

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINESE AND JAPANESE EMPERORS

Question: "Are Japanese and Chinese emperors related and how?"

Simple answer: "Mythology says yes"



There is a consensus among historians that there were no emperors of a unified Japan before about the third century CE. The very name Emperor (Tenno, from Tianhuang, 天皇) came even later, VII century CE. The most ancient Chinese documents mentioning Japan give the impression that it was fragmented in many small kingdoms. Emperor *Ankoo*, who, according to the tradition, was the 20th emperor of Japan (traditional dates 453–456 CE) is the earliest historical ruler of a large part of Japan. On *Ankoo*, most historians agree, leaving aside the mythical/traditional Japanese accounts.

From then on, the Japanese Imperial house is fairly well recorded, and (with one exception, see below) we can safely exclude that people of different ethnic background are among the direct ascendants of any Japanese Emperor.

Thus, research should focus on the early centuries of formation of the Japanese Empire. An easy way to solve the question of the origin of the Japanese Emperors would be to excavate the early imperial burials, the kofun (古墳).

Incidentally, if not definitely the largest, the Daisen Kofun, which allegedly is the tomb of Emperor *Nintoku* (the "legendary" sixteenth Emperor, reigned 313-399) is among the largest burial monuments on Earth (it is not very tall, 35 m, but the area of the mound alone is 100 000 square meters.)



Daisen Kofun – Tomb of Nintoku Tenno

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Thus, if a body were found, an analysis of the DNA could give precious indications. However, *“recent excavations have shown a strong Korean and Chinese influence in their construction. There are suggestions that the current Imperial family is descended from Korean royalty as there are similarities between Korean and Japanese artifacts recovered from the tumuli. As a result, the authorities have not been keen to open or reveal any more of the graves than is absolutely necessary. Most are sealed off from public viewing, but the Imperial Household does occasionally allow archeological investigations to take place. As archeological associations do not have any code of ethics in Japan, permission to excavate graves is rarely given, if ever.”* ([Japanese Imperial Graves in Nara - Nara - Japan Travel.](#))

Frankly, whatever is the reason to deny public access to the Imperial graves, and to the bodies preserved inside them, I side with the Imperial Household without the slightest doubt. There is no valid reason to perturb the burials just to please a small number of experts and the curiosity of tourists. Let those Emperors rest in peace.

We must thus rely on reasoning, and there are four possibilities.

1) **The Imperial family if fully “Japanese”**, whatever that means. There is some evidence that the so called Jomon people, of the “Jomon period”, 14000 BC-300 BC, were more similar to the Ainu, while the Yayoi people, of the “Yayoi period”, 300 BC-300 AD, were more similar to present day Japanese. The Yayoi, according to all appearances, came from outside of the archipelago.

The “Japanese”, let’s say **Yayoi**, origin is the easiest one to accept.

2) **The Imperial family has a native origin** (in one word, **Jomon**). It is a very doubtful thesis. The conquest of Japan from the preceding natives, such as the *Emishi* of Tohoku (probably related to the *Ainu* of Hokkaido), took centuries and was completed only with the annexation of Hokkaido after

1868. The title of shogun itself, which derives from Chinese, Zhang Jun (= general, 將軍) is a shortening of “Sei-I tai-shogun”, *Generalissimo to subdue the barbarians*. The title was created for *Ootomo no Otomaro* in 794; only in 1192, with *Minamoto Yoritomo*, it took the modern meaning, of “ruler of Japan,” on behalf of the Emperor.

Not only, but in Japanese history, we find one interesting story. In 770 the Buddhist monk *Dookyoo*, having an affair with Empress *Kooken/Shootoku*, tried to establish his dynasty, a unique attempt in the history of Japan. A complacent oracle confirmed that such was the will of the gods. As a countercheck, the faithful *Wake no Kiyomaro* was dispatched to consult the oracle of god Hachiman, in Usa, Kyushu. Why so far? Apparently, Usa was the first city, which surrendered to the first Emperor of Japan, Jimmu Tenno, before he started his travel toward central Japan, which would become the centre of Imperial Japan. He was born on Mount Takachiho (Miyazaki prefecture), where the gods had descended from Heaven. In other words, the Imperial family confusedly put its own origin in Kyushu, where it landed, either from Heaven or from somewhere else, probably in a more straightforward manner. They apparently believed that their remote roots were outside of Japan.

3) Korean origins. Occasionally one reads that the “Yamato clan” is the clan of the Imperial family. In fact, the clan (*Yamato fuhito*) migrated into Japan from Korea at the end of the fifth century. However, the Yamato clan is not the Yamato dynasty, the Imperial dynasty of Japan. Still, in 2001, Emperor Akihito told reporters “*I, on my part, feel a certain kinship with Korea, given the fact that it is recorded in the Chronicles of Japan that [Niigasa] the mother of Emperor Kammu [735–806, fiftieth Emperor of Japan] was of the line of King Muryong of Baekje [a Korean state].*” ([News, sport and opinion from the Guardian's US edition | The Guardian](#)) It was the first time that a Japanese emperor publicly acknowledged Korean blood in the imperial line. Of course, this is not strange, considering the frequent waves of Korean immigrants to Japan especially from the Fifth to the Seventh century CE, importing, among other less crucial innovations, the Chinese script and the Buddhist religion. However, it does not mean that the Imperial family is Korean, although there are journalists looking for a scoop who believe it. The wife of Henri IV of France, after his death, reigned as Queen of France. Her name was Maria de’ Medici, but that does not mean that the Bourbons were or became Italians.

4) Chinese origins. Here we can talk about documented and non-documented history.

I. Regarding the documented history we know that the usually accurate Chinese historical documents mention the country of Wo (I am afraid that at first it was not a complimentary name, but later it was transformed into Wa, which means “harmony”) as divided in many small states. In 57 CE, emperor Guangwu (光武), of the Former Han dynasty, is recorded to have granted a golden seal to an envoy of the state of Na of Wa. A golden seal was found in the island of Shikanoshima in 1784, and the engraving “Han Wa Na Koku Oo”, in Chinese “漢委奴國王, Han Wa Na Guo Wang” (=King of the Han (tributary) State of Na of the Wa), seems to identify the seal. Na sent several embassies to China in the following years.

Later, the Wei 曹魏 kingdom of China (one of the famous “Three Kingdoms” of the homonymous novel (220–280 CE) had exchanges with the mysterious state of Yamadai, ruled by a shaman-queen, Himiko (卑弥呼, or Himeko; in chinese Beimihu), who sent at least four embassies to China. One embassy was sent by her successor Iyo. We can stop here, because what follows is the documented history of the Japanese Imperial family. Neither Himiko nor Iyo are recorded as having had a husband or having looked for one. They were some sort of Vestals, and were not supposed to marry. Also, the story of Himiko is so obscure that it is difficult to maintain that she was the first of the Imperial line of Japan.

II. The non-documented history is more exciting. Let's follow it in a reverse chronological order. The Chinese apparently knew about Japan. Most authors quote the Qin emperor Shi Huangdi (221–210 BCE), who sent twice Xu Fu (徐福), a wizard or shaman from the island of Zhifu, looking for the elixir of life or immortality, in the mythical land of Penglai (蓬萊), which, *faute de mieux*, historians tend to identify with Japan. The second time, Xu Fu could not, or preferred not to come back to his dangerous customer, without the elixir. Xu Fu is identified with a half-god revered in many places in Japan, which all claim to be his landing site. His Japanese name is Jofuku (徐福: Japanese has the unique feature of being the language which is closest in writing and farthest in pronunciation from Chinese). The idea is that a non-noble Chinese, but carrier of a higher culture, could have been made king by the naïve local population, thus becoming the first of the longest extant dynasty. I perceive some sort of snobbery in this theory. But who knows?

I would like to conclude the present essay with a mention of a second, frequently forgotten story. The Chinese envoys who went to Japan during the Northern Wei (北魏, 386–534 CE) and Jin (晉, 265–420 CE) dynasties, had the surprise to learn that the Wo/Wa of Japan claimed to be the descendants of prince Taibo (泰伯) of Wu (吳, a feudal state of China), and duly recorded it (*Encounters of the Eastern Barbarians, Wei Chronicles*).

(From [Wa \(Japan\) - Wikipedia](#)) A second Wei history, the ca. 239-265 CE *Weilüe* 魏略 "Brief account of the Wei dynasty" is no longer extant, but some sections (including descriptions of the Roman Empire) are quoted in the 429 CE *San Guo Zhi* commentary by Pei Songzhi 裴松之. He quotes the *Weilüe* that "Wō people call themselves posterity of Tàibó" (倭人自謂太伯之後).

Taibo was the eldest son of King Tai of Zhou (XI century BCE). He had two younger brothers, Zhongyong and Jili. The King of Zhou wished his youngest son, Jili, to inherit his kingdom. Taibo, which literally means "Great Uncle," and Zhongyong complied, either because of filial virtue or because they were afraid to be eliminated as possible competitors. They traveled southeast with their retainers, settling in Meili (梅里). There, Taibo and his followers adopted the costumes of the natives (including tattoo) and set up the State of Wu (吳), which later was confirmed as a feud by the Chinese Emperor. Wu was totally destroyed in 473 BCE by the state of Yue (越), and the Japanese belief was that exiles from the Wu state escaped to Japan. The son of Jili, Ji Wen, was the father of Ji Fa, 姬發, the founder of the (Western) Zhou Dynasty, better known as King Wu di Zhou, 周武王.

The Wu exiles, descendants of Tai Bo, would be nobler ancestors than Xu Fu, as Tai Bo was the grand-uncle of the founder of the Zhou dynasty, the longest of all Chinese dynasties. But there is more: the Zhou claimed to descend from the semi-historical (less than semi, according to many historians) emperor Ku, or Gaoxin (2436-2366 BC), a descendant of the Yellow Emperor, whose wife Jiang Yuan, after she stepped on the footprint of a god, had a son Houji, the pre-dynastic founder of the lineage of the Zhou dynasty. The interesting twist is that Emperor Ku, according to the tradition, had four sons to four different wives; two of them were ancestral founders of a [Chinese dynasty](#), or inherited the empire. He is known in the most ancient sources as the father of [Houji](#), [Xie](#), [Yao](#), and Zhi. He is also said to have had two sons who became star gods, Ebo and Shichen.

The first of Ku's sons to rule the kingdom was [Emperor Zhi](#), who was the son of Empress Changyi. Accordint to Sima Qiang's *Shiji* he reigned only nine years and behaved badly.

Zhi's brother, Yao, became the [Emperor Yao](#). Liu Bang, the founder of the **Han dynasty**, claimed to descend from Yao.

Ku's son Xie, born miraculously to Empress [Jiandi](#) after she swallowed the [egg](#) of a black bird, became the predynastic founder of the ruling family of the [Shang dynasty](#).

As noted above, Ku's son [Houji](#), born miraculously to Empress Jiang Yuan after she stepped in the footprint of a [god](#), became the predynastic founder of the lineage of the [Zhou dynasty](#).



Emperor HuangDi (黃帝, the “Yellow Emperor”)

As Emperor Ku descended from Emperor HuangDi (the “Yellow Emperor”), other dynasties would be related to the Zhou, that is the **Xia** (through Zhuanxhu), the **Qin** (interestingly, in the Lü Buwei *Liezhuan* Sima Qian suggests that Shi Huangdi did not really belong to the Qin house), and Wang Mang, the only Emperor of the **Xin** dynasty (9-23 CE).

And, finally, we have reached our target. Somehow we have established a link between the Imperial House of Japan and not one, but all Imperial houses of China until the Later Han (which answers to the question: “To which Chinese Emperor are Japanese Emperors related?”). After this effort, I suppose we can take a rest.