to Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, along with the Sengoku daimyo before them. For instance, Ieyasu was made Minister of the Right in 1603.⁴⁹ The imperial court displayed the same initiative of granting prestige to the current military overlord as it had in Sengoku and Reunification. After Ieyasu became shogun, however, the court was no longer able to rely on granting court rank alone to project influence.

Though Ieyasu at first accepted some limits of court authority through accepting court rank and title, he quickly sought to define his regime under different terms. Ieyasu focused on establishing a military regime that would survive after his death. Ieyasu's focus on the court culminated with the promulgation in 1615 of the *Kinchu narabi ni kuge shohatto* or Regulations for the Emperor and Nobility. Two of the major points of the *Kuge shohatto* are outlined below.

[1] "The emperor is to be engaged in the arts, the first of which is scholarship. If he is negligent in learning he will be unable to illuminate the ancient way; there has yet to be [an unlearned emperor] who has ruled well, in peace. The *Chen-kuan cheng-yao* (Kanpyo era 889-897) is a lucid, instructive work. Even if one does not examine the morals and history of the *Kanpyo yuikai* one must certainly learn well the [teachings of the] *Ch'un-shu ch'ih yao*. The composing of waka began with emperor Koko (830-887) and continues to this day. Though it consists

⁴⁹ Webb, *Japanese Imperial Institution*, 52.

merely of beautiful expressions, it is our country's art; it should not be abandoned. As written in the *Kinpisho* (1221), [the emperor's] primary efforts should be directed to the arts.”⁵⁰

[7] “Offices and ranks of the military lords must be kept separate from those of the courtiers.”⁵¹

The seventh law of the *Kuge Shohatto* prevented the imperial court from granting the court titles that significantly aided its influence through Sengoku and Pacification, while the first law attempted to define the role of the emperor in Tokugawa society. Ieyasu’s reasons for proclaiming the elimination of court granted titles and honors of warriors reveal the extent to which the court’s influence could reach. Ieyasu was likely afraid of the court continuing to grant titles to daimyo beneath him or those who he had recently subjugated. In so doing, the imperial court could lend its legitimating authority to a daimyo other than Ieyasu. Ieyasu knew that a daimyo backed by the court could potentially be a threat to his newly established shogunate. If the imperial court could not influence politics and was weak during the preceding century, then surely Ieyasu would not have felt a strong need to control the appointments of court rank.

Some historians have indicated that these two laws forcibly limited the range of emperor and courtier activities in an attempt to curb their political influence and reduce the image of imperial significance. John Whitney Hall indicated that “the opportunity for the Tenno to manipulate the warrior elite through appointment to court office was forever destroyed” and that the laws resulted in the “achievement of control over the court”.⁵² Hall refers to the first law as confining the emperor to a single symbolic function and removing the emperor from the sphere of political influence. While these two laws did indeed prevent the court’s granting of rank due

⁵⁰ *Kinchu Narabi Ni Kuge Shohatto*, As cited in Lee Butler, “Tokugawa Ieyasu’s Regulations for the Court: A Reappraisal” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54 (Dec 1994): 532.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 532.

⁵² Asao Naohiro, “Shogun and Tenno”, 263-64.

to a risk of political interference, they were not meant for Ieyasu to subjugate or diminish the court.

The *Kuge shohatto* reaffirmed the importance of the imperial court to Japanese society and ensured its continued influence on Japanese social and cultural realms. The first law, while seen as limiting, was actually based on Ieyasu's historical knowledge of the emperor's legitimacy to reign. The three works of literature that the first law mentions were manuals on the functions of an ideal ruler.⁵³ The seventh law was Ieyasu's attempt to establish a hierarchy among his daimyo subordinates that would aid the establishment of a lasting peace, by preventing the court from granting prestige to warriors beneath his status. Other articles within the *Kuge shohatto* attempted to define the functions and practices of court society, through seating arrangements, promotion requirements, and ceremonial affairs. If Ieyasu and Tokugawa policy desired the diminished status of the imperial court, it would not have needed to confirm the imperial court's status. Instead, Ieyasu's proclamations on the court established a new kind of legitimacy for the court that combined with its already extensive historical legitimacy.

Imperial Legitimacy Post Ieyasu

In the years following Ieyasu's death in 1616, the imperial court could lay claim to a legitimacy from its historical functions and longevity, as well as documented legitimacy stemming from Ieyasu's regulations. Ieyasu's shogun successors also regarded the imperial court as a source of legitimacy for the bakufu's control. The third shogun, Iemitsu (1604-1651), explained the Tokugawa legitimacy as being connected to Emperor Seiwa (850-878), through the

⁵³ Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy*, 209.

Toshosha Engi, a text dedicated to Ieyasu's memorial.⁵⁴ The Tokugawa shoguns of the seventeenth century, while holding effective political control, perceived their claim to authority by the legitimation of the emperor and imperial court.

Tokugawa intellectuals of the seventeenth century also perceived the shoguns' claims to authority as being legitimated by the emperor, through the imperial court's historical and sacred authority. The intellectuals drew upon the emperor's divine authority as inspiration for his place in society. Yamaga Soko (1622-1685), a Tokugawa Confucian philosopher and writer, discussed the hierarchy of shogun and emperor.⁵⁵ Soko's *Buke jiki*, which interpreted the role of the various shogunates in Japanese history, acted as a definition of the relationship between the emperor and Tokugawa bakufu. A key idea of the *Buke jiki* is as follows:

The Imperial Court is the Forbidden Precinct. Happily, the line descended from Amaterasu has possessed hereditary authority for countless generations. Accordingly, even though a military general has grasped power and directs government and letters within the four seas, this is nevertheless for the reason that he has been commanded to oversee all state affairs on behalf of the Imperial Court, and his serving of the Imperial Court diligently, without the slightest negligence, is in accordance with the Great Propriety obtaining between lord and subject.⁵⁶

Soko's ideas here present a clear hierarchy that establishes the emperor and court as the supreme body of Japanese society, although the shogun performs political functions. Soko asserted that the Tokugawa shoguns gained their legitimacy from the emperor and imperial court.

Another intellectual of the Tokugawa period of the seventeenth century whose ideas aided the legitimacy of the imperial court, was a related member of the Tokugawa family no less:

⁵⁴ Norihito Mizuno, "The Tenno in Early Modern Japanese Policy toward East Asia: The Case of Japanese-Korean Diplomatic Relations" *Journal of Asian History* 43 (2009): 63.

⁵⁵ David Earl, *Emperor and Nation in Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 38-43.

⁵⁶ *Buke Jiki*, Book XLV, As cited in David Earl, *Emperor and Nation in Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964, 43-44.

Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628-1701). Mitsukuni began work on *Dai nihon shi*, which conveyed the ideology of imperial loyalism and legitimacy. *Dai nihon shi* was, structurally, a biography of emperors and shoguns throughout Japanese history, and especially made reference to support and admiration for the past emperors. The fact that the Tokugawa shoguns allowed the *Dai nihon shi* to be published reveals their interpretation that they were also loyalists to the imperial court and received its legitimization.⁵⁷ The backing of political commentators and the shoguns themselves, provided the imperial court with a sense of importance and influence that may have been attenuated with the loss of the ability to grant court rank. The ideology that provided the backing of the imperial court came from Ieyasu's affirmation of the court's socio-cultural importance as well as its historical legitimizing functions that enabled perseverance through Sengoku and Pacification.

Conclusion

The emperor and imperial court of Japanese society has gone through sweeping changes in political structure to continue to survive today as an important element of Japanese culture. Throughout the historical periods of Sengoku, Pacification, and the seventeenth century of Tokugawa Japan, the court's role and function in society was uncertain. Several factors, from almost continuous warfare, poverty, and military warlords rising and falling from seats of authority brought into question whether the imperial court would continue to function as a political and socio-cultural force. The court was also sometimes interpreted by historians as nothing more than a "tool" for the warriors to use in their quest for dominance. The imperial

⁵⁷ John Brownlee, *Japanese Historians and the National Myth, 1600-1945: The Age of the Gods and Emperor Jinmu* (Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1997), 29-33.

court successively projected its influence over military rivals through the manipulation of court rank and title, along with a historical legitimization that oftentimes commanded respect and admiration.

Rank and title were given to various provincial daimyo of Sengoku, to Nobunaga and Hideyoshi during Pacification, and to Ieyasu during the early period of Tokugawa Japan. The imperial court could rely on its ability to legitimize the authority of warring daimyo, to preserve a historical initiative as a divine cultural authority. The possibility of receiving rank and title, thereby establishing credibility over their domains, compelled daimyo to send gifts and donations to the court, as well as support the court's functions in society. Each of the leading daimyo of the times sought the acquisition of court rank.

By the time of Tokugawa Japan, when granting rank and title was removed from the court's abilities, the previous two centuries had ingrained a respect for the imperial institution among the members of the Tokugawa shogunate and populace. Rank and title initiatives by the imperial court during Sengoku and Pacification had already solidified the court's place in society as a beneficiary of the military overlord. Even though the court could no longer grant rank to members of the warrior class, the shoguns still relied on historical precedent for legitimization of their authority by the imperial court.

Granting court rank and title, along with historical precedent, provided the imperial court with the tools to ensure survival during Sengoku, Pacification, and Tokugawa. These same measures provided the imperial court with an ability to initiate action that contradicts a theme of weakness and frailness. By the end of the seventeenth century, the imperial court was certain to be a permanent feature of Japanese society that legitimized the current political ruler of Japan

and represented the cultural sphere of society. The imperial line continues to survive today, due in part to the efforts of Sengoku, Pacification, and Tokugawa emperors and courtiers.

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