
Exploited Images of Tennō: Manipulative Strategies for the Public of Japanese Government from 1920s to 1940s

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It is widely acknowledged that Japanese displayed formidable unity and extreme insistence in World War II. However, underlying factors supporting Japanese's mindsets to demonstrate such behaviors in the war still remain contentious. This topic includes complicated social and political aspects; however, comprehensive investigation in every aspect always distracts main focus and cannot provide insightful conclusion. Therefore, in this research, I shall specifically explore those underlying factors by perspective of two different roles of Japanese emperor: (1) emperor as religious symbol and (2) emperor as patriarch in system of family-nation. To logically develop these two arguments, I will firstly trace the history of family structure and deity of emperor in Japan, for that the history is important to reason the formation of family-nation and symbolic, religious emperor in 1930s and 1940s; then, primary sources including newspapers, films, and excerpts are presented to further illustrate each point; finally, the article will show that by using the two images of Japanese emperor, politicians imposed a type of national will into public in two decades between 1930s and 1940s to compel citizens to unconditionally favor the government's decisions and actions in the war.

The wartime manipulative policies of government that were produced based on traditions and cultures instilled great influence into public's perceptions of country and nation, dominating Japan's post-war actions and still exerting effects in modern Japan society. Therefore, studying this topic shall provide understanding of contemporary Japan authority's attitudes toward global issues and diplomacy from the perspective of a certain period of this country, thereby revealing history study's value in terms of comprehending and predicting a civilization's acts from its past.

Emperor as Religious Symbol

Reverence of Deity The role of Japanese emperor, known as *Tennō* in Japanese, is special in that power of Japanese emperor comes from deity because Japanese emperor itself is deemed to be the descendent of the sun goddess.

One direct proof of the deity of *Tennō* is from *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*), the very first literature work in Japanese history that reflects notion of Shinto. To better understand deity of Japanese emperor, it is necessary to briefly recount the history of this book. Although reliable records are limited, scholars of Japanese history agree that Japan was primarily consisted of hundreds of small clans called *Uji*. Yamato, the royal family later, was one of them but became powerful enough to dominate middle and south territories of Japan during 5th to 7th century by merging the lands of other clans. At the early 7th century A.D., Yamato family held primacy among other clans while ruling the subordinate clans and their territories insecurely. To strengthen its own governance, Yamato family ordered to compile a book that could verify the authority of its reign, which is *Kojiki*.

According to *Kojiki*, deity of the emperor is related to native and prevailing religion Shinto in Japan. The book accounts the creation of world by gods manifesting in duality, Takamimusubi and Kamimusubi, from who the divine power come in Shinto; the formation of Japan is related to another two gods, *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, who are important to the inheritance of Japan. *Jimumu Temuwa*, the very first emperor in Japan, himself was the descendant of the sun goddess *Amaterasu-ōkami*- a goddess in highest statue and child of *Izanagi*.¹ By saying so in *Kojiki*, Yamato family could give its members a kind of “unbroken lineage” of deity for the interrelation with national religion. Through this means, the emperor’s legitimacy is constructed: since the family of *Tennō* is sacred, no doubt would be easily raised about the authority of Japanese emperor, thus entrenching the role of Japanese emperor in whole country.

Symbol of welfare Japanese emperor is also closely related to the happiness of

1. See Zhou Zuoren (周作人, translator), compiled by 太安萬侶, *Kojiki*, (Shanghai People’s Publishing House 上海人民出版社, 2015), pp.15-53

people in religious sense, from both positive and negative aspects. A belief known as *goryō shrinkō*, which refers to a concept that great disasters, such as earthquake and plague, were brought by the powerful spirits with rage of emperors and royal family members who died abnormally and miserably², embodied awful image of the emperor in the public. One example is the tale of Crown Prince Sawara. He accidentally involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Fujiwara Tanetsugu, and was exiled to Awaji as punishment. However, to show that he was innocent, he refused to have any food on the road to Awaji and eventually died tragically. At the same year a serious epidemic attacked the capital, which was deemed by people a consequence of grudge of Sawara's spirit.³ This prevailing belief was also related with *kami*, Japanese word for "spirits and divinity". Combined with Shinto's perception of *kami* that one has obligation to keep the *kami* delighted otherwise angry *kami* would incur ominous deeds to the one, *goryō shrinkō* urged people to revere the emperor for the assurance of their interests.

Japanese emperor also undertakes a vital role in assuring the happiness of his citizens from positive side. This responsibility is also linked with Shintoism. Thus, to acquire comprehensive understanding of this point, it is reasonable to investigate some teachings in Shinto.

The core principle of Shinto can be viewed as animism referred to *tama*, a belief that every object has its own spirit. In particular to point out, Shinto believes that the spirit is not innate but comes from the environment.⁴ Therefore, in terms of agriculture, especially rice that ancient Japan relied on, the land for cultivating crops has its own spirit; after an agricultural year, the spirit of the land is supposed to be weak, so farmers have to inject a fresh and strong spirit into the land for considerable yield next year by some rituals.

One crucial ritual exerted by *Tennō* himself, *niinames*, is for this purpose. In this annual activity, emperor submits the first harvest in autumn to *Amaterasu-ōkami*, with

2. Kōichi Mori, "The Emperor of Japan: A Historical Study in Religious Symbolism", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6:4 (Dec., 1979), pp. 528-30

3. Hori Ichirō, "The shamanism of Japan", *Tokyo: Kadansha* 1973, pp. 151-52

4. Origuchi Shinobu, 折口信夫全集 (Complete Works of Origuchi Shinobu), (Tokyo: Chuo Koronsha, 1956) vol.20 pp.241

a request of new spirit for the land.⁵ Even nowadays, Japanese emperor still plants and harvests crops in person emblematically as routine to show the respect to ancestors and to express blessing for the country.

In this sense, emperor takes the role of national priest who is responsible for the harvest of peasants next year in whole nation, which represents happiness and welfare of Japanese people. Thus, for their own interests, people would automatically value the importance of emperor with reverence and expectation.

In conclusion, the combination of stable deity, negative impacts, and positive effects of Japanese emperor provides an illusionary sense to the public that compels all citizens of Japan consciously or unconsciously regard the emperor as a figure that dominates many aspects in their daily life, forming a national religion in broad sense. *Tennō*, centered as symbol in this religion, certainly have great influence of pathos to ordinary Japanese. From my perspective, there is a hereditary psychological foundation derived from people's affective acknowledgement of emperor. This foundation provides the government an opportunity to utilize the emperor for political purposes. However, emperor as religious symbol itself is not sufficient to achieve the goal, so the government manufactured a national ideology to further strengthen its force.

Emperor in Family-Nation System

Notion of family-nation The notion of “family-nation” can be interpreted from its literal meaning: the country as an entity is a family. “教育勅语” (*Imperial Rescript on Education*) and “勅语演义” (*Modern Japanese thought system*)⁶, two books issued by the authority in pre-war period that explicitly proposed the concept of family-nation, states that the emperor as to his subjects is what parents as to their children and country is extension of families; therefore, emperor's order to his subjects is no different from parents' kind instructions to their children, so all citizens

5. Origuchi Shinobu, 折口信夫全集 (*Complete Works of Origuchi Shinobu*), (Tokyo: Chuo Koronsha, 1956) vol.3 pp.184

6. 井上哲次郎, 近代日本思想大系 (*Modern Japanese thought system*), (Chikuma Shobo publication, 1976 version), volume 31 明治思想集 II (Meiji thought collection II) pp. 86-91

should obey the emperor as they do to their parents. The mechanism of the notion of family-nation to influence all subjects is clearly abstracted from the excerpts: family-nation places Japanese emperor in a role of patriarch of Japan as a family, so people have obligation to submit in front of emperor by filial piety, as the obligation they have to their parents; in this sense, patriotism equals to loyalty to the emperor.

The effectiveness of family-nation should be attributed to family-centered ideas in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. Confucianism emphasizes relationships between people and classes derived from ethics to keep the stability of a society, and filial piety is one of these important relationships in a family, which requires the younger to obey the elder.⁷ Neo-Confucianism, prosperous as a philosophy in Song and Ming dynasty, derived from Confucianism and intended to create a more rationalist and secular form of Confucianism by proposing a delicate and complete philosophical theory that traditional Confucianism lacks.⁸ Chu His, a splendid Neo-Confucian, says: “In universe there is only one principle (*li*)... its expansion in world becomes three rules and five virtues, and it is ubiquitous ”⁹ It is through *li* that Neo-Confucians support the authority of relationships proposed in Confucianism, endowing it an undeniable principle of the universe and endorsement of a complete philosophical theory. Starting from Tokugawa period, the shogun advocated Neo-Confucianism for its concepts were advantageous to the governance, thereby laying the foundation of the firm idea of obedience in family in Japanese mindsets.¹⁰

Spread of the notion of Family-Nation The deliberate emphasis of family-nation as polity of country by the Japanese government was already obvious in pre-war period, and reached its peak in 1930s and 1940s.

The *Peace Preservation Law*, issued in 1925, clearly shows the government’s resolution to maintain the political system. In the beginning of the law, article one stipulates:¹¹

7. Zongli Tang, “Confucianism, Chinese Culture, and Reproductive Behavior”, *Population and Environment* 16:3 (Jan. 1995) pp.273-74

8. Blocker, H. Gene; Starling, Christopher L. (2001). *Japanese Philosophy*. SUNY Press, pp. 64

9. 陳俊民 (Junmin Chen), 朱子文集 (*Collected Works of Chu His*), (德富文教基金會, 2000) vol.6

10. 李未醉 (Weizui Li), “宋明理学在日本传播的途径及其作用(The Way of Spread and Funtion of Neo-Confucianism in Japan)”, (*ACADEMIC FORUM*, 2007) No.11 pp. 29-30

11. “Japan’s April 12, 1925 Peace Preservation Law,” Michigan State University, https://www.msu.edu/~londo/FAU/4933_web/Peace_pres_law.htm

“Anyone who organizes a group for the purpose of changing the national polity (kokutai) ... or anyone who knowingly participates in said group, shall be sentenced to penalty servitude or imprisonment not exceeding ten years.

An offense not actually carried out shall also be subject to punishment.”

Centered on article one, the rest of provision restrains any organization and individual to participate and assist any activities that may have potential threat to national polity of family-nation with severe punishment- death penalty at most. For example, article two states that anyone who consults with another person on matters described in article one should be sentenced with penal servitude or imprisonment. This document provided legitimated excuse for the government to prosecute any dissident under the name of “suspicious to be subversive”. . For instance, in “March 15 Incident”, the government arrested more than 16,000 suspected communists and a few radical students,¹² and banned Labor-Farmer Party, which advocated social reform, for its help to those subversives in the incident. Through this mandatory method, the government could efficiently suppress any latent political dissent by overawing the public with serious consequence that committing subversive movement could have, showing common attitudes during 1920s and 1940s of the authority toward domestic policies as the preparation of imperial expansion.

In 1937, before Japan completely conducted military action in China, Ministry of Education of Japan published a pamphlet named *国体の本義*. The text focusing on national polity was distributed to high schools nationwide, as well as governmental institutions, and requested every school to adjust teaching syllabus according to this pamphlet in order to unify thoughts of citizens and prepare for the war. The pamphlet was not abolished as textbook until 1945, educating teenagers for eight years so that consecutively influenced the main group of society with the notion of family-nation. The content of this pamphlet is divided into two segments. The first part restates the national polity centered on emperor, while the second part recounts history and reflections of national polity.

The government’s message of promoting Japanese national polity is explicitly expressed in introduction of the pamphlet. Different from the *Peace Preservation Law*

12. James L. McClain, *Japan: a Modern History*, (W.W. Norton, 2002) pp.389

of 1925, the government intended to persuade people to follow the national polity by attributing the social discord at that period to not comprehending the essence of western ideology in terms of family-nation, and by elevating national polity to a reliable guidance that motivated people, rather than by intimidating people with juristic means. The following excerpts provide evidence:

“即ち今日我が国民の思想の相剋、生活の動揺、文化の混乱は、我等国民がよく西洋思想の本質を徹見すると共に、真に我が国体の本義を体得することによつてのみ解決せられる...乃ち「国体の本義」を編纂して...以て国民の自覚と努力とを促す所以である。”¹³

(“Only through our citizens’ thorough understanding of the meaning of national polity as well as the essence of western ideology can we solve the conflict of our people’s thoughts, the upset of our lives, and the confusion of culture...To this end, the ‘Kokutai no Hongi’ is compiled...to encourage people’s awareness and efforts.”)

The pamphlet also underscores emperor’s role in family-nation system by repeating several ideas in texts.

“臣民の道は...億兆心を一にして天皇に仕へ奉るところにある。皇祖と天皇とは御親子の関係にあらせられ、天皇と臣民との関係は、義は君臣にして情は父子である。この関係は、合理的義務的關係よりも更に根本的な本質關係であつて、こゝに忠の道の生ずる根拠がある。...君民一体の一大家族国家である。故に国家の繁栄に尽くすことは、即ち天皇の御栄えに奉仕することであり、天皇に忠を尽くし奉ることは、即ち国を愛し国の隆昌を図ることに外ならぬ。忠君なくして愛国はなく、愛国なくして忠君はない。”¹⁴

(“The way of subjects... is to serve emperor with billions and trillions loyalty. Jōkō is the father of Tennō; The relationship between subjects and emperor is obedient in obligation, but is descendent-parent in emotion. This relationship is more reasonable and fundamental than obligation, and is the root of

13. 国体の本義 (May 1937) 緒言, 日本文学電子図書館, <http://www.j-texts.com/showa/kokutaiah.html> (no official English translation available)

14. 国体の本義 (May 1937) 第一 臣節, 日本文学電子図書館, <http://www.j-texts.com/showa/kokutaiah.html> (no official English translation available)

loyalty... We are family nation that connects all subjects and emperor. Therefore, what is devoted to the prosperity of the nation is to serve the emperor, and to be loyal to the emperor is no less than to love the country, and to pursue the prosperity of the nation. In this sense, loyalty to the emperor equals patriotism; love to the country is loyalty to the emperor.”)

The excerpt is clearly consistent with the mechanism of the notion of family-nation mentioned above: the emperor as a father figure of the country demands unconditional loyalty of all citizens, while equating patriotism with devotion to the emperor indicates that one should obey any actions of the country. Four years after the publication of *国体の本義*(*Kokutai no Hongi*), the Ministry of Education of Japan issued another pamphlet called *臣民の道*(*Shinmin no Michi*), as counterpart of its previous propaganda material. Besides presenting whole picture of national polity to the public, this pamphlet contains additional information that directed people how to behave in daily life in accordance with the notion of family-nation, including educating children, practicing ancestor worship, and maintaining relationships in family etc. In common, both two pamphlets depict Japan as a family instead of aggregation of families, continuously advocate to family-nation structure as essence of Japan, and underline emperor’s patriarch role in the system. It was through these documents that citizens were brainwashed unconsciously so that they incorporated the family-nation into their daily life.

Newspaper in this period also reflected the government’s effort to disseminate the notion of family-nation in society. In a piece of newspaper issued in 1919, which discussed the influence of European revolution on Japan, its attitude in favor of family-nation system is distinct.

“要するに万世一系の君主制、是れ即ち我国の国体である... 我国の歴史上今日ほど国体の真髓が発揮せられ、皇室の尊厳が発揚されて居る時代はないので、是れは一々事実を挙げて論証するまでもなく、何人も

疑うことの出来ない現実なる大事実であると思う。”¹⁵

(“In short, unbroken lineage of emperor is the national polity of our country...There was no period in history that could promote the essence of national polity and dignity of royal family more than nowadays, a self-evident and undeniable fact.”)

Same as the previous materials, the content of this newspaper also used the notion of national polity and family-nation to provide a future direction for the development of Japan. Implied by the title of this newspaper, the implicit information contained in excerpt is to appeal suppression of impact brought by revolution in western world, the representation of democracy, in order to maintain the absolute monarchy in Japan. Extracted from all excerpts mentioned above is a similarity that the government intentionally conveys a message in these publications that the image of emperor in family-nation is undeniable and unnecessary to prove. Accustomed to this idea, subjects would not raise any doubt toward the emperor, the government thus assuring effectiveness of the emperor for further steps that Japan would take.

The government also tried to penetrate family-notion completely into daily life by recreation. Popular in 1930s was a storytelling form called *kamishibai* in Japan. *Kamishibai* is a type of street theater, in which a narrator recounts a story with a series of illustration boards. The government utilized this entertainment to propaganda family-nation in society, which was well demonstrated in story “*Ōzora no ko*” (“*Child of the Sky*”). The story was mainly about two brothers, Ryuuta (the elder) and Ryuhei, whose father had died in the war as a pilot, and both of whom desired to continue their father’s career. The conflict was arisen when Ryuuta insisted that his younger brother had to stay at home to take care of their mother, for that it was unlikely that they could come back alive from the war. The final resolution was their mother’s confession that she sincerely hoped both of the brothers could serve Japanese army.¹⁶

The idealized obedience in family-nation system is clearly depicted inside this

15. 京大講師 米田庄太郎, “欧洲の革命運動が我国に及ぼす影響”. 横浜貿易新報 1919.1.1 (大正 8) http://www.lib.kobe-u.ac.jp/das/jsp/en/ContentViewM.jsp?METAID=10091299&TYPE=IMAGE_FILE&POS=1&LANG=EN(no official English translation available)

16. Emily Horner, “‘Kamishibai’ as Propaganda in Wartime Japan”, *Storytelling, Self, Society* (fall 2005) 2:1, pp. 26-27

small family: younger brothers' obedience to the elder one to abandon his pilot dream, even though he was desperate for it; sons' obedience to their mother to become soldiers, although they were worried about their mother in hometown lonely. In turn, the family-nation also puts obligation on the people in higher authority to make decision for the inferior— the mother's requirement urging her sons to enlist, for example. Moreover, the mother's attitude toward the nation and the war clearly shows another important value that encourage self-sacrifice to the nation, since patriotism equals to the loyalty to emperor, a father figure in family-nation. This *kamishibai* story is a precise epitome of family-nation structure including all vital characters that the government demands subjects to possess for the sake of united governance. Influenced by great number of stories similar to "*Ōzora no ko*", Japanese gradually accept values contained in these tales.

The Japanese government endorsed the idea of family-nation through regulations, pamphlets, newspapers and even daily entertainments, successfully boosting the status of the emperor and therefore controlling public opinion in the early 20th century. It can be concluded from these examples that family-nation and the figure of emperor were juxtaposed in the center of national ideology, bolstering Japan's war-time actions with spiritual solidarity back in homeland.

Effects of Manipulative Strategies

The strategies of Japanese government were effective. Religious symbolism endows the emperor psychological fundament in public as premise of accepting system proposed later. The notion of family-nation and figure of emperor infiltrates into people's life through school education texts, newspapers, and entertainments, almost every aspect that a citizen could contact with. By such vigorous propaganda, the Japanese government manages to create a demanded mainstream ideology in society.

Core of the success of manipulative strategies is forming a sense of "willingness submission" in society. This concept indicates that people convince themselves submitting is a volunteer and spontaneous action. Willingness submission is also a

sign of internal self-control in a managed society, which is the ultimate goal that the Japanese government intends to achieve in family-nation because people who admit the spontaneity of their submission would never suspect motivation of their behavior. Loyal followers are subjects that the government seeks for.¹⁷

By willingness submission, the family-nation system compelled people to deem emperor as father figure in a family nationwide, and the only way to show their respect and filial piety was to obey orders of the emperor. Those who totally embraced this idea became a component of a war machine that provided human resource and security for the government. In this system, individual submerged into the entity of family-nation to minimize personal variation, thus creating a group of people who were fanatical to loyalty toward their country and emperor. One example is organization of *kamikaze*, a special air force in World War II who particularly executed suicidal attack. Most pilots in this team were drafted students selected from numerous volunteers who were eager to prove that they had ability to fly a single plane in this task with confidence and bravery, and that they were ready to devote their lives for the country.¹⁸ For some extent, they are also victim of interest of the few in government. Under intense education of family-nation from their birth, allegiance to the emperor is considered appropriate from their points of view, so enthusiasm replaces rational judgment - in other words, their belief is the most righteous. Another example is an opinion in magazine. It states that the power of family in family-nation Japan had never been embodied like now; as Japanese who were raised by the benevolence of generations of emperor, it was naturally to link affection to children with patriotism. Therefore, no matter how much you like your son, you should be happy when your boy was enlisted and sent them to the battle field proudly.¹⁹

Understanding family-nation and emperor's role in the country during 1920s and 1940s is also practical in terms of comprehending contemporary Japan government's policy and attitude toward its history in wartime. Nowadays, Japanese authority

17. Kurihara Akira 栗原彬, "The Emperor System as Japanese National Religion: The Emperor System Module in Everyday Consciousness", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Jun.- Sep., 1990), 17:2/3, pp.490

18. Ben-Ami Shillony, "Universities and Students in Wartime Japan", *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Aug. 1986) 45:4, pp.490

19. 羽仁本子, 婦人之友(Friend of Women), 1913.10

deliberately avoids to response any issue about apology to Chinese and Korean people, and also commemorate generals in World War II annually, a behavior which is viewed as offend from China and Korea's stance. Underneath cause of this seemingly unreasonable attitude may be traced back to family-nation ideology and respect to the emperor that still survive in Japanese society. The family-nation emphasized that everyone should "take one's proper station" in any social or family structure.²⁰ When applying to global situation in wartime, this idea gave Japan a sense that the intention of its expansion was only to find a "proper station" in the world. During 1920s and 1940s, Japan was seeking to integrate into advanced western world. Japan regarded other Asian countries as inferior so that it refused to be one of them. Therefore, from its own perspective, Japan was misplaced and it was righteous utilizing any possible resource to enhance current situation. In this sense, Japan thinks that its behavior in World War II should not be regarded as evil deeds without morality, but was an attempt to relocate its position in international environment. Therefore, it is unnecessary to apologize for what Japan has done in war. Moreover, emperor is seen as respectful symbol of Japan in the public. In a survey conducted by Mainichi Shimbun, eighty-seven percent of respondents said Emperor Akihito has fulfilled his role as the symbol of the state.²¹ In some extent, to apologize equals to admit that the emperor is also a war criminal who escaped from legal punishment because wartime actions of Japan were commanded under the name of the emperor, but immediately after the war, the emperor was not sentenced as other war criminals were and was preserved as representation of Japan. Thus, it is nearly impossible for Japanese government now to ruin a central figure that is reputed, although without deity now, and respectful at the risk of triggering wide discontent in society.

20. Ruth Benedict, *The chrysanthemum and the sword*, (Nanjing Yilin Press, 2014) , pp.37-46

21. The Mainichi, "87% say Emperor has played role as symbol of state: Mainichi poll". March 19, 2019 (Mainichi Japan), <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190319/p2a/00m/0na/021000c>