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## &lt;Article&gt;Emperor-System Fascism : A Study of the Shift Process in Japanese Politics

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Writers in the pluralist tradition frequently mislabel Japan in the period 1937–1941 militarist rather than fascist, thereby leaving the impression of a one-dimensional rule by the military, commencing after 1937. But, in fact, a dominant political trend of the entire wartime period (which commenced not in July 1937 but in September 1931) was the marriage of the military and key ministries of the civil bureaucracy with the upper stratum of the industrial and financial bourgeoisie, and their joint participation in the formal drafting of the laws and maintenance of the war economy. A state in which top corporate executives shared power directly with the military, while retaining in their own hands supervisory direction over national economic affairs, is more characteristic of fascism than of an ordinary military dictatorship. Nor does the militarist label apply to a state which always remained, in a sense, “under civilian control” because the military, with all of its imperial prerogatives, was unable to conquer the highest citadels of executive power.

In the wartime Japanese state, intermediate groups, not “masses” (which rarely exist in history) were permanently mobilized; the military and the special thought police acted in the name of an autonomous politico-religious leader; and the industrial and financial bourgeoisie (with the aid of the bureaucracy and in partnership with the military) controlled everyday economic life. The difficulty in defining and labeling such a state arises from the fact that fascism developed in installments, by and through the process of strengthening absolutism. But here no static labeling approach is intended. Instead, in the discussion that now follows attention will focus on factors that constituted the ensuing political object — that is, on the institutions, the changing political and ideological practices and the alliance relationships that gave the wartime Japanese state its highly composite (hence transitional) nature. To understand this compositeness and the dual (political and economic) logic of the relationships to which it points — of institutional structures formed at different stages of capitalist development and never adequately integrated — more attention must be paid hereafter to the political functions of the emperor institution. [To be continued]

modifications. First, the cabinet promulgated on May 28, 1936 a "Thought Crimes Prevention and Observation Law" (*Shisōhan hōgō kansatsu hō*). It stipulated that anyone who was either "arrested under the Peace Preservation Law but not prosecuted, given a stay of execution of punishment, released from prison before completion of sentence, or released after completion of his sentence, was to be subjected to an additional two years (or more) of protective observation and restrictions on residence and communications". This law anticipated by five years the preventive detention system, with its special prison detention centers, which were established in 1942, after the Peace Preservation Law had once again been fully revised. The vital point, however, is that these laws, taken as a whole, signalled the fascization of the state's legal structure, brought about after the left had been destroyed, by Home and Justice Ministry bureaucrats, acting sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes at the behest of the army, but without any undue stimulus from outside civilian extremists. Similarly, the promulgation on April 1, 1938 of the National General Mobilization Law (*Kokka sōdōin hō*) further systematized this reorganization of the legal system, the net effect of which was to elevate the absolutist features of the Meiji Constitution while emasculating its constitutional aspects.<sup>16</sup>

In the light of this prehistory of constantly expanding thought repression, public mobilization for war, and fascization of the legal system, the Konoe cabinet's decision, coming just after one month in office, to deal China a crushing blow by escalating the fighting at Marco Polo Bridge was no more a mistake or "blunder" than the Johnson administration's decision in 1964 to escalate the American attack against Vietnam was a mistake. Both undeclared wars were inevitable consequences of specific undemocratic systems of rule in which decades of brain washing and mass mobilization operated to forestall and deflect demands from below for reform and fundamental change. In Japan's case, however, such reforms were not only more desperately needed but were couched in the rhetoric of "Showa restoration." Steadily and deliberately, at least since the early 1920s, Japan's rulers had been moving to establish a strongly authoritarian system of national mobilization, while preparing for an expanded war on the continent. And — another contemporary parallel — like leaders of presentday neo-fascist states — they had found in the ideological struggle against communism and heterodoxy an official rationalization for war that also served to rationalize their suppression of the class struggle at home.

(like their American counterparts in the FBI, the McCarthyites of the 1950s and the CIA) justified their existence by energetically fomenting fear of internal “conspiracies” being plotted by communists and other radicals — fear that in time fed on itself and turned into rampant hysteria against any form of expression that seemed to obscure the brightness of the *kokutai*.

By the time of the Manchurian Incident, the pattern had been set. The army agitated the nation with propaganda on Japan’s foreign policy crisis and on the need for more armaments, while the pervasive internal security apparatus (to which the Peace Preservation Law in its numerous revisions gave legal *carte blanche*) deflected the public’s attention from the economic impact of the Depression in order to focus it on the internal crisis. Between 1933–34 and the summer of 1937, these two political crisis of Japan’s own making interacted, perception of the external danger prompting and reinforcing perception of the internal one, and vice-versa.

The Peace Preservation Law, and the various state organs whose task was to enforce it, became entangled with the trend toward bureaucratically controlled mass-mobilization. Chronologically, the latter trend developed in and through the very process of political repression. By March 1935, with the arrest of the central committee of the Japan Communist Party, the Peace Preservation Law’s initial object of destruction had been virtually eliminated as an organized force. No anti-war, anti-militarist public opinion existed within Japan and the governments of the day could do just as they pleased, subject to dissent and schisms within the groups comprising the ruling stratum.

Why then did the police and judicial bureaucrats still continue to expand the system of political repression and thought control? They did so because of their own lack of confidence in the intellectual efficacy of State Shinto as the sole support for emperor worship, but also, more importantly, from fear that, even in the absence of self-professed revolutionary forces, the domestic situation remained highly volatile and fraught with contradictions.

During 1935, the Home Ministry adopted a “heresy annihilation” (*jakyō senmetsu*) policy and stepped up its control over religions in general and Shinto-type new religions such as Ōmotokyō and Tenrikyō in particular.<sup>15</sup> Early the following year, on February 26, 1936, officers of the army’s Imperial Way faction (*kōdō-ha*) attempted unsuccessfully a coup d’état in Tokyo and in the wake of this happening the legal system underwent further

such an association with the full knowledge of its objects, shall be liable to imprisonment with or without hard labor for a term not exceeding ten years.

This new law, enacted against a background of intensifying class conflict and counter revolutionary violence on a global-scale, in effect, divided the entire Japanese nation into those who supported capitalism and the existing form of state; and everyone else who sought changes in either. Henceforth the latter stood accused of two specific crimes: one against capitalism, the other against the emperor system (or the *kokutai*). And for each crime maximum punishments of equal severity were stipulated: ten years imprisonment.<sup>12</sup>

Three years later, with the advent to power of the Seiyūkai cabinet of Tanaka Giichi in April 1927, a break occurred in the application of this Peace Preservation Law. Justice Ministry bureaucrats who had been instrumental in drafting it and who were connected with Baron Hiranuma Kiichiro's National Foundation Society, moved into the key Home Ministry. At their direction, mass arrests under the Peace Preservation Law began in March 1928, in the wake of the 16th national Diet elections, the first held under an expanded suffrage law and the first in which representatives of the proletarian parties won seats. Following these arrests the Tanaka government, on June 29, 1928, suspended normal constitutional processes and issued an emergency imperial edict revising the 1925 Peace Preservation Law with respect to the crime of "altering the *kokutai*" which was now made punishable by death. Simultaneously, punishments were specified for those who merely took "actions for the purpose of furthering the aims" of proscribed organizations.<sup>13</sup>

To implement this revised, loosely drawn Peace Preservation Law and thus to strengthen the state and help reproduce its official ideology of emperorism — both of which were then being challenged at nearly all levels including the armed forces — a decentralization of repression occurred. That is to say, the organizations of repression were expanded within the ministries of Home, Justice and the armed forces. This personnel expansion began in 1928 — at approximately the same time as the start of the first air defense drills — with the appointment in all prefectures of specially-designated "thought procurators" (*shisō gakari*), "special higher police" (*tokkō keisatsu*), "military thought police" (*shisō gakari kempei*), Home Ministry police officials (*keimukan*), and specially-deputized "police assistants" (*keimukanho*).<sup>14</sup> These upholders of ideological orthodoxy

1928. To slight the role of the police and courts under the Peace Preservation Law in the period *before* 1937 is to do more than miss an important signpost of the shift from the Meiji police state to a qualitatively different, composite fascist state. It is also to confuse fascism, a specific form of the modern capitalist state, with militarism, a more general social phenomenon affecting most societies at all times. Where militarism denotes a technique of class rule associated with military budgets, the arms race, the development of weapons technology and everything which contributes to the spiritual support for waging war, the discussion of fascism is intended to focus attention on the process of change in the political form itself and the conditions under which such changes persist.<sup>11</sup>

Long before the reformist military cliques took the initiative in trying to rearrange Japan's political structure to make it more responsive to the needs of the time (as they saw them), the police, under the centralized control of the Home Ministry, had been interfering in domestic politics. By nurturing hysteria and fear over such issues as anarchism, communism and radicalism, they paved the way for the military to act. Although the military has received most of the attention and criticism of writers, the apparatus of police repression was actually the more effective bulwark of modern emperor ideology and of Japanese industrial capitalism, both of which were only as old as the Meiji Restoration itself. Since the enactment in 1900 of the Public Peace and Police Law — designed to prevent the decline of the landlord system by helping landlords and capitalists suppress the embryonic tenant and labor movements — the police administration in Japan had complete control over freedom of speech, association and assembly. Without doubt, their sphere of authority included an enormous area; and in the transition to Japanese "fascism from above", which occurred gradually after World War I, they came to play as distinctive and pivotal a role as the military. A significant problem then is to show exactly how each connected with and buttressed the other.

On March 7, 1925, the Lower House of the Japanese Diet passed overwhelmingly, by a vote of 246 to 18, a Peace Preservation Law which brought the thoughts of the Japanese people for the first time within the confines of state action. In the words of the new basic security law,

Anyone who has formed an association with the object of altering the national polity [*kokutai*] or the form of government [*seitai*], or disavowing the system of private ownership, or anyone who has joined

1933, and featured public lectures and movies. It was followed less than two months later by the first “Kantō air defense maneuvers” (*dai ikkai Kantō bōku enshū*) held on August 9–11, 1933. Meanwhile, to heighten the public’s sense of national emergency, the bureaucracy launched an “air defense donation campaign” (*bōku kenkin undō*) and mobilized town councils (*chōkai*) to help collect money and distribute “donation bags” (*kenkin bukuro*) to households in the major cities.<sup>9</sup>

Behind these activities lay the army’s desire for military modernization and decisive changes in the state structure. Its aspiration, dating back to 1920, to develop and implement a “total-war mobilization policy”, had actually been realized in principle when the Katō government on April 29, 1926 established a “Preparatory Committee for Establishing an Organ for General Mobilization” (*Sodojin kikan junbi iinkai*). One year later, in May 1927, the Tanaka government established the first cabinet-controlled central planning agency (*shigen kyoku*) for the mobilization of natural resources and manpower.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the late 1920s and early 1930s, covering in particular the years of the party cabinets and the Saitō and Okada “national unity” cabinets, saw crisis itself being steadily institutionalized and politicized by ruling class cabinets which, despite their frequently bitter internal conflicts, were firmly at one in advancing the new fascist aims in domestic and foreign policy. The aims themselves (spawned in the era of “Taisho democracy”) represented the culmination of a long tradition, dating back to Meiji, of relying on war and the manipulation of foreign policy crises to achieve domestic unity and integration. Caught up in an atmosphere of chauvinist, patriotic propaganda, heightened to an unprecedented degree by the mass circulation dailies, subjected to the modern tactics of crisis management and to an ideology of emperor worship (which even in the best of times reinforced the existing power structure), the overwhelming majority of Japanese strengthened their diverse group ties. In so doing, they helped implement ever greater degrees of mass mobilization, since the groups to which they belonged all avowed unquestioning belief in the emperor, and were wide open to manipulation from above. The vertical restructuring of existing intermediate groups so as to support fascist principles and methods of controlled mass mobilization continued apace.

Yet another structural cause of the crisis atmosphere that had waxed continually since 1930, was the rule of law itself, or, more specifically, the role of the police and courts under the revised Police Preservation Law of

a foreign policy of territorial repartition by means of aggression, the Saito cabinet strengthened press censorship and in 1933 increased political arrests to an all time high of 18,397. Simultaneously, it initiated, as part of a campaign to suppress rural labor's fight against landlords in farming and fishing villages, a self-assistance and life renewal (*jiriki kosei*) movement, which (despite its failures) also served to quicken the trend toward spiritual and economic mobilization of the public for war.<sup>6</sup>

The second "national unity" cabinet, spanning the years 1934 to 1936, continued the course which had been chartered by the unstable balance of military bureaucratic and political party forces in the previous Saitō cabinet. Headed by Okada Keisuke (another retired admiral), it presided over a period of bitter army factional rivalry, paralleled by conflicts within capital between "old" and "new" zaibatsu. Like its predecessors, it used an aggressive foreign policy as a tool for forging domestic integration while giving the appearance, at the same time, of working to contain more radical demands for a national restoration and reconstruction. Under the Okada cabinet, the army, starting in October 1934, aggravated the domestic scene by issuing public propaganda (in pamphlet form) about an impending crisis of war that would occur in either 1935 or 1936.

Crisis management in Japan during the early 1930s was also aided by the formation of civilian air-raid defense corps (*bōgodan*) in all Japanese cities, apparently starting first in Tokyo on September 1, 1932.<sup>7</sup> Furuya Tetsuo has recently given this development, with its roots in the 1920s and its role in sustaining the public's sense of crisis, particular emphasis. Japan's first, well-publicized air defense drill was held in Osaka on July 5, 1928, fully three years before the "Manchurian Incident" even occurred.<sup>8</sup> The context was a hardening of Japan's position regarding the Chinese civil war. The last of Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi's four military interventions in China had recently ended without having achieved its purported objective of protecting Japanese rights and interests. The previous month, June, the Senior Staff Officer of the Kwantung Army, Colonel Komoto Daisaku, had assassinated the Manchurian chief of state, Chang Tso-lin. Against this background, locally organized, citizen-supported defense drills were held in the summer of 1928. Other drills followed during the next few years. But not until the Manchurian incident had nearly ended, in 1933, were frequent air defense drills introduced on a national scale. Tokyo's first "air defense week" (*bōgo shūkan*) commenced on June 22,



different groups with whom he treated. The imperial institution benefitted from the alliance of the military with the monopoly bourgeoisie. But it used its enhanced power to limit the renovationist tendency embodied in the military and key organs of the bureaucracy. Ultimately, it functioned to hinder effective fascist control. During the era of fascism and war, big capital, the emperor and, at his suffrance, the military all prevailed institutionally — each supreme in his own sphere, though with ultimate decision-making power in the emperor's hands. How did such a situation arise?

### c. The Apparatus of Repression

To answer that question we might begin by acknowledging the deep and lasting impact that the Manchurian aggression of September 1931 had on Japanese politics for the remainder of the decade. Conceived by army officers imbued with ideas of national reconstruction under military leadership, the expropriation of China's Three Eastern Provinces immediately communicated to public life in Japan an acute sense of war crisis and tension. In the process, it blurred for many Japanese all distinction between soldiers and civilians, war and politics. The political assassinations of early 1932, which arose from the same widespread reconstruction movement — Finance Minister Inoue Junnosuke, Mitsui chief Baron Dan Takuma, and Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi — then further deepened the sense of extraordinary national emergency by giving the public new episodes on which to focus. Subsequently, in March 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, and the emperor issued a rescript to acknowledge the event.

The crisis management policies of the professedly apolitical “national unity” cabinets of the 1930s enter the picture at this point. Starting with the cabinet of the “moderate” retired admiral, Saito Makoto (May 1932 to July 1934), formed about a year and a half before the Hitler cabinet in Germany, the trend toward a fascist domestic control structure and an expanded war abroad was further strengthened. In foreign policy, the Saito cabinet established an autarchic Japan-Manchukuo-Korea bloc; approved the expulsion from North China of Kuomintang influence and, in its place, the fostering of local puppet regimes; and enunciated a Japanese “Monroe Doctrine” for Asia, based on the assumption that Japan could develop an autonomous military capability for meeting its expanded imperialist commitments. Domestically, to secure support for this shift to

some of the characteristics of a crusade for the reformation of a sacrosanct church, arose out of a final, belated and extremely complex effort to renovate the emperor system, at both the political and economic levels, largely by means of national mobilization campaigns and war, during the period of transition to state monopoly capitalism. The renovation or reconstruction drive or process aimed at the broadest possible organization of society from above, for purposes of war. It was bureaucratically led, deeply hostile to all manifestations of liberalism, attractive to cynical opportunists and adventurers, drew heavily on European fascist precedents and projects (modified, of course, to suit the Japanese context) and functioned to enhance the system-binding effect of the emperor-system's properties. Finally, it tried to exploit the deeply-felt anti-capitalist, anti-monopoly sentiments of the petty bourgeoisie on the land and in the cities; and to that extent sometimes assumed a pseudorevolutionary coloration. Ultimately, however, the movement never proved quite equal to the task.

Thus emperor-system fascism denotes the incomplete, tension-ridden nature of the fascist form of crisis regime in Japan. The bureaucracy was the first area of Japanese public life to be fascized. Here the Home and Justice Ministries played, by proxy, the role of a fascist party, while the military cliques (most notably the Control Faction or *Tōsei-ha*) rose to power only within the established context of the emperor system, whose legitimacy it could not question. Under such conditions, the breaks with the past that did occur were discrete and incremental and their effects cumulative. Continuity invariably predominated over discontinuity. Penned within the imperial legal and ideological framework, with its rammifying network of divided rights, authorities and interests, the Japanese military could never achieve what it considered an adequate or even necessary centralization of power. It had always to rely on the strategy of war and territorial expansion as levers for securing desired structural reforms. And since war required the active cooperation of big capital, the military was also compelled to allow the zaibatsu or monopoly bourgeoisie to continue making profits under the regime of total national mobilization. They, in turn, used the renovation movement and the war to extricate themselves from the depression and advance industrialization. Finally, the emperor, occupying the very top position, consistently defended the basic class interests of the original ruling bloc and checked its rivalries by giving, or withdrawing, his trust to the representatives of the

Germany and, much later still, Japan had changed into dictatorial regimes, the latter were distinguished generally by a) the extremely offensive thrusts of their foreign policies, based on racist and anti-communist principles; b) their use of such aggression to serve the purposes of domestic integration and political repression; and c) their intensification of all preexisting tendencies towards militarism, imperialism and racism. But "intensification" in this context does not imply any inexorable determinism. The fascist state form need not eventuate stage by stage, or in a manner analogous to the change from quantity to quality, in every society characterized by racism, imperialism and militarism. Its emergence, rather, depends also on many other factors such as the political and cultural traditions of such societies, the timing and completeness of their bourgeois revolutions, the nature of the economic crisis and how it is perceived, and especially on the dynamics of the political process which always proceeds differently in each country. Thus no single concept or definition can possibly register all that historical fascism connoted in the above three countries over the course of its short life-span. Yet any over-preoccupation with fascism's definition per se, in an effort to make the term less value-laden, can easily cause one to lose sight of a most critical issue: the moral evils and hateful oppression that fascist regimes personify to an extreme degree, and that (for that reason) use of the term invariably evokes in individuals who are willing and open enough to relate to such oppression. Ultimately, whether a particular form of state is fascist or not fascist is a moral question precisely because it is also a factual question.<sup>5</sup> And if the factual side of the question is approached by acknowledging at the outset the rise of contemporary forms of neo-fascist dictatorship in response to the global economic crisis (such as Chun Doo Hwan's regime in South Korea or Marcos' in the Philippines), and the rightward shift process presently underway in the advanced capitalist countries, including Japan, then what may well be enhanced by such a historical discussion is our will to act against contemporary forms of oppressive regimes. Meanwhile the nature of fascism in Japan will become clear in the course of historical analysis.

With these thoughts in mind, the first step is to note that in prewar Japan fascism took the guise of a powerful state renovationist drive against the forces of orthodoxy and privilege (the "establishment"), which developed at virtually all levels of society and within all components of the emperor system during the late 1920s and 1930s. This movement, having

itself denotes a framework of power, a total system of ruling people, constructed out of and encompassing diverse but related structures and institutions, each one of which had its own "logic" of development. Landlord/tenant relations in agriculture, linked to the modern factory system but cast in a strong semi-feudal mold, and having a moral economy of its own, was one such structure. Another was the civil bureaucracy, narrowly recruited, deriving its income from taxes and with a distinctive esprit d'corps shaped by state Shinto and Confucian precepts. A third related component was the Meiji legal structure capped by the 1889 Constitution, a 'gift' from the emperor to his subjects, and the 1891 Imperial Rescript of Education, which proclaimed the virtues of emperor and state worship in the classrooms of the nation. The Diet and the political parties had their own subordinate place in the system while two other institutions — the police and the military — functioned as its bulwarks. The military also had its own special sub-system of extended authority in colonial Taiwan and Korea and semi-colonia South Manchuria. But most important was the sovereign emperor himself and his Imperial Household, situated at the very apex of the authority structure and functioning as a dynamic entrepreneurial enterprise linked directly to all the other elements: landholding and landlordism, heavy industry and finance, the police, the military and the colonies. The imperial institution (meaning: the individual, the family, the Imperial Household and the court officials) represented the general interests of the ruling bloc as a whole and was the sun, the axis and the core element of the entire "emperor system": a monolithic center around which the different parts fitted in such a way as to advance and protect the long term interests and aims of the social forces comprising the ruling bloc.

To sum up: emperor system denotes not an object but an abstraction. It is a functional concept deriving from the Japanese historical and intellectual environment and entailing some prior schematic knowledge of at least these three institutional structures plus their inter-relationships, conflicts and contradictions over time. Use of this term thus points to, though it does not necessarily explain, the distinguishing features of a specific state together with its ruling bloc and all-encompassing moral life.

By contrast, the term "fascism", despite its European provenance, connotes a global political phenomenon associated initially with the political backlash and moral dislocation resulting from World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. After fascist movements in Italy, later Weimar

By then, nationalist challenges were also beginning to be mounted against it from without by Chinese and Koreans inspired by the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. A reaction was not long in coming. By the crisis conjuncture of the late twenties—early thirties, many new groups and individuals had mounted the stage of Japanese politics imbued with fascist aims and ideas which they tried to realize from the standpoint of renovating the emperor-led absolutist state. As these “new bureaucrats” moved into the ministries of Justice, Home and Foreign Affairs, as younger officers acquired influence over military policy, and as a younger group formed at court, the form of the political regime in Japan gradually altered. By June 1937, when Konoé Fumimaro, the forty-six year old hereditary noble and former president of the House of Peers from 1933 to 1937, formed his first cabinet, the regime in Japan could be called composite fascist. What does such a term mean?

Pluralist writing assumes that fascist parties exercised unilateral control from the time they attained state power. But the history of European and Japanese fascism fails to bear that out. Fascism everywhere coopted, rather than displaced, the most important pre-fascist ruling elites, making it impossible for fascist leaders or the parties they headed to exercise, to their complete satisfaction, overwhelming, unilateral control over all apparatuses and branches of the state. To varying degrees all fascist dictatorships were composite in nature and obliged to compromise with conservative nationalists, traditional ruling elites and, where they existed, monarchies.<sup>3</sup> And a high degree of compositeness was a particularly pronounced feature of fascism in the Japanese case. To emphasize that feature, some Japanese historians follow Moriya Fumio, who in 1949 first established the theory of “emperor-system fascism.” Moriya argued the thesis of the enduring absolutist nature of the emperor system, its gradual acquisition of fascist functions and the “growing fusion of the emperor system with monopoly capital.”<sup>4</sup> Other historians have since given this term varying contents or used it, as I do here, in their own way.

Emperor-system fascism highlights the temporary combination, merging or loose juxtaposition of elements formed in different historical stages of the same capitalist mode of production, within a nation having distinctive historical traditions of authoritarian rule and the value structures derived from a long feudal past. The modern emperor-system emerged during the late 19th century, in the course of the simultaneous development of industrial capitalism and overseas imperialism. The term

of Japanese political debate need to be set against this background. In June 1980 conservative control of the Diet was strengthened by an overwhelming LDP electoral victory. More confident of the "realism" of their traditional party agenda, a minority of LDP politicians have seized the occasion to try and revive the prewar conservative legacy of militarism, political reaction and nationwide consensus under the emperor.<sup>2</sup> The opposition parties are unable to offer them effective resistance, nor can they expect soon to receive broadbased public support for their own traditional definitions of the socialist vision. And so, preparations unfold at various levels for the end of the "Showa era" and the start of a new era with a new ("autonomous") constitution that can be more easily interpreted to support militarism. In such a context of realignment in Japan's political direction, a discussion of emperor-system fascism may again be particularly relevant.

#### b. Emperor System and Fascism

During the long course of the Meiji Restoration (1868–1890), the oligarchs learned how to transform their private class interests into the general interest, effectively counteracting in the process demands from the peasant majority for basic bourgeois rights and liberties. This they did not only by exploiting skillfully foreign policy crises and imperial ventures, but also by utilizing the charisma of the imperial institution. The manipulation of only one device — foreign policy — probably would not have been enough, in the opinion of the small group of officials and the privileged rank of voteholders who then counted most, to secure their continued hold on power, or to legitimate their policies. Equally indispensable was the elevation of the emperor above the state and above all law. For to this policy was connected, organically, the elevation of the emperor's servants and advisers above the rest of society. Hence, in late Meiji, the standard practice for reproducing political legitimacy and national unity became absolutism infused by nationalism. Or stated more accurately, the success formula for rule in late developing Japan was an ideology of absolutism, promoted by a regime in which the sovereign had virtually unlimited powers and was regarded as an object of popular veneration, plus a nationalism generated by periodic national crises.<sup>2 a</sup>

Not until after World War I did the development of industrial capitalism in Japan create sufficient material conditions and opportunities for the oppressed classes to challenge the absolutist regime from within.

# **Emperor-System Fascism:**

A Study of the Shift Process in Japanese Politics

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## **a. Introduction**

During the early 1930s international political disorder and global economic breakdown profoundly altered the political and social structures that had developed in late modernizing Japan. From that crisis there emerged toward the end of the decade a composite formation with roots going back to the Meiji Restoration, which may be usefully labelled emperor-system fascism. A very tight embrace between the military cliques, the imperial institution and the holders of industrial and financial power, particularly the zaibatsu, constituted its essence. But the alliance itself was conflict ridden and managed to survive only for the war period, which ended with Japan's defeat in 1945.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter democratic ideology superceded the tradition of imperial absolutism while a new international and domestic division of labor replaced some of the imperial regime's material bases: specifically, the colonial system in East Asia and the landlord system in the countryside. Once the problem of power in the postwar state was settled, the question of the nature of power in the presurrender state also ceased to be a matter of pressing political concern.

Today, however, the world has returned to a period of major, protracted capitalist crisis and superpower confrontations. The fear and the danger of a nuclear war grows steadily more acute as nuclear weapons proliferate and the US/Soviet arms race accelerates. Meanwhile Japan, having developed into a central economic component in the system of world imperialism, finds itself at a crossroads. Nearly thirty years of uninterrupted economic growth and prosperity have served to obscure the contradictory, incomplete and fragile nature of its postwar democracy. But as the crisis that afflicts the rest of the capitalist world draws nearer to Japan, pressures mount (from within and without) for Tokyo to play a more active role in defense of capitalism's strategic interests in East Asia. The subtle changes that have been occurring recently in the very context