

BOOK REVIEW

The Birth of the Meiji Empire

Sam-Hun Park*

Susumu Shimazono (島藺進). *The Birth of the Meiji Empire* (明治大帝の誕生): *The State Shintoization of the Imperial Capital* (帝都の国家神道化). Tokyo, Shunjusha Publishing Company, 2019, 244 pp. ISBN: 978-4-393-29951-7.

Abstract: Understanding the meaning of State Shinto is the key to elucidating the modern Japanese history in religion and spirit. It makes clear how the self-identity of the Japanese people has transformed since the Meiji Restoration and to the present. In this sense, 'State Shinto' can be considered a core concept for describing the overall picture of the spiritual life of the Japanese, which so-called theories on Japanese people or Japanese culture have yet to fully explain. In this book, the author suggests the concept of 'Divine Emperor' as a new framework for understanding State Shinto and introduces 'Emperor Meiji' as its historical embodiment.

Keywords: Divine Emperor, Emperor Meiji, Morden Emperor System, State Shinto, Meiji Jingu, National Integration.

The Birth of the Meiji Empire: The National Shintoization of the Imperial Capital, originally written in Japanese by Susumu Shimazono, explores a critical question: Did the Japanese truly have 'no religion'? While many modern Japanese claim they do not follow or worship any specific religion or deity, this prompts a deeper historical inquiry. What was the religious situation in Japan before

* Sam-Hun Park is from the Department of Japanese Language Education, Konkuk University, Seoul, Korea. His research focuses on Japanese Modern History. This paper was supported by Konkuk University in 2021. Email: syamony@konkuk.ac.kr

World War II? Was it true that the Japanese had 'no religion' during that time? These questions are central to understanding the nature of State Shinto and its role in shaping Japan's national identity.

'State Shinto' refers to a form of Shinto that developed in close association with the state following the Meiji Restoration. It blended traditional Shinto practices with Imperial Household Religious Rites and a system of Emperor worship, profoundly shaping the spiritual life of the majority of Japanese people. This form of Shinto centred on the veneration of national deities, particularly those of the Imperial Family and successive emperors, with Ise Jingu as a focal point. Over the decades leading up to World War II, rituals such as bowing toward Ise Jingu or the Imperial Palace and visiting sacred sites like Yasukuni Shrine or Meiji Jingu became daily practices for many Japanese. In this context, State Shinto evolved into a modern expression of Shinto, linking reverence for the Emperor and the nation with devotion to Japanese deities, becoming the central axis of religious life in the process.

In this book, the prominent Japanese religious scholar Susumu Shimazono highlights the intricate relationship between the modern Emperor system and State Shinto, particularly through the concept of the "Divine Emperor." Shimazono examines how the worship of the "Divine Emperor" permeated Japanese society and shaped social life, especially during the reign of Emperor Meiji. The book is composed of 24 chapters, which are broadly divided into five parts, each exploring different aspects of this dynamic between State Shinto and the imperial system.

Chapters 1 to 5 examine the significance of Emperor Meiji's funeral and the ritual suicide (*seppuku*) of Maresuke Nogi and his wife. In these chapters, the author draws on existing studies to assess how "the public greatly contributed to bringing Emperor Worship and State Shinto closer to the masses" (p.57). He argues that this event spurred the emergence of a unique cultural phenomenon centred around the praise of Emperor Meiji's 'Imperial Virtue' (pp.19-31).

Chapters 6 to 9 delve deeper into the origins and development

of this cultural phenomenon. The author traces it back to July 22, 1912, two days after the government announced Emperor Meiji's critical condition. Citizens, unable to visit the Emperor personally, gathered spontaneously in front of the Double-Arched Bridge of the Imperial Palace to pray for his recovery (pp.76-84). This grassroots movement reflected the internalization of Emperor Meiji worship, which had grown during his leadership in Japan's victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars (pp.93-94). This widespread devotion among the populace culminated in the construction of Meiji Jingu and the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery, built immediately after Emperor Meiji's death to commemorate his 'Imperial Virtue' (pp.73-74).

Chapters 10 to 14 focus on the critical perspectives of intellectuals regarding the nationwide reverence for Emperor Meiji's 'Imperial Virtue' that arose after his death. For instance, journalist Tanzan Ishibashi argued that instead of constructing shrines to worship Emperor Meiji based on popular enthusiasm, efforts should be directed toward projects that contribute to social development (pp.101-108). Despite such rational criticisms from intellectual circles, the spontaneous popular movement to honor Emperor Meiji's 'Imperial Virtue' gained overwhelming momentum, leading to the construction of Meiji Jingu. This development marked the populace as significant supporters of State Shinto 'from below' (pp.117-124). The author concludes that Emperor Meiji's death marked a turning point in the history of the Divine Emperor and State Shinto (p.125). Following this shift, scholars, writers, and ideologues began to produce discourses surrounding the Divine Emperor, the Divine Imperial Family, and the Divine Nation (p.134).

Chapters 15 to 21 explore the relationship between the masses, who were uplifted by Emperor Worship, and the intellectuals who sympathized with and encouraged this sentiment. Together, they contributed to the establishment of a security system that positioned the Imperial Family as the ultimate embodiment of 'the good.' The author argues that this dynamic created a social atmosphere where it became increasingly difficult for individuals to distance themselves from the worship of the Divine Emperor,

which was being actively promoted by the state (p.197).

Chapters 22 to 24 examine how the movement called 'Imperial Way Faction', which venerated the Divine Emperor, was linked to the rise of Showa fascism. Specifically, the book highlights the case of Muneki Minoda, a nationalist and anti-communist who led the movement for "the clarification of the fundamental concepts of national policy," focusing on "the homeland Japan" as an object of faith (pp.212-220). The author concludes that the Divine Emperor system, solidified following Emperor Meiji's death, became the core of 'State Shinto from below,' which ultimately fueled Japan's war of aggression in Asia.

To sum up, the book introduces the concept of the 'Divine Emperor' as central to understanding the politico-religious values that shaped modern Japan since the Meiji era and argues that this system inevitably contributed to Japan's national downfall in the modern period.