


## Article

# The Divinity of the Emperor and Postwar Japanese Conservative Nationalism

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the scholarly discourse on the divinity of the emperor in postwar Japan to better understand Japanese conservative nationalism, which has been regaining momentum since the 1990s. Viewing the idea of the divinity of the emperor as ideologically fundamental to Japanese conservative nationalism, this paper looks at how conservative scholars from the 1970s developed a culturalist argument for the divinity of the emperor, first to negate the “humanity declaration”, i.e., the New Year’s greeting by the Showa emperor on 1 January 1946 renouncing his divinity, and then to reconfigure conservative ideology into a popular discourse on Japanese identity (i.e., the Nihonjinron), thereby making it more easily accepted by postwar society. Key to this culturalist argument is an essentialized dichotomy between Japanese culture and Western culture, more specifically a binary between Shinto kami and the Christian God—that the Japanese concept of kami is qualitatively different from that of the Christian God, so the emperor is not God but is kami; therefore, the emperor’s divinity is not really denied and he remains the spiritual pillar of the Japanese nation even under the postwar constitutional regime. Refashioning itself as part of the increasingly popular but depoliticized Nihonjinron discourse, the culturalist argument on the divinity of the emperor helped make the imperial house a popular topic of the discourse on Japanese identities, even while it completely circumvented the very issues of war responsibility and historical memory which gave rise to the “humanity declaration” in 1946 in the first place. In its depoliticized, popularly appealing form, the culturalist argument played a role in legitimating the regressive conservative nationalism that seeks to revive the pre-1945 divine emperor-centered political regime. Exploring the scholarly discourse on the divinity of the emperor, then, helps shed light on how and why conservative nationalism could persist and gain momentum in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** the divinity of the emperor; the humanity declaration; Nihonjinron; kami; *bansei ikkei*; Japanese conservative nationalism



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## 1. Introduction

From the 1990s, a nationalist conservatism has been regaining momentum in Japan. In 1997, two grassroots conservative groups, the National Conference to Protect Japan (*Nihon wo Mamoru kokumin kaigi*), which grew in 1983 out of the National Conference to Realize the Legalization of Imperial Era Name (*Gengō hōseika jitsugen kokumin kaigi*, created in 1978), and the Association for Protection of Japan (*Nihon wo mamoru kai*, formed in 1974), merged to found *Nippon Kaigi*, or the Japan Conference, which became the largest and most influential conservative organization in the country. The influence and power of *Nippon Kaigi* comes from, first, participation by hundreds of Diet members, primarily those affiliated with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and second, its collaborative relationship with the conservative *Jinja Honchō*, an umbrella organization formed in 1946 comprising the majority of Shinto shrines of Japan, and *Shinto Seiji Renmei*, or the (self-designated) Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, the lobbyist group of *Jinja Honchō* created in 1969. Then, also in 1997, the Association for Creating New History Textbooks (*Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho wo tsukurukai*) was formed to promote a revisionist history that affirms and beau-

tifies war and Japanese imperialism. These organizations are not independent from each other but share many members.

Mobilizing more and more grassroots support via these institutional channels, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was able to pass the Act on the National Flag and Anthem in 1999 despite activist groups' protests that this was an attempt to revive prewar imperialist nationalism. Then, the hawkish prime minister Koizumi Junichiro (b. 1942) officially visited the ultra-nationalist Yasukuni Shrine every year from 2001 to 2006. When the equally nationalist Abe Shinzo (1954–2022) replaced Koizumi as prime minister, he revised the Basic Act on Education by infusing nationalist content into it in 2006. During Abe's second term as prime minister from 2012 to 2020, he manipulated the United Nations Charter's Article 51 of the right of collective self-defense to bypass the constitutional ban on possession and use of military power and succeeded in devising policies that enable Japanese self-defense forces to join allies' military actions overseas. For Abe, who believed the Asia–Pacific War was a war of self-defense, this is a necessary step in returning Japan to a normal country, i.e., to no longer being encumbered by the US-imposed peace constitution (Abe 2013). In the same year (2015), Abe forced the passing in the Diet the State Secret Law which activists have critiqued will stifle citizens' right of access to information. The Abe administration also started making concrete moves to revise the constitution, the bedrock of the postwar political system. After Abe's assassination in July 2022, his revisionist efforts were succeeded by his political disciples such as Kishida Fumio, prime minister from October 2021–September 2024, and Takaichi Sanae, a member of the National Diet.

Why are these conservative movements successful? How should we understand the power and influence of postwar Japanese conservative nationalism? Recent scholarship in Japanese and English has taken up these issues from different angles and shed light on the development of the conservative movement. In Japanese, Tawara (2016, 2018) conducted a comprehensive review of the organization and ideology of Nippon Kaigi. The weekly *Shūkan kinyōbi* in 2016 edited a volume tracing the close connections between Nippon Kaigi and the Shinto Shrine Association (*Jinja Honchō*) (*Shūkan Kinyōbi* 2016). The prominent scholar of Japanese religions Shimazono Susumu examined postwar conservative nationalism as the survival of prewar State Shinto in a reduced form (Shimazono 2021). For Shimazono, postwar conservatism is focused on the worship of the divine emperor and he documents how many conservative discursive and institutional efforts are predicated on the idea of the emperor's divine authority. In English, Mark Mullins's (2021) *Yasukuni Fundamentalism* is the most recent study of the postwar conservative movement. Finding Yasukuni Shrine to have been the principle lightning rod for conservatives and progressive critics alike, Mullins names the movement "Yasukuni fundamentalism", which seeks to "revive and restore the social order and values expressed in the emperor-centered State Shinto of wartime Japan" (p. 43). Mullins documents the efforts of conservatives to revive the cultural and political significance of Shinto shrines and the imperial institutions as well as the divisions that exist within representative groups—Shinto, Buddhist, Christian, and New Religions (p. 50). Another recent study by Aike P. Rots (2017) traces the development of a religious environmental paradigm that enabled "Shinto's environmental turn". Rots documents how the notion of *Chinju no mori*, or sacred groves surrounding Shinto shrines, was promoted by the Shinto establishment to transform Shinto into an environmentally friendly "ancient nature religion". The embrace of environmentalist discourse has allowed Shinto shrines and their affiliated actors to cultivate broad contact with and acceptance by Japanese civil society in recent decades.

This paper adds another dimension to this scholarship by exploring the ideological foundation of Japanese conservative nationalism, i.e., the idea of the divinity of the Japanese emperor. All current scholarship takes into account the ideological dimension of postwar conservative nationalism. For example, Mullins mentions the "core beliefs and agenda" of the ruling LDP as well as Yasukuni Shrine's view on World War II history when he discusses the significance of the term "Yasukuni fundamentalism" (Mullins 2021, pp. 43–44). Nevertheless, being primarily a historical sociological study of Japanese conser-

vative nationalism, Mullims's work does not focus on examining the ideas or ideologies of this nationalism. Shimazono's comprehensive work likewise does not investigate in depth how the idea of the divine emperor was (re)formulated and deployed as part of the postwar conservative movement, even though he repeatedly points to the importance of the divine emperor for postwar State Shinto. For example, he uses the "reverence of the divine emperor" (*shinsei tennō sūkei*) throughout the book to refer to the ritual–doctrinal regime directed to the imperial institution in both prewar and postwar periods.

The divinity of the emperor requires a focused examination because the central ideological importance of the idea of the divine emperor for postwar Japanese conservative nationalism is evident. For example, Nippon Kaigi invigorates itself by six major goals that all hinge on an emperor-centered nationalist vision, with the first goal being to build a future Japan that reveres the divine imperial institution (Nippon Kaigi n.d.). Similarly, Shinto Seiji Renmei is devoted to first of all "building a society that respects the imperial household that boasts a tradition of *bansei ikkei*" ("a divine unbroken genealogy", a phrase deployed in pre-1945 years for ideologically mobilizing the nation for imperialism and war) (Shinto Seiji Renmei n.d.). The Association for Creating New History Textbooks looks at the divinity of the emperor as literal truth and has compiled a series of textbooks that narrate mythologies of the imperial institution as real history of ancient Japan (Jiyū hōsō dan 2005).

However, the divinity of the emperor was not a naturally accepted idea in the immediately postwar years. Given that under U.S. Occupation the emperor had announced himself as a human being, the Showa emperor came to be widely known not as a divine emperor but as a human emperor in the 1950s and 1960s. This paper focuses on exploring how a scholarly discourse on the divinity of the emperor was constructed over a period of five decades starting from the 1970s that returned a divine aura to the image of the human emperor and functioned like an undercurrent that helped sustain the conservative nationalist movement in the postwar period. This paper demonstrates how prominent conservative scholars from the 1970s developed a culturalist argument for the divinity of the emperor, first to negate the "humanity declaration", i.e., the New Year's greeting by the Showa emperor on 1 January 1946 renouncing his divinity, and then to reconfigure the conservative ideology into a depoliticized popular discourse on Japanese identity. In the reconfigured popularly appealing form, the culturalist argument became more easily accepted by society and was able to continuously provide legitimacy to postwar conservative nationalism. Key to this culturalist argument is an essentialized dichotomy between Japanese culture and Western culture, more specifically a binary between Shinto kami and the Christian God—that the Japanese concept of kami is qualitatively different from that of the Christian God, so the emperor is not God but is kami; therefore, the emperor's divinity is not really denied and he remains the spiritual pillar of the Japanese nation even under the postwar constitutional regime where the emperor is legally defined as no more than a political symbol.

Refashioning itself from the 1980s as part of the increasingly popular but de-politicized Nihonjin-ron discourse, the culturalist argument on the divinity of the emperor helped keep the imperial house as a topic of popular interest in the discourse on Japanese identities, thereby lending reticent legitimacy to conservative nationalist ideology, even while it completely circumvented the very issues of war responsibility and historical memory that gave rise to the "humanity declaration" in 1946 in the first place. In its depoliticized, popularly appealing form, the culturalist argument played a role in legitimating the regressive conservative nationalism that seeks to revive a divine emperor-centered political regime. Exploring the scholarly discourse on the divinity of the emperor, then, helps shed light on how and why conservative nationalism could persist and gain momentum in the 21st century.

This paper has four parts, each taking up a specific moment in the making of the discourse on the divinity of emperor. First is the so-called 1946 "humanity declaration" from which the very issue of the divinity of the emperor arose. On 1 January 1946, the Showa

emperor made a radio greeting to the nation announcing that he was not a god. Part One traces the origin and making of this event and explores the ambiguities embedded in the event of the “humanity declaration”. Second, I look closely at the argument made from the 1970s by a prominent Shinto scholar named Ōhara Yasuo (b. 1942) to disqualify the “humanity declaration” as culturally meaningless and politically invalid. Ōhara cashes in on the ambiguities and fashioned a culturalist reading of the divinity of the emperor. Ōhara was reacting to the then-leftist student movement that called for the abolishment of the emperor, and his argument found resonance in a segment of society starting to distance itself from politics and enjoy cultural consumption of the emerging Nihonjin-ron discourse.

The third part looks at the argument for the divinity of the emperor by Kaji Nobuyuki (b. 1936), a prominent scholar of Chinese classics and Confucianism at Kyoto University. In May 2000, Kaji convened a group of scholars and public intellectuals to defend the then prime minister Mori Yoshirō, who stirred a controversy by claiming Japan is a country of gods centered on the emperor. Like Ōhara, Kaji adopted an inherent dichotomy between the Christian God and Japanese kami to argue for a unique Japanese cultural sensibility about the divine nature of the world. Deliberately cashing in on the popular Nihonjin-ron discourse that was fond of talks of a Japanese uniqueness, Kaji argued that Japan, in its radical difference from the Christian West, is a country of gods and the emperor is the center of this divine land, thereby proving the cultural authenticity of the divinity of the emperor.

Part Four examines the argument of Watanabe Shōichi (1930–2017), a highly influential conservative scholar and public figure, for the divinity of the emperor during public debates in 2016–2019 concerning the abdication of the Heisei emperor. For Watanabe, the emperor’s abdication before death should not be allowed because it will compromise the very source of legitimacy of the imperial house, i.e., the unbroken divine imperial genealogy. Watanabe has for nearly six decades promoted his cultural–historical theory of the divine emperor, writing prolifically and actively engaging the public. His expert opinion was sought by the government when it came to issues concerning the imperial household. His opinion on abdication was not adopted by the Japanese government, but the effect of his conservative views in keeping the public engaged in discussions about the imperial house is obvious and hard to ignore. Even if Watanabe and Kaji were not formal members of Nippon Kaigi or other right-wing groups, their arguments helped sustain the relevance of Japanese conservative nationalism in society at large.

Needless to say, Ōhara, Kaji, and Watanabe were not the only voices talking about the divinity of the emperor. They are taken up here because of their shared status as influential, prominent scholars and because their arguments form a continuous discourse over the postwar decades. Most likely, they also knew each other. Many more people, such as the famous writer Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) and the cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori (b. 1953), participated in articulating the importance of the divine imperial institution for postwar Japan. They will be examined in future studies.

## 2. Part One

### *The “Humanity Declaration” and Its Ambiguities*

On 1 January 1946, the Showa emperor made a New Year radio announcement to the nation yet to recover from war devastations. While formally entitled the “Imperial Rescript on Constructing a New Japan” (*Shin Nihon kensetsu ni kansuru shōsho*) (NDL 2003–2004), it later came to be known as the “humanity declaration” because the rescript announced the emperor is not a god but a human being. It is understood that the humanization of the emperor, via the “humanity declaration”, together with the Shinto Directive issued by SCAP in December 1945, cleared the ideological ground for the making in 1946 of a new constitution that defined the emperor as the “symbol of the State and of the unity of the people”, rather than a divine, ruling sovereign monarch as codified in the Meiji constitution of 1889 (“The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal” (Article 1), and “The Emperor is sacred and inviolable” (Article 3)). The



announcement has since been regarded as a major step in the SCAP-led transformations of Japan from an imperialist state to a democratic and peaceful nation.

However, since the 1970s, the understanding that the emperor was transformed from a god to a human via the “humanity declaration” has come under attack. Conservative figures in Japan started arguing that the “humanity declaration” makes no cultural sense and should be dismissed. The Japanese emperor, as a result, is precisely a divine being, albeit defined on Japanese terms. If the “humanity declaration” clearly denied his divinity, why and how did the conservatives try to argue otherwise? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the whole event of the “humanity declaration”. We shall start by introducing the political context at the end of WWII.

In summer 1945, there were worldwide calls for the Showa emperor to be punished or to bear war responsibility. New Zealand prime minister argued the emperor should be tried as a war criminal (Bix 1995, p. 320). China, the Philippines, and Australia made similar demands (Rekishigakukenkyukai 1986, p. 138). A Gallop poll in June 1945 showed 77% of the American public wanted him severely punished (Bix 1995, p. 320). The Potsdam Declaration calling for Japan’s unconditional surrender in July 1945 left the emperor’s future status uncertain, leaving much room for speculation. After Japan’s surrender, the U.S. Senate introduced the Joint Resolution 94 declaring the emperor should be tried as a war criminal on September 18. Also in September, foreign press reported rumors of the emperor’s imminent abdication (Bix 1995, pp. 320–21).

In Japan, when nearly 500 Japanese communist political prisoners were freed in October, they began to publicly criticize their government and the imperial institution (Bix 1995, p. 325). The question of abdication surfaced in the Japanese press, keeping alive the problem of the emperor’s war responsibility (Bix 1995, p. 326). On 7 November 1945, Communist Party leader Shiga Yoshio wrote in the party journal *Akahata* that “the emperor is the war criminal who carries most responsibility” (Bix 1992, p. 305). Japanese public opinion also showed a strong desire to have the imperial institution reformed. A survey conducted in December 1945 showed 45.3% wanted the center of morality placed outside of politics, and 28.4% wanted a British-style emperor system (Bix 1995, pp. 328–29).

However, General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), had no plan to punish the emperor or force him to abdicate. He had decided not to pursue the emperor’s war responsibility because he wanted to use the emperor to maintain social stability to reform Japan (Bix 1995, p. 320). MacArthur and his military secretary Bonner Fellers had worked out a plan for occupying and reforming Japan, one that turned on separating the emperor from the militarists and retaining him as a constitutional figurehead (Bix 1995, p. 321). On the other hand, not knowing about MacArthur’s plan, the Showa emperor and the political elites were extremely worried about their fate under the American occupation. They spent all the efforts to save the imperial institution, or the National Polity (*kokutai*), from severe punishment or abolishment.

Then, the Showa emperor and MacArthur met each other for the first time on September 27, and in all likelihood, MacArthur indicated his intention to keep the emperor without pursuing his war responsibility in return for his cooperation in reforming the country (Bix 1995, p. 323). At the very outset of the occupation, then, the Japanese defensive strategy for protecting the *kokutai* and MacArthur’s occupation strategy for using the emperor to facilitate reforms overlapped (Bix 1995, p. 321). The imperial court secretly joined hands with SCAP in seeking ways to shield the Showa emperor from his war responsibility and transform him into a figure fit for postwar reform (p. 323). One key strategy was to humanize the emperor, to reshape the emperor from a divine, unapproachable monarch into a fellow human being that every Japanese can identify with, i.e., to have him become the people’s emperor.

The idea of humanizing the emperor as an occupation strategy emerged simultaneously in the U.S. and in the GHQ occupation. In October 1945, American experts polled in Columbia University poll agreed a “divine” emperor was a menace to reform and that the emperor system had to be eliminated, but this could not be done by outsiders (being too

strong). The Japanese would have to do it themselves. Experts proposed that the emperor should be persuaded to tell his people he was not divine (Woodard 1972, p. 251). Then, on 12 October, MacArthur said to Fellers, who submitted on 2 October a memorandum on the attitude of the Japanese people on their sovereign, “I wonder what would happen if the Emperor were to deny his divinity?” (Woodard 1972, p. 253).

In November, Dr. Reginald H. Blyth, a newly appointed professor of English literature at Gakushuin University and tutor of English to the Crown Prince, began to serve as the informal liaison between the imperial household and Civil Information and Education Section (CIE) of the GHQ (Woodard 1972, p. 259). At the end of the month, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Henderson of CIE discussed the Emperor Meiji’s Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo*) with Blyth and expressed that the Rescript had been used to indoctrinate Japanese people into the idea of imperial divinity. He then told Blyth that “before democratic and peaceful ideals could be expected to grow in Japan”, the “false notions of national and especially imperial superiority due to divine descent” would have to be eradicated (Woodard 1972, p. 260).

In early December, Blyth came to the CIE and told Henderson that the imperial household had informed him that the emperor had decided to renounce his divinity. The emperor did not believe in it and “wished to prevent the possibility of such a thing (the idea of divinity being abused during wartime) ever happening again” (Woodard 1972, pp. 260–61). Blyth then said the imperial household wanted some suggestions regarding the form in which such a denial should be made. Pressed by Blyth, the initially hesitant Henderson drafted a brief statement during lunch hour. Blyth hurried back to the imperial palace with the draft statement. The following day, Blyth returned to the CIE, bringing with him his version of the statement approved by the imperial household. Henderson was pleased because he found Blyth’s version was almost identical to his, with the deletion of one word “only” (Woodard 1972, p. 262). The CIE showed MacArthur the statement on the same day; he was delighted and approved it. The statement was given back to Blyth.

On December 20 or so, the draft statement arrived at the desktop of prime minister Shidehara Kijūrō (1872–1951) (Woodard 1972, p. 263; Okazaki 2012, p. 92). Proficient in English, Shidehara made revisions of the draft and had his secretary Fukushima Shintaro translate it to Japanese (Okazaki 2012, p. 92). Shidehara next sought editorial help from Maeda Tamon, the minister of education and a Christian. Maeda spent two days revising the English draft before returning it to Shidehara on 25 December, who made some further changes and had Fukushima again translate into Japanese.

On 29 December, Maeda submitted the statement to the emperor for approval. The emperor agreed with the statement but requested the Charter Oath in five articles (*gokajō no goseimon*) made public by the Meiji government in April 1868 be included in the statement. The Showa emperor wanted to create an impression of continuity that democracy in Japan did not start in 1945 but in 1868, and the new direction Japan in 1945 embarked on was but a continuation of what the great Emperor Meiji had initiated in the Charter Oath (Okazaki 2012, p. 94; Woodard 1972, p. 266). This specious continuity would clearly serve to deemphasize pre-1945 authoritarianism and imperialism, thereby vindicating the emperor to a great extent. Thereafter, Minister Maeda and one of the Chamberlains, Kinoshita Michio, revised the statement to include the Charter Oath, and eventually placed the Oath at the beginning of the text. As such, the statement reads first of all like a declaration of commitment to democracy rather than a renunciation of divinity, as was initially intended.

Before finalizing the text and sending it to the GHQ for final approval, however, Chamberlain Kinoshita found problematic the Japanese translation of the phrase “the Emperor is divine”. The two sentences where the phrase appeared are as follows (Okazaki 2012, p. 95).

The ties between Us and Our people have always stood on mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine, and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world.

朕ト爾等国民トノ間ノ紐帯ハ、終始相互ノ信賴ト敬愛トニ依リテ結バレ、単ナル神話ト伝説トニ依リテ生ゼルモノニ非ズ。天皇ヲ以テ神ノ裔トシ、且日本国民ヲ以テ他ノ民族ニ優越セル民族ニシテ、延テ世界ヲ支配スベキ運命ヲ有ストノ架空ナル觀念ニ基クモノニモ非ズ。

“The Emperor is divine” is translated as “tenno wo motte kami no sue toshi” (天皇ヲ以テ神ノ裔トシ). Kinoshita found this translation unacceptable. He could accept the concept of the Japanese being the descendants of the gods to be deemed false (架空ナル觀念), but he could not possibly accept the statement that the conception of the emperor as the descendant of gods (天皇ヲ以テ神ノ裔トシ) was also false (Okazaki 2012, p. 95). Kinoshita knew he could not do anything about the English version because that had been approved by MacArthur, but he knew he could change the Japanese expression. Indeed, he changed 天皇ヲ以テ神ノ裔トシ (the emperor as the descendant of gods) to 天皇ヲ以テ現御神トシ (the emperor as a manifest god) (Okazaki 2012, p. 95). After receiving approval from the emperor, the statement was finalized as the imperial rescript.

This change was no less than a last-minute, strategic manipulation of words by Chamberlain Kinoshita. Most significantly, by replacing “descendants of gods” with “a manifest god”, Kinoshita successfully concealed and thereby salvaged the very idea of the emperor being the descendant of the gods, which was precisely the ideological source of the divine authority of the Japanese sovereign monarch, a source codified in the Meiji constitution as *bansei ikkei* 万世一系 or “a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal”. Now, the emperor’s divinity is explicitly denied in the English version of the rescript but in the Japanese version, his divinity became ambiguous. A manifest god (*akitsu-mi-kami*), being a subcategory of god (*kami*), entails that not being a manifest god does not mean the emperor is not a god. In Japanese, then, this “no” is not a real denial.

As for the term *akitsu-mi-kami*, it was used during the Asia–Pacific War (1937–1945) to refer to the emperor as a god, most prominently in the notorious political tract, *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity* (*Kokutai no hongō*), issued in 1937 for ideological mobilization of the nation for war (*Kokutai no hongō* 1937). As such, Kinoshita’s denial of the emperor’s divinity as *akitsu-mi-kami* can then be understood as denying his divinity only during the wartime period. This partial denial suggests that Kinoshita recognized that the notion of imperial divinity was indeed abused for wartime mobilization and should be corrected. But more fundamentally, this partial denial was more of Kinoshita’s impromptu strategy to save the emperor’s essential divinity than of expressing remorse for the imperialism and war the emperor’s supposed divinity had helped to justify. Kinoshita sowed the seed of ambiguity between English and Japanese.

The imperial rescript was broadcast on 1 January 1946 (See Appendix A for the rescript in Japanese and English). The reaction from US and other Western media was strong. They chose to read the rescript as primarily the emperor’s renunciation of his divinity. On 2 January, the *Los Angeles Times* reported the announcement under the title “Hirohito Quits Being a Phony God” and explained sarcastically that “Hirohito is a phony god. ...Yesterday, the god rolled down Mount Fuji. The emperor made a humanity declaration because he wants to cling to his life and evade war crime trial (Okazaki 2012, p. 105). On 2 January, the *New York Times* reported under the title “Hirohito Disclaims Divinity” that the emperor was now treated unambiguously as a human being, the same as the people (Okazaki 2012, p. 105). On 2 January, *The Washington Post* reported that with the declaration, the obstacle for Japan’s democratization was now removed (Okazaki 2012, p. 105). On 31 December 1945, *The Morning Bulletin* of Australia reported the following title: “Japanese Emperor Refutes Divinity and Race Superiority Beliefs” (*The Morning Bulletin* 1945). On 1 January 1945, *The Sydney Morning Herald* announced to its readers that the “Japanese Emperor Denies His Divine Ancestry” (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1946). On 16 January, *The Christian Century* in the U.S. wrote that “[The Japanese soldier’s] conduct on a thousand battlefields left no doubt that the average Japanese accepted the emperor as divine. ...He was not only the spiritual center of the state; he was the physical incarnation of Japan in this life, and in the life to come its protector. Now all that is gone” (Anderman 2010).

Japanese media was equally explicit in reading the rescript as denunciation of the emperor's divinity, consciously or unconsciously helping SCAP and conservative elites create the image of a human emperor who would end up leaving behind the question of war responsibility. The imperial household proactively arranged a journalists' meeting with the Showa emperor on 22 December 1945 to show the latter was just a human being, and furthermore postponed news reports of this meeting to 1 January 1946 to magnify the effect of the "humanity declaration" (Kawanishi 2015, p. 90). The national newspaper Asahi Shimbun on 1 January celebrated the rescript's call for democracy and noted that the "emperor is not an *akitsu-mi-kami*" (Kawanishi 2015, p. 92). Another national daily Mainichi Shimbun on 1 January carried the rescript on its front page together with a photo of the emperor in suit rather than a standard pre-1945 military or imperial outfit (Mainichi Shimbun 2016).

Not just national newspapers, but local newspapers also contributed to the "humanization" of the Showa emperor. More specifically, they used the terms "human emperor" (*ningen tenno*) as well as "symbol" (*shōchō*) to portray the emperor's nation-wide tours during February 1946–November 1951. These tours were precisely planned by the GHQ to move the emperor closer to the populace as a human being (Bix 1995). *Bōchō* of Yamaguchi prefecture on 6 December 1947 reported that "the emperor is a human just like us. We understood that he is by no means a manifest god (*akitsu-mi-kami*) but an emperor living among the people" (Sebata 2010, p. 60). On 1 June 1949, *Kumamoto* of Kumamoto prefecture similarly reported that "through approaching the honest and authentic personality of Our Emperor, there is no doubt that people have seen the 'symbol of the country of Japan' and the 'symbol of national integration of Japan'" (Sebata 2010, p. 60). An editorial of *Shikoku* on 13 March 1950 criticized commercially oriented publishing journalism reporting "all sorts of miscellaneous details about the imperial family to cater to their readers. This is permissible to the extent that the humanity (*ningensei*) of the emperor needs be emphasized. But their intention cannot be said to be pure when it comes to creating a new human image (*ningenzō*) (of the emperor) as the human symbol of national unity..." (Sebata 2010, p. 56). *Kōchi*, the prefectural newspaper of Kōchi in Shikoku, on 29 March 1950 wrote, "we come very close to His Majesty. It is for the purpose of reporting the appearance of the 'human emperor' as it is. ...Needless to say, it is the duty of news media to let our people recognize the new 'appearance' of the emperor" (Sebata 2010, p. 56).

So, despite the fact that the humanity declaration in Japanese did not really deny the divinity of the Showa emperor and that the humanity declaration was a result of a SCAP–emperor collaborative effort to save the emperor, the understanding that the emperor renounced his divinity through the "humanity declaration" on 1 January 1946 spread and became widely accepted. On the other hand, while the message in English was explicit and clear, in Japanese the declaration left room for competing interpretations. Also notably, the "human" Showa emperor after 1945 did not stop engaging in rituals directed to his ancestral gods in the imperial palace, nor did he stop visiting the Ise Shrine, which enshrines the imperial ancestor the Sun Goddess Amaterasu from whom originated the reputed unbroken imperial genealogy (Shimazono 2021, pp. 186–92; Mainichi Shimbun 2022). After his death in 1989, imperial family members would regularly visit his and the Taisho emperor's mausoleum in western Tokyo as well as the mausoleums of the mythical Jimmu emperor and other emperors (NKS 2019). For example, the current emperor visited Jimmu emperor's mausoleum to report his assumption of the throne in November 2019 (Asahi shimbun). All these rituals are based on and confirm the myth of "a line of emperors unbroken for ages eternal", or *bansei ikkei*, contrary to the "humanity declaration" of 1946. Conservative scholars cashed in on these layers of ambiguity in the "human declaration" and started in the 1970s to overthrow the understanding of the "human declaration".



### 3. Part Two

#### *The Emperor Is Not God, but Kami*

During the American occupation from 1945 to 1952, the idea of the human emperor was popularized by Japanese mass media and the Showa emperor's tours in Japan. Once Americans left Japan in 1952, however, Japanese conservative nationalism soon reemerged. Various attempts were made to revive the pre-1945 imperial ideology that centered on the divine emperor. Jinja Honchō started campaigning to revive the abolished *Kigensetsu* (11 February), a national holiday celebrated before 1945 as the day on which the mythical emperor Jinmu founded Japan. In 1966, the LDP successfully revived *kigensetsu* as the National Founding Day (*kenkoku kinen no hi*) despite the fact that Emperor Jinmu had been debunked as pure fiction after 1945. In 1969, the aforementioned Shinto Association for Spiritual Leadership (*Shinto seiji renmei*) was created. During 1969–1974, a bill proposing the revival of state support of Yasukuni Shrine was annually submitted to the national Diet but was every time defeated until the LDP eventually gave it up.

The 1960s–1970s was a period of political movement in Japan as well as in many other countries. Marxist-inspired student and civil movements protested against the US–Japan security treaty (Anpo) and the Vietnam War. Many called for pursuing the emperor's war responsibility and even abolishing the imperial institution (Suga 2019). A series of assassination attempts were made on the emperor in the 1970s (1971, 1972, 1974, 1975). At the same time, the 1960s also witnessed Japan's phenomenal economic growth, with its GDP reaching No. 2 globally in 1968. Economic growth brought about affluence and satisfaction, leading to the gradual de-politicization of society. In its stead, a popular discourse analyzing and positively evaluating Japanese culture emerged. Later known as the *Nihonjinron*, this discourse usually adopts an essentializing dichotomy between Japan and the West in articulating the uniqueness or superiority of Japanese culture (Befu 2001).

In response to radical anti-emperor protests and influenced by the above socio-cultural changes, conservative scholars started to develop an argument for the importance of the emperor for the now prosperous and confident nation, not as a political symbol as defined by the 1946 constitution, but as the cultural essence of the Japanese nation. Key to the articulations of the importance of the emperor was none other than his supposed divinity, presented as a cultural value, straddling literal and metaphorical interpretations. In this section, I look at one of the conservative scholars in the postwar period, Ōhara Yasuo (大原康男 (1942–)), a long-time professor of religious studies at the private, conservative Kokugakuin University, and examine how he crafted an effective culturalist argument to challenge the dominant understanding of the “humanity declaration”.

Ōhara attended college at the elite Kyoto University and received his PhD in Shinto studies from Kokugakuin University in 1978. He then started to work at the Institute for Studies of Japanese Culture at the same university. Taking up the Shinto Directive (*Shinto shirei*) issued by the SCAP in December 1945 as the topic of his PhD thesis, Ōhara pursued a consistently conservative scholarship, representing an influential stance that sees Shinto as having been unfairly marginalized and emaciated by American Occupation. Identifying Shinto with the Japanese nation and upholding the emperor as the core of Shinto, Ōhara, like many other scholars and sympathizers of Shinto, devoted himself to relieving the emperor from the constraints of the postwar political framework which, he and others claimed, was imposed on Japan by the Americans. He directly participated in the postwar conservative nationalist movement. When Nippon Kaigi was formed in 1997, Ōhara became the chairperson of its policy committee, rising to become a key figure of Nippon Kaigi (Shimazono 2021, p. 343). He also was a member of the policy committee of Shinto Seiji Renmei, closely associated with Nippon Kaigi.

Ōhara developed his theory on the divinity of the emperor in a series of writings from the 1970s. His first book, *A Tentative Theory on the Manifest God (Akitsu-mi-kami kō shiron)*, published in 1978, was devoted to none other than the topic of the emperor as a manifest god. His second book, *Tenno — Transformations of Emperor Theories and the Imperial Institution (Tennō—sono ron no hensen to kōshitsu seido)* (Ōhara 1988), sharpened the argument devel-

oped in the first book. I conduct a close reading of the second book to explore how he developed a culturalist argument that discredited the “humanity declaration” and returned divinity to the emperor. A decontextualized re-reading of the “humanity declaration” is the most prominent feature of Ōhara’s work. That is, he ignored the very reasons that led to the creation of the rescript—the joint efforts by the SCAP and the imperial household to release the emperor from bearing war responsibilities. Instead, he focuses on the text itself and reduces it into a problem of cross-cultural translation and understanding.

Ōhara starts his revisionist operation on the “humanity declaration” by emphasizing the role of the GHQ in initiating the rescript. That is, it is the GHQ that imposed its intention on the emperor to announce his humanity. Ōhara refers to Lieutenant Colonel Harold Henderson’s concern over the ideological threat posed by the Imperial Rescript on Education, and concludes that the “humanity declaration” was the end result of the SCAP’s engagement with the urgent issue of removing the remnant ideological effect of the now abolished Rescript (Ōhara 1988, p. 31). While it is true, Ōhara concedes, that some on the Japanese side actively accepted the order of the GHQ, this acceptance was reasonable in the context of international public opinion which “called for correcting the excessive emphasis on the divinity of the emperor”—Ōhara’s euphemistic expression for the pre-1945 imperialist ideology that used the divine emperor to mobilize the nation for war (Ōhara 1988, p. 33). In any case, there is no doubt that the whole process of creating the “humanity declaration” was led by the GHQ, rather than a US–Japan joint work (Ōhara 1988, p. 33). Ōhara deliberately ignored the historical context of 1946, wherein the emperor was equally eager to denounce his “divinity” so as to avoid bearing war responsibility, and painted a picture of the emperor victimized by domineering Americans. By placing historical agency on the American occupation, Ōhara sets up an unequal relationship as the context to analyze the rescript text itself and sees the problem of cross-cultural translation and understanding as rising out of this hostile context.

Ōhara’s ultimate goal is to disqualify the very event of the “humanity declaration” so as to recover the emperor’s divinity. His basic strategy is to set up an essentialized dichotomy between kami and God, representative of equally essentialized pair categories of Japanese culture and Western culture. He starts by making the point that kami is not God (Ōhara 1988, p. 37). In the context of Christianity, Ōhara explains, God is usually defined as the “only, humanity- and nature-transcending, omnipotent, omniscient existence”. That is to say, “divine being” is fundamentally incompatible with and separated from “human being” (Ōhara put these terms in quotation marks). As such, a divine being such as God is qualitatively different from the Japanese concept “kami” (Ōhara 1988, p. 37). Ōhara quotes the definition of kami given by Motoori Norinaga, the 18th-century literary scholar reputed for discovering the essential qualities of the Japanese: “Kami refers to extraordinary, admirable, virtuous beings” (Ōhara 1988, p. 47). For Ōhara, such a broad definition naturally arises from the polytheistic cultural world of Japan where the idea of an absolute God could not have emerged (Ōhara 1988, p. 49). Kami is a concept filled with meanings and nuances that the concept of God does not have. Humans also become kami, in stark contrast to God, who transcends human life. The difference between kami and God points to the ultimate fact that there exist unsurpassable obstacles between cultures of the West and Japan (Ōhara 1988, p. 41).

Ōhara asks the following: If kami is so different from God, why did people think they are interchangeable? This was due to a fatal mis-translation (*goyaku*) of the Christian God into kami in the Meiji period (Ōhara 1988, p. 40). For many centuries, the Christian God was correctly translated as *Deusu* (Deus) or *Tenshu* (Heavenly Lord) but not kami, because people recognized their difference. However, when in early Meiji years American missionaries translated the Bible into Japanese by referring to the Chinese version (as *shen*, the same Chinese character for kami), God came to be rendered as kami. By translating God as kami, the marker of difference between the two was lost, leading to the equivalence of the two and subsequent confusion of understanding (Ōhara 1988, p. 41). “‘God’ came to be mechanically translated as ‘kami;’ likewise, ‘kami’ was translated as ‘God.’ This has

become a normal practice nobody finds strange. Now the situation has worsened to be an imminent danger for the culture of Japan" (Ōhara 1988, p. 41). Clearly, Ōhara views Christianity as a cultural threat and sees a cultural crisis in the translation of God into kami.

Once we recognized the difference between kami and God, Ōhara asserts, the statement "that the emperor is divine is a false conception" in the English version of the 1946 rescript should be translated in Japanese as "that the emperor is a God-like kami, i.e., supra-natural kami is a false conception" (Ōhara 1988, p. 37). This would actually be the correct and precise translation; no Japanese would find fault with it because the emperor is clearly not such a kind of kami. However, "the emperor is divine" was translated into "tenno wo motte akitsu-mi-kami toshi" ("to regard the emperor as a manifest kami"). This is a grave mistake (Ōhara 1988, p. 40). *akitsu-mi-kami* refers simply to a kami that manifests itself; the concept does not refer to any supra-natural attribute possessed by absolute divine beings such as God, but rather is predicated on the fact that the emperor possesses attributes of a natural human being. That is, *akitsu-mi-kami* means that the emperor, while being a natural human being, is thought to possess certain noble virtue or power (*ikihoi, toku*) unavailable to human beings (Ōhara 1988, p. 37).

Here, lies the essence for the emperor to be an *akitsu-mi-kami*. As a manifest kami, the emperor falls in love or gets sick, just like us. He has the dimension of a living body. The emperor is both a kami and a human. From the perspective of the traditional conception of kami, then, it is incorrect to say "from kami to human", because it is almost meaningless to speak about a "declaration to become human" because the emperor is always already a human being. The very conception of enacting a change from kami to human is possible only when seeing the emperor from the perspective of monotheistic religions which strictly distinguish "God" from "man" (Ōhara 1988, p. 51).

It is not just the emperor who can be an *akitsu-mi-kami*. According to Ōhara, *akitsu-mi-kami* is not a political but cultural concept. It is a concept widespread among both educated groups and common people. In popular culture, the idea of a manifest kami is called *ikigami*, a living kami (Ōhara 1988, p. 47). People love virtuous persons so much that they enshrine them as kami even when they are still alive. These include imperial family members, political figures, bureaucrats, military figures, scholars, and righteous commoners (Ōhara 1988, p. 48). By bringing in the concept of a living kami, Ōhara broadens the semantic coverage of *akitsu-mi-kami* to include the entire Japanese culture. As a result, Ōhara asserts that "with a piece of rescript, not just the imperial institution but the traditional conception of kami that had become popular belief of the Japanese have come under the threat of damage" (Ōhara 1988, p. 42). Indeed, "to view the emperor being an *akitsu-mi-kami* as a false conception amounts to denying completely the very belief of the Japanese people in *akitsu-mi-kami*" (Ōhara 1988, p. 48).

By now, Ōhara has transformed the "humanity declaration" from a political announcement to a culturalist argument. *Akitsu-mi-kami* is the emperor but also Japanese culture. To deny the emperor as *akitsu-mi-kami* is denying Japanese culture itself. Yet the denial is an impossible attempt because an *akitsu-mi-kami* being both a human and a kami cannot undergo a transformation from kami to human. As such, the whole event of the "humanity declaration" is meaningless, and the Americans forced this specious transformation on the emperor. This event made sense only to the Americans who had no respect for or understanding of Japanese culture and just looked at the emperor from the outside perspective of Christianity.

To be fair, a well-informed and non-essentializing comparison between kami and God or Japanese culture and Western culture could be a useful intellectual exercise. Ōhara's argument, however, not only deliberately ignored the background issue of the emperor's war responsibility; it is also empirically wrong. While he posed an unbridgeable dichotomy between kami and the Christian conception of the divine, i.e., God, they were clearly identified with each other in the Japanese and English versions of the Meiji Constitution and its Commentaries. The English version of the Commentaries unambiguously rendered the Japanese phrase *tenshō ishin shisei* 天縱惟神至聖 as "The Emperor is Heaven-descended,

divine and sacred" (Ito and Ito 1906). Here, the emperor as kami is explicitly identified as "divine". The author of the Commentaries, Ito Hirobumi, apparently did not feel any need to distinguish kami in Japanese from what is divine or God in English. He may even have felt pride in claiming divinity for the emperor in English because for him and other Meiji leaders, the divinity of the emperor is the only feature with which they could claim to distinguish Japan from competing Western nation-states.

For more complete reference, the commentaries on Article I and III of the Meiji Constitution are quoted in full below.

Article I: The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal.

Commentary: Since the time when the first Imperial Ancestor opened it, the country has not been free from occasional checks in its prosperity nor from frequent disturbances of its tranquility; but the splendor of the Sacred Throne transmitted through an unbroken line of one and the same dynasty has always remained as immutable as that of the heavens and of the earth (Ito and Ito 1906, p. 2).

Article III: The Emperor is sacred and inviolable.

Commentary: "The Sacred Throne was established at the time when the heavens and the earth became separated" (Kojiki). The Emperor is Heaven-descended, divine and sacred; He is pre-eminent above all His subjects. He must be revered and is inviolable (Ito and Ito 1906, p. 7).

#### 4. Part Three

##### "Isn't Japan a Country of Gods?"

Japanese conservative nationalism started to pick up momentum in the 1990s. In 1997, the Association for Creating New History Textbooks was formed for promoting a revisionist history that affirms the pre-1945 history of Japanese imperialism and war as well as the divine nature of the imperial institution. In the list of over seventy endorsers of the history textbook association was Kaji Nobuyuki 加地伸行, a then professor of Osaka University, a major national university of Japan (JCA-NET n.d.). Not surprisingly, Ōhara Yasuo was also in the list. Kaji Nobuyuki is a scholar of Chinese classics and Confucianism and has been known as a conservative intellectual, writing prolifically for specialized as well as general readership. In June 2000, Kaji edited a book *Isn't Japan a 'Country of Gods'?* (*Nihon ha 'kaim no kuni' deha nai no desuka?*) which consists of eleven essays by a journalist and ten conservative scholars including Ōhara Yasuo and Kaji himself. Why did Kaji edit the book? What did he want to say when he says "Japan is a 'country of gods'" in the title? To answer these questions, we need to go back to an incident caused by the then prime minister Mori Yoshiō that sparked a controversy.

On 15 May 2000, the Conference of Diet Members, a subgroup of the Shinto Association of Political Leadership (*Shinto seiji renmei kokkai giin kondankai*), held its 30th anniversary celebration meeting in Tokyo. The then prime minister Mori Yoshio, serving as the adviser of the Conference, was invited to give a speech. An LDP politician known for making blunt and controversial comments, Mori talked for about 20 min, emphasizing the importance of respect for gods and buddhas and the key role of Shinto in local communal life. At the beginning of his greeting, he introduced himself by explaining how he, representing the Conference, had worked hard with Shinto leaders over the past thirty years to hold celebrations for the emperors' anniversaries, promote kami worship, and promote among the people the idea that "Japan is no doubt the country of gods that centers on the emperor" (*Nihon no kuni, masani tenno wo chūshin toshiteiru kami no kuni dearu*).

His statement on Japan as a country of gods centering on the emperor aroused immediate criticisms and protests. Mass media, political parties, and various social groups all sharply criticized Mori for making the comment. On 17 May, the Asahi Shimbun criticized Mori for violating the fundamental principle of national sovereignty: "The prime minister who is elected in the Diet based on the principle of national sovereignty made a statement that denies this very principle" (Kaji 2000b, p. 35). The principle of national



sovereignty emerged out of Japan's reflection upon prewar militarism and the related ideology of the divine emperor: "In prewar Japan, the emperor and kami were tied together, and the people were ruled by a state centered on the sacred emperor. This prepared the groundwork for the military to act alone and violently, resulting in the death of numerous citizens. It also brought misery to the people of Asia. In reflection, postwar Japan began its rebuilding by severing the relationship between the emperor and politics and establishing national sovereignty. The principle of separation of church and state was also adopted in order to avoid repeating the harm of State Shinto" (Kaji 2000b, pp. 35–36).

The Communist Party of Japan likewise likened the idea of a divine country to prewar ideology and found Mori's statement unacceptable. "The idea that Japan is a 'divine country' functioned as the spiritual impetus for militarism and aggression, giving rise to the claim that because Japan is such a special nation, it is qualified for world domination. In the postwar period, Japan has cut it off from this idea forever (but the prime minister brought it back)" (Kaji 2000b, p. 44).

Labor unions, Buddhist groups, the Japan Baptist Alliance, the anti-discrimination Burakumin Liberation League, etc., all issued protest statements. The Burakumin Liberation League (*Buraku Kaihō Dōmei*), for example, criticized Mori for trying to revive the pre-1945 patriarchal emperor system and ignore historical lessons (Buraku Kaihō Dōmei 2000). It called on Mori to take back his statement and apologize. The Buddhist True Pure Land Sect Coalition (Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō, SKR) reflected on its own history of participating in war efforts and stated that the prime minister's words trampled the hope and efforts of the world for peace. It also demanded that Mori retract his statement (SKR 2000).

Amidst numerous criticisms, conservative figures came out to defend Mori. Kaji led the defense by editing a collection of pro-Mori arguments by major conservative scholars and entitled the book straightforwardly *Isn't Japan a 'Country of Gods'?* Curiously, Kaji put the phrase "country of gods" in single quotes. Does he mean by this that Japan is not literally but metaphorically a country of gods? It is not clear. His actual portrayal of gods and divine beings is ambiguous, bordering on literal and metaphorical in style. Kaji's will to defend is clear as he expresses it on the book's back cover while also making a popular appeal for the book by relating it explicitly to the Nihonjin-ron discourse.

A big fuss is being made about the prime minister's comment that 'Japan is certainly a country of gods that centers on the emperor'. But isn't Japan actually 'a country of gods?' This book aims to take up the controversy around the 'country of gods,' which is the core of the Nihonjin-ron and Nihon-ron, to reconsider the problem of 'kami' that has been long forgotten by many Japanese.

How, then, does Kaji reconsider "kami" so as to defend prime minister Mori? Let us look at Kaji's essay "Japan is a country of gods" (*Nihon ha kami no kuni dearu*) in the book.

Kaji argues that prime minister Mori's statement has been distorted and misunderstood by mass media and other criticisms (Kaji 2000a, pp. 95–96). The idea of a country of gods centering on the emperor referred to by Mori should be understood in the context of the Japanese polytheistic kami culture rather than of the monotheistic Christian culture. Understood correctly, it is clear that Japan is indeed a country of gods with the emperor at the center (Kaji 2000a, p. 97). Kaji develops his argument in two steps. First, he establishes that Japan is a country of gods, and second, that the emperor is at the center of Japan, a country of gods.

Kaji asserts that there is a fundamental difference between monotheistic God and polytheistic kami (Kaji 2000a, p. 97). The concept of god (kami) in a polytheistic culture such as Japan is always a plural one as there are always many gods in Japan. Moreover, gods are very close to people's daily life and there is no qualitative difference between gods (kami) and human beings, unlike in Christianity where God is a transcendent being high above the human world (Kaji 2000a, p. 98). In Japan, anybody can become a kami or Buddha when they die. Furthermore, people can become gods even when they are still alive. They are "living gods" (*ikigami*) or in the case of the emperor, a kami manifesting as a human (*arahitogami*) (Kaji 2000a, p. 97). Surrounding the emperor as the manifest god are count-

less gods in different forms. In Japan, Buddhists enshrine Buddha and Christians pray to God but both Buddhists and Christians also make offerings to ancestral gods because of Japanese polytheistic culture (Kaji 2000a, p. 98). Japanese visit Buddhist temples as well as Shinto shrines; they get married in Christian church and go through a Buddhist funeral. Polytheistic Japanese make practical choices about gods depending on particular situations (Kaji 2000a, p. 99).

After qualifying the concept “kami”, Kaji next expounds the term “country” (*kuni*). *Kuni* 国 in Japanese is a multivalent word. It can mean “country”, “state”, or “region”. Kaji, however, sets out to define *kuni* as a cultural entity by reducing its political dimension. When prime minister Mori talked about “the country of gods”, Kaji claims, he is not talking about “country” in the sense of the state or a political, executive, or legal system with a constitution at the center. Mass media, however, misunderstood Mori by interpreting *kuni* exactly in such a sense. By *kuni*, Mori meant actually a cultural totality (*bunkateki sōtai*) that exists as the bonding between historical, cultural, and traditional elements (Kaji 2000a, p. 100). This cultural country encompasses and undergirds the politico-legal country. This cultural totalistic *kuni*, Kaji proposes, means “a cultural country where polytheistic gods coexist” (Kaji 2000a, p. 100). In this country, a folk Shinto has settled in Japanese people’s everyday life. To say Japan is a country of gods merely expresses how Japanese feel about nature and society in their daily life. Prime minister Mori just articulated this everyday feeling of the Japanese people (Kaji 2000a, p. 100). He said nothing wrong. Without a doubt, Japan is a country of gods.

After establishing the veracity of the statement “Japan is a country of gods”, Kaji goes on to show that the emperor is at the center of this polytheistic culturalist *kuni*. He refers to Article one of the new Constitution promulgated on 3 November 1946, which reads, “The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people”. For Kaji, this shows the central position the emperor occupies in the national life of Japan (Kaji 2000a, p. 101). Yet, he does not stop here but further strengthens his point by referring to the Showa emperor’s declaration of the new Constitution as an amendment to the Meiji Constitution, which reads partially, “I rejoice that the foundation for the construction of a new Japan has been laid according to the will of the Japanese people, and hereby sanction and promulgate the amendments of the Imperial Japanese Constitution” (CFR n.d.).

The announcement of the 1946 Constitution by the Showa emperor was in fact a strategy deployed by General MacArthur in 1946 in using the emperor to achieve social order for realizing political and social reforms (CFR n.d.). With the new constitution being a key part of the reforms, and given that the Meiji Constitution stipulated that only the emperor could make changes to the constitution, having the Showa emperor announce it into existence as an amendment of the Meiji constitution would certainly create the effect that the constitution was not a new law imposed by the SCAP on the Japanese people, and thereby bring about significant legitimacy to the new Constitution. The Showa emperor’s announcement, however, is not a formal part of the constitution text. Nevertheless, Kaji refers to the announcement as evidence of the power of the emperor in authorizing the new constitution, and this authorizing power in turn proves the centrality of the emperor in the cultural totality of Japan, in the past and in the present (Kaji 2000a, p. 101). A case of manipulation of the emperor by the SCAP is reinterpreted half a century later as a proof of the centrality of the emperor for modern Japan.

Now reaching the conclusion that “Japan is a country centering on the emperor” (Kaji 2000a, p. 101), Kaji goes on to combine this with the first conclusion that Japan is a country of gods to reaffirm his key point that Japan is a country of gods that centers on the emperor. His construction of a culturalist argument is now complete. It is notable that like Ōhara, Kaji adopted an essentialized dichotomy between the monotheistic Christian God and polytheistic Japanese kami as the discursive ground for exposition. It is by contrasting the latter with the former that Kaji was able to make a case for a unique Japanese cultural sensibility about the divine nature of the life world of the Japanese archipelago. Such a cultural sensibility or belief for Kaji proves the cultural authenticity of the divinity

of the emperor, with which he must have believed he had vindicated prime minister Mori. Similar to Ōhara's argument, however, Kaji's culturalist argument is based on a strategic wavering between kami as a literal existence and kami as an object of belief. His argument is similarly conceptually ambiguous and logically inconsistent. It carries, however, an ideological charge compounded with indignation (for being misunderstood or even bullied by the West/US—an emotion made possible by the assumed dichotomy). Like much of the Nihonjin-ron discourse, Kaji's argument is strong in emotional and cultural appeal despite being weak in logic exposition and conceptualization.

Interestingly, unlike Ōhara, who simply evaded talking about the pre-1945 emperor-centered state and imperialism, Kaji is explicit in singling out State Shinto of this period, when Shinto was used for ideological indoctrination for militarism and ultranationalism, as an exception in the long history of the Japanese nation as a country of gods centering on the emperor. He reads State Shinto of pre-1945 period as overly emphasizing the absolute authority of the emperor and regards it as a period that does not represent true Shinto, which is none other than the polytheistic cultural totality in which gods coexist and intermingle with human beings. By excluding the prewar years from his definition of the country of gods, Kaji skillfully depoliticized his Nihonjin-ron-type exposition on the divinity of the emperor and made it more palatable to general Japanese readership in search of consuming talks about Japanese uniqueness without feeling guilty for what Japan had done before 1945.

Nevertheless, although Kaji recognized State Shinto as an exception not representative of true Shinto, he brushed aside the fundamental point of the link between the divine emperor and Japanese imperialism and war, a point repeatedly raised by criticisms of Mori. Kaji went a step further than Ōhara in de-politicizing the idea of the divine nature of the emperor and the country of Japan and transformed these concepts into a culturalist argument that ultimately lends legitimacy to postwar conservative nationalism.

## 5. Part Four

### *"A Country Where History Is Joined by Mythology"*

Part four examines the argument of Watanabe Shōichi (1930–2017), a highly influential conservative scholar and public figure, for the divinity of the emperor during public debates in 2016–2019 concerning the abdication of the Heisei emperor. For Watanabe, the emperor's abdication before death should not be allowed because it will compromise the very source of legitimacy of the imperial house, i.e., the divine unbroken genealogy of the emperor. A professor of English at Sophia University, one of the most prestigious private universities in Japan, Watanabe has for nearly six decades been promoting his cultural–historical theory of the divine emperor, writing prolifically and actively engaging the public. He hosted a column "Lessons of History" on the conservative monthly *Chichi* for 36 years until his death (Chichi shuppan sha n.d.). While his expert opinion on the emperor's abdication did not eventually prevail, the effect of his conservative views in keeping the public engaged in the discussions about the imperial house is obvious and hard to ignore.

On 8 August 2016, the then 82-year-old emperor announced to the public in a video message his intention to abdicate while alive, citing reasons of old age and deteriorating health (NHK n.d.). He also expressed his opposition to appointing a regent for him because he did not want to continue to be the emperor while having another person, i.e., the crown prince, to perform duties on his behalf. The emperor's announcement caused a legal difficulty because the Imperial House Law (1947) stipulates that succession of emperors can take place only upon the death of the incumbent emperor. While the law also stipulates that a regent can be arranged when the emperor is unable to perform duties, the Heisei emperor's expressed desire contradicts this stipulation. The apparent disagreement between the law and the emperor's desire made abdication an issue of nation-wide concern.

To find a solution, the Japanese government in September convened an advisory panel of experts that consisted of university professors, journalists, a retired judge, and a writer

(NDL 2017). On the 16- and then 6-member panel was Watanabe Shōichi, professor emeritus of Sophia University (as well as Ōhara Yasuo). Watanabe held that the emperor should not be allowed to abdicate and he supported his position with an argument about the divinity of the emperor. This argument is aligned with his culturalist theory of the divine emperor, which he had promoted for many decades. What, then, is Watanabe's theory and how does it relate to his argument against the emperor's abdication? Watanabe's conversation with former German ambassador to Japan, Volker Stanzel, published in 2017 as a book under the colloquial title *Prof. Watanabe, what kind of existence is the emperor for Japanese?*, provides a succinct introduction to Watanabe's incredibly regressive and conservative theory.

Underlying Watanabe's theory of the divine emperor is an assumed dichotomy between Europe and Japan (again!), upon which he constructs an essentialized Japanese uniqueness. "There are many countries in Europe that adopted the monarchical system. But there is a decisive difference between European monarchies and Japanese imperial institution. That is the emperor of Japan is linked to mythology. ... from the moment of the founding of the country called Japan a complete genealogy links the Sun Goddess Amaterasu to emperor Jimmu without a break, and then emperor Jimmu linked to the current emperor without a break. This unbroken imperial genealogy (from mythology to modern times) must be very difficult for you foreigners to understand because your history is filled with fighting for the throne" (Watanabe 2017, chap. 1). The unbroken imperial genealogy is the unique feature of Japanese history and culture.

Watanabe goes on to introduce the role of the concept of mythology (*shinwa*), which he posits as both stories and history, in constituting this Japanese uniqueness. "Mythology is created to reflect the natural world and the hearts of the people living in that world. There were (pre-civilizational) times when only mythology existed; it is a fact that Japan was formed on the basis of our respect for mythology. As such, mythology reflects national character, and national character is formed through mythology. The Japanese state came into being by way of this mutually enriching effect. You can't find another country in the world where its history is joined with mythology" (Watanabe 2017, chap. 1).

This reading of the concept of mythology as linked to history serves to reconnect Japanese history back to the imperial institution. "For our Japanese, mythology is like stories of our ancestors. The imperial ancestors created Japan. So Japanese people feel that the imperial household is the root family of the Japanese. The political system of Japan changed numerous times but the unbroken imperial genealogy—*bansai ikkei*—has never been disrupted. The genealogy has undergone some changes but what remained unchanged is the succession by a male member from a male heir household of the imperial household" (Watanabe 2017, chap. 1).

Watanabe further consolidates his thesis of *bansai ikkei* as the source of the divine authority of the emperor that grounded the history and culture of Japan. *Bansai ikkei* essentially embodies a divine commandment that all Japanese, however powerful they may be, had to obey. "The mythology of the descending of the imperial grandson (from heaven to rule the world on earth) has sustained the social order of Japan. The mythology substantiates the authority of the unbroken genealogy as one that supersedes the mundane world. However strong a hegemon could be, he could not become the emperor. The reason is that nobody could overthrow the order created in the ages of the gods. In history, many hegemonists boasted power capable of expelling the emperor from the throne, but being the latter's vassal, they could never become the emperor who exists in a genealogy originating from the gods" (chap. 3).

With the thesis of *bansai ikkei* established as the basis for the divinity of the emperor, Watanabe brings the divinity down to its connection with the mundane world—that is, *kami* is not transcendental God. He does so by developing a cultural reading of the "humanity declaration" given by the Showa emperor in 1946 and explicating the term "*kami*" as constitutive of the emperor's divine authority. "I don't think foreigners can understand the Showa emperor's 'humanity declaration.' When the emperor said 'I am not a *kami*,' he



was half right. Because when Japanese people calls the emperor ‘kami’ they don’t mean God of Europe and the U.S. but ‘above’ (*kami*), which is a primitive term referring to ‘the person above’ (*ue no hito*)” (Watanabe 2017, chap. 4). For the sake of convenience, “the person above” (*okami*) was abbreviated as “kami,” so it merely refers to people in a superior position in our social life. Indeed, the emperor is a kami by virtue of being in a superior position in the human world. That is what Watanabe means by “half right”, the other half, of course, being none other than that the emperor is indeed a god. Here, we see a line of logic Watanabe shared with Ohara and Kaji: the emperor is both a human and a god.

Watanabe next discusses the issue of the emperor’s abdication. Because the emperor is *okami*, which Watanabe inscribes with the honorific “o” and *kami* (“above”) and put in quotation marks, suggesting the double meanings of a superior position occupied by the emperor and his divinity, it is strange to talk about the “human rights” of the emperor because he is more than a human being (Watanabe 2017, chap. 5). It is true that the emperor, being a Japanese citizen, possesses constitutionally guaranteed rights. He is, however, as *okami*, in a highly special position, so his rights must necessarily be restricted. He has no right to give up his Japanese nationality. He cannot leave the country out of his personal will. Being the head priest of Shinto rituals, he cannot be said to have freedom of religious belief. Given that the emperor’s rights can be restricted, his desire to abdicate before death should not be allowed (Watanabe 2017, chap. 5).

Instead of abdication, Watanabe proposes appointing a regent. For him, this is how the divine imperial genealogy has been secured in the past and will be secured in this case. Although the emperor had expressed his opinion not to set up a regent, Watanabe held on to his theory of imperial authority and preferred the regency. “The most important point in Japan’s imperial household succession is the throne being succeeded by a male heir from a male imperial line. When tracing the male line of the imperial succession, you will ultimately reach Emperor Jimmu. When you further trace backward to the era of the gods, the imperial genealogy goes back to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. What has secured the smooth succession of the imperial genealogy is the regency. The idea of the emperor abdicating while alive, however, prepares the ground for domestic disturbances out of power struggle hundred or two hundred years later. The imperial institution will lose its stability”.

Watanabe thought about abdication differently from the emperor. The emperor clearly did not think about himself as a kami. He saw himself as a human and as the “symbol emperor” (*shōchō tenno*) (NHK n.d.). He wanted to abdicate because he was seriously ill and could not perform duties, and did not think a regent would be appropriate because that would put him in a selfish position of enjoying the title of the emperor without fulfilling the emperor’s duties. These are all considerations of a human emperor. Watanabe, on the other hand, thought about the emperor as a kami—a divine being in a politically superior position and at the same time in a divine genealogy continuously traceable to the age of the gods, so he could not allow abdication but wanted a regent because this would secure *bansei ikkei*, the divinity of the emperor, the source of imperial authority and of the cultural authenticity of Japan. He held on to his theory of the divine emperor despite the contrary opinion of the emperor himself. He ignored the emperor’s constitutional rights and proposed a plan that would put the emperor in a difficult situation. There had to be a necessary compromise, from Watanabe’s point of view, because the emperor is divine and his divine authority obligates him to be the emperor until his death.

Watanabe’s opinion was in the minority among the advisory panel members (NDL 2017). Only two of the six expert panelists argued against abdication. The government eventually decided to amend the Imperial Household Law to allow one-time abdication. The Heisei emperor abdicated on 30 April 2019 and the crown prince was enthroned as the new emperor at the same time, kicking off a new imperial era named Reiwa. Watanabe himself died in April 2017, soon after his conversation with Volker Stanzel and two years before the emperor’s abdication. When he died, many prominent conservative figures including the then prime minister Abe Shinzo, the ultra-rightist former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro, and the journalist

Sakurai Yoshiko all wrote eulogies for him. Abe and Ishihara called Watanabe an “intellectual giant” (*chi no kyōjin*). Abe further lamented that Japan had lost the “spiritual essence of conservatism” (*hoshu no shinzui*) (Chichi shuppan sha n.d.).

Although Watanabe’s opinion was not adopted in the abdication case, it is important to not lose sight of the effect conservative scholars like Watanabe generated in society. Ohara Yasuo, Kaji Nobuyuki, and Watanabe Shōichi, while writing to respond to different issues of their times, crafted a similar culturalist argument about the divine emperor and Japanese culture. Their argument fed into Japanese society’s need for cultural discussions on Japanese identity as well as the imperial household. In the process, I suggest, their Nihonjin-ron-type argument helped connect people’s sense of self-identity with the imperial institution as a key part of Japanese culture. Even though they may not have succeeded in bringing many people into the fold of postwar conservative nationalism, they nevertheless most likely have succeeded in desensitizing people to the political nature of this nationalism. As a result, when the conservative nationalist movement gained momentum in the 1990s, there was not much strong resistance to it.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper examined scholarly discourse about the divinity of the emperor in postwar Japan and explored the connection of this discourse with the evolution of postwar conservative nationalism. This paper understands the idea of the divinity of the emperor to be the ideological foundation of this conservative nationalism. After first tracing the making of the “humanity declaration” of the Showa emperor in 1946, the paper looked at how three conservative scholars developed a culturalist argument for the divinity of the emperor, first to negate the “humanity declaration”, and then to reconfigure conservative ideology into the popular Nihonjin-ron discourse on Japanese identity, which helped depoliticize this ideology, thereby enabling its wide reception. Fundamental to this culturalist argument is a dichotomy between Japanese culture and Western culture. By assuming such a dichotomy, these scholars were able to distinguish Shinto kami from the Christian God and construct a cultural Japan with the divine emperor at the center. Emerging out of these scholars’ argument is a half-divine, half-human figure. This figure is human—as the symbol of the postwar constitutional nation-state; he is also kami—representative of a country of gods constructed on the basis of an unbroken genealogy going back to the age of gods.

A serious problem with this culturalist argument for the divinity of the emperor is its total circumvention of the very issues of war responsibility and historical memory that gave rise to the problem of the divine emperor in immediate postwar years. These scholars focused instead on clarifying linguistic and cultural problems created by themselves. They ignored the historical contexts that gave rise to the “humanity declaration” in 1946 and transformed a political event into a cultural argument. As a result, their discourse on the divine emperor fed into popular interest in the imperial house as well as Japanese identities, thereby lending indirect cultural legitimacy to expanding conservative nationalist ideology.

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## Appendix A

### *Rescript on the Construction of a New Japan (1 January 1946)*

In greeting the new year we recall to mind that the Emperor Meiji proclaims as the basis of our national policy the five clauses of the charter at the beginning of the Meiji era. The charter oath signified:

1. Deliberative assemblies shall be established and all measures of government decided in accordance with public opinion.

2. All classes high and low shall unite in vigorously carrying on the affairs of State.
3. All common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall be allowed to fulfill their just desires so that there may not be any discontent among them.
4. All the absurd usages of old shall be broken through and equality and justice to be found in the workings of nature shall serve as the basis of action.
5. Wisdom and knowledge shall be sought throughout the world for the purpose of promoting the welfare of the Empire.

The proclamation is evident in its significance and high in its ideals. We wish to make this oath anew and restore the country to stand on its own feet again. We have to reaffirm the principles embodied in the charter and proceed unflinchingly towards elimination of misguided practices of the past; and keeping in close touch with the desires of the people, we will construct a new Japan through thoroughly being pacific, the officials and the people alike obtaining rich culture and advancing the standard of living of the people.

The devastation of the war inflicted upon our cities the miseries of the destitute, the stagnation of trade, shortage of food and the great and growing number of the unemployed are indeed heartrending; but if the nation is firmly united in its resolve to face the present ordeal and to see civilization consistently in peace, a bright future will undoubtedly be ours, not only for our country but for the whole of humanity.

Love of the family and love of country are especially strong in this country. With more of this devotion should we now work toward love of mankind.

We feel deeply concerned to note that consequent upon the protracted war ending in our defeat our people are liable to grow restless and to fall into the slough of despond. Radical tendencies in excess are gradually spreading and the sense of morality tends to lose its hold on the people with the result that there are signs of confusion of thoughts.

We stand by the people and we wish always to share with them in their moment of joys and sorrows. The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world.

Our Government should make every effort to alleviate their trials and tribulations. At the same time, we trust that the people will rise to the occasion and will strive courageously for the solution of their outstanding difficulties and for the development of industry and culture. Acting upon a consciousness of solidarity and of mutual aid and broad tolerance in their civic life, they will prove themselves worthy of their best tradition. By their supreme endeavours in that direction they will be able to render their substantial contribution to the welfare and advancement of mankind.

The resolution for the year should be made at the beginning of the year. We expect our people to join us in all exertions looking to accomplishment of this great undertaking with an indomitable spirit (Showa Emperor 1946).

#### 詔書

茲ニ新年ヲ迎フ。顧ミレバ明治天皇明治ノ初國是トシテ五箇條ノ御誓文ヲ下シ給ヘリ。曰ク、

一、廣ク會議ヲ興シ萬機公論ニ決スヘシ

一、上下心ヲ一ニシテ盛ニ經綸ヲ行フヘシ

一、官武一途庶民ニ至ル迄各其志ヲ遂ケ人心ヲシテ倦マサラシメンコトヲ要ス

一、舊來ノ陋習ヲ破リ天地ノ公道ニ基クヘシ

一、智識ヲ世界ニ求メ大ニ皇基ヲ振起スヘシ叡旨公明正大、又何ヲカ加ヘン。朕ハ茲ニ誓ヲ新ニシテ國運ヲ開カント欲ス。須ラク此ノ御趣旨ニ則リ、舊來ノ陋習ヲ去リ、民意ヲ暢達シ、官民擧ゲテ平和主義ニ徹シ、教養豊カニ文化ヲ築キ、以テ民生ノ向上ヲ圖リ、新日本ヲ建設スベシ。

大小都市ノ蒙リタル戰禍、罹災者ノ艱苦、産業ノ停頓、食糧ノ不足、失業者増加ノ趨勢等ハ眞ニ心ヲ痛マシムルモノアリ。然リト雖モ、我國民ガ現在ノ試煉ニ直面シ、且徹頭徹尾文明ヲ平和ニ求ムルノ決意固ク、克ク其ノ結束ヲ全ウセバ、獨リ我國ノミナラズ全人類ノ爲ニ、輝カシキ前途ノ展開セラルルコトヲ疑ハズ。

夫レ家ヲ愛スル心ト國ヲ愛スル心トハ我國ニ於テ特ニ熱烈ナルヲ見ル。今ヤ實ニ此ノ心ヲ擴充シ、人類愛ノ完成ニ向ヒ、獻身ノ努力ヲ效スベキノ秋ナリ。

惟フニ長キニ互レル戦争ノ敗北ニ終リタル結果、我國民ハ動モスレバ焦躁ニ流レ、失意ノ淵ニ沈淪セントスルノ傾キアリ。詭激ノ風漸ク長ジテ道義ノ念頗ル衰ヘ、爲ニ思想混亂ノ兆アルハ洵ニ深憂ニ堪ヘズ。

然レドモ朕ハ爾等國民ト共ニ在リ、常ニ利害ヲ同ジウシ休戚ヲ分タント欲ス。朕ト爾等國民トノ間ノ紐帶ハ、終始相互ノ信賴ト敬愛トニ依リテ結バレ、單ナル神話ト傳説トニ依リテ生ゼルモノニ非ズ。天皇ヲ以テ現御神トシ、且日本國民ヲ以テ他ノ民族ニ優越セル民族ニシテ、延テ世界ヲ支配スベキ運命ヲ有ストノ架空ナル觀念ニ基クモノニモ非ズ。

朕ノ政府ハ國民ノ試煉ト苦難トヲ緩和センガ爲、アラユル施策ト經營トニ萬全ノ方途ヲ講ズベシ。同時ニ朕ハ我國民ガ時艱ニ躓起シ、當面ノ困苦克服ノ爲ニ、又産業及文運振興ノ爲ニ勇往センコトヲ希念ス。我國民ガ其ノ公民生活ニ於テ團結シ、相倚リ相扶ケ、寛容相許スノ氣風ヲ作興スルニ於テハ、能ク我至高ノ傳統ニ恥ザル眞價ヲ發揮スルニ至ラン。斯ノ如キハ實ニ我國民ガ人類ノ福祉ト向上トノ爲、絶大ナル貢獻ヲ爲ス所以ナルヲ疑ハザルナリ。

一年ノ計ハ年頭ニ在リ、朕ハ朕ノ信賴スル國民ガ朕ト其ノ心ヲ一ニシテ、自ラ奮ヒ自ラ勵マシ、以テ此ノ大業ヲ成就センコトヲ庶幾フ。御名御璽

昭和二十一年一月一日

内閣總理大臣兼第一復員大臣第二復員大臣 男爵幣原喜重郎

(NDL 2003–2004)

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