

The Imperial Family

皇室

The Japanese Imperial family is the oldest hereditary monarchy in the world. The family's lineage dates back to the sixth century BC, though the title of **Tenno** (emperor) or **Sumera-Mikoto** (heavenly sovereign) was assumed by rulers in the sixth or seventh century and has been used since. The family crest (above) is the **kiku**, or chrysanthemum.



The role of the Emperor (and occasionally the Empress - there have been 8 to date) has varied in importance. Considered a divine being until the end of World War II, the postwar Constitution made him the "Symbol of the state". He plays a largely ceremonial part in the life of the nation.

Origins and early history

According to the historical chronicles of ancient Japan, the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, AD712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicle of Japan, AD720), the sun goddess **Amaterasu Omikami** presented the **sanshu no jingi** or Imperial Regalia to her grandson, **Ninigi no Mikoto**. He in turn passed them on to his descendants, the emperors, the first of whom was **Emperor Jimmu**. The regalia, a mirror, a sword and a curved jewel are symbols of the legitimacy and authority of the emperor. These creation myths also form the foundations of the indigenous **Shinto** faith.

The emperor was thought to possess magical powers and to converse with the gods. It was therefore considered beneath him to become involved in the day-to-day running of the country. This was left to ministers and advisors. An exception was the period between the 7th and 8th centuries during which several emperors tried to bring the regional clans under central Imperial control. The first emperor to establish such direct imperial rule, modelled after the Chinese Tang dynasty, was **Emperor Tenji** who ruled between 661 and 672. Later during the **Nara Period** (710~794) **Prince Shotoku**, son of the **Empress Suiko**, created Japan's first constitution and established Buddhism as the country's dominant religion.

At the beginning of the **Heian Period** (794~1185), **Emperor Kammu** established a new capital in **Kyoto**, a city designed based on the Chinese capital. A combination of efforts to free the emperor from the web of entrenched bureaucracy and the court's increasing preoccupation with the pursuit of the arts and literature led to a situation where the real power was held by those occupying the posts of regent, for emperors not yet of age, and chief advisor. These posts were dominated by the **Fujiwara** and later the **Taira** families. While making no claim to the emperor's title or ritual role, the clans basically ruled in his name for several centuries.

Except for a period during the 14th century when the **Emperor Godaigo** briefly restored imperial rule, for almost the next 700 years, Japan was ruled by a succession of **Shoguns**, or military leaders. It wasn't until **Tokugawa Iyasu** became Shogun of the recently reunited Japan at the beginning of the **Edo Period** (1600~1868) that the imperial institution regained some of its former glory, if not its power. While the Tokugawa's ruled from **Edo** (now Tokyo), the imperial court was in Kyoto and performed duties that, while important to the shogunate, were mostly religious rituals.

Early modern period

During the Edo Period, a time of great cultural advancement but also of almost total isolation, a school of intellectuals known as *kinno-ha*, or imperial loyalists, developed their concept of Japanese identity with the emperor at its symbolic center. Faced with foreign pressure to 'open up' the country to foreign trade and diplomacy following the arrival of US Commodore **Matthew C. Perry**'s 'Black Ships' in 1853, this concept was adopted as a rallying cry to defenders from the foreign threat. By 1868, they had succeeded in toppling the Tokugawa shogunate and establishing a new national government under direct imperial rule - the **Meiji Restoration** (analogies to this period of revolutionary change are often made by today's radical politicians).

The Meiji leaders spent the next twenty years experimenting with the imperial system before creating the Constitution of the Empire of Japan in 1889. The emperor was 'sacred and inviolable' and sovereignty rested with him as the Head of the Empire. He commanded the armed forces, declared war and concluded treaties. All laws required his sanction and enforcement. And yet he had no real political power; his main role was to ratify and give the imperial stamp of approval to decisions made by his ministers.

Post World War II

Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the occupation forces carried out radical reforms of the country's government and imperial systems. While there were calls for the emperor to stand trial at the 1946 Tokyo Tribunal and for the imperial system to be completely abolished, a more moderate approach was taken. The emperor had no political powers and under Article 1 of the new 'Showa' constitution he became 'the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power'. His role was purely symbolic and his functions subject to cabinet approval. The emperor himself declared in a New Year's Day radio broadcast that he was 'not divine'.

During the post-war period, efforts were made to bring the imperial family closer to the people, no longer his 'subjects' but citizens. Certainly there is great affection among Japanese people for their 'royals' as could be seen at the funeral of **Emperor Hirohito** in 1989 or the marriage of **Crown Prince Naruhito** to **Princess Masako** in 1993. The eagerly anticipated birth of a male heir to the Crown Prince was even thought of in terms of an event that could spark Japan's economic revival. The fact that his and Masako's first child was a girl (Aiko) and Masako was reaching an age where another child was increasingly unlikely, there were renewed moves to revise the Imperial House Law to allow female members of the family to ascend to the throne. This was proposed on the grounds of sexual equality and the fact that there have been 8 women on the throne in the past. The birth of a son to Prince Akishino and Princess Kiko in September 2006 may have put this issue on the shelf for another generation.