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RULE BY RIGHT vs. RULE BY FORCE

Michele Gibney



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RULE BY RIGHT vs. RULE BY FORCE

There are at least two ways to legitimize a power base. One is to prove you have the right to rule, the other is to rule by force. In Japan's feudal period, three leaders came to power and each ruler utilized some of the preceding ones principles of government, while at the same time adapting his mode of dominion on the prevailing factors of the day. Only one of these rulers had the right to rule by virtue of his lineage; perhaps this is why his reign lasted so much longer than the other two, or perhaps it is simply because of the foundations that the other two built that the Tokugawa dynasty lasted as long as it did. In either case, the reign of Tokugawa Ideas and his descendents is the culmination of events in the 16th Century, a period of struggle, war, bloodshed, persecution, and—ultimately—legitimization.

The first *daimyo* to unify central Japan was Oda Nobunaga. Nobunaga used religion and force to legitimize his rule, as he never took the title of shogun. At the beginning of his rise to power, he was forced into direct opposition with militant Buddhist forces and due to this, his reprisals against Buddhism were harsh. Nobunaga's actions on Mt. Hiei are an interesting example of the legitimization of rule through force. Buddhism was already well-established in Japan and had its own history of legitimacy. As a threat to his power, Buddhism had the devotion of the populace and the military and political might of its monks. The monks had long been a "source of concern and threat to the security of the capital city," because "they utilized their privileged position as monks and interfered in politics with impunity," (Lu, 187). In order to prove his own right to

rule, Nobunaga had to make an example of this long-standing political threat. In three days, September 29-31, 1571, Nobunaga and his soldiers killed 1,500 monks and 1,500 civilians, including women and children. Utilizing fire, swords, and muskets, Nobunaga laid waste to the populated towns, universities, temples, and shrines on Mt. Hiei until none were left alive. He did all this in order to, “slake his thirst for vengeance...and to increase his fame,” (Lu, 188). By waging war in this fashion, cruel and implacable, Nobunaga did indeed generate a reputation for himself. In this manner, he became absolute ruler through force and examples of power.

Nobunaga’s power did not prove to be strong enough and he was forced to commit suicide by a rebellious vassal. Toyotomi Hideyoshi then stepped in to take over the reins of command and complete the unification of the country. His rule borrowed much from Nobunaga’s tactics, but he also implemented some very important innovations of his own.

At the beginning, Hideyoshi continued to encourage the Christian missionaries that Nobunaga had permitted into the country based on Nobunaga’s own conversion and desire for Western trade. Nobunaga used Christianity as a “counterweight to Buddhist power,” (Murphey, 226), but Hideyoshi did not have that problem to contend with in his own rule. Instead he had to worry about how “the spread of Christianity was becoming a disruptive influence in Japanese society and also a political menace,” (Murphey, 226-27). Hideyoshi in counteracting this banned missionaries in 1587 and in 1597 he even crucified some missionaries and Japanese converts, (Murphey, 227). Hideyoshi regulated the spread of Christianity by obstructing the incursion and continued presence of missionaries, but he also wrote edicts which limited their ability to spread. During

Hideyoshi's rule people who converted for true religious reasons were allowed to do so, but landholders with a fief over a certain amount of space "must receive permission from the authorities before becoming a follower of the padre," and if they attempted to force "retainers to become followers of the padre," it was treated as a "most unreasonable illegal act," (Lu, 196). Hideyoshi, in effect, made it a crime to continue spreading Christianity in the old top-down manner which would serve to slow the process considerably.

In addition to the problems with Christianity, Buddhism continued to require supervision. Though Hideyoshi was not as severe on Buddhism as Nobunaga had been, he continued to dampen its power revival with edicts couched in terms of threats. One edict entitled, "Control of Mt. Koya, 1585", prohibited monks from bearing arms and invading neighboring lands. It also implied that any act of dissension would result in a reprisal similar to the one conducted against Mt. Hiei: "Mt. Hiei and Negoroji were destroyed by making the nation their enemy. This you have witnessed. Therefore use your good sense in these matters," (Lu, 196). Hideyoshi continued in the vein of Nobunaga in controlling religion and harnessing it to his own power in order to prove his rule by example of those he kept in check.

However, a far more important threat to Hideyoshi's legitimacy than religion was his peasant background which prohibited him from taking on the title of shogun. In subsequent thrusts to legitimize his rule, he patronized the imperial court, hoping to bolster his power base by closeness. He also managed to claim a connection to the Fujiwara family and with that tie "took the title of *kampaku*, which had earlier been used for Fujiwara regents," (Murphey, 227). Interestingly, when offered the chance by China

to be recognized “as the ‘king’ of Japan and granting him the privilege of formal tribute relations with the Ming,” he turned it down, (Eckert, 147). Though Korea used China to legitimate their ruler by requesting approval, Hideyoshi considered himself and Japan above China’s ability to provide legitimacy.

Irregardless of his appearance and power base in the eyes of his neighbors, Hideyoshi’s rule within Japan cannot be given a complete picture without homage being paid to his domination over the peasant and samurai classes. Due to his own peasant background, Hideyoshi appears to have treated the commoner class as one to be feared and distrusted. Under the theory that if he had risen so high in power, others could do the same, Hideyoshi began efforts to stratify society and keep each group in its place. First of all, commoners were not allowed to have swords, and so began the “famous ‘sword hunt’ among all commoners in which houses were methodically searched and all swords confiscated reestablished rigid class lines, and was accompanied by harsh new laws prohibiting farmers or common soldiers from becoming merchants or even laborers,” (Murphey, 226). The ‘sword hunt’ was a way of maintaining power by cheating others of the ability to wield it. Lu notes that 80% of the Japanese population was farmers; therefore the need to control them was of paramount importance. The commentary on the “Collection of Swords” edict states that, “this is a measure specifically adopted to prevent occurrence of peasant uprisings,” (Lu, 192). In turn for surrendering their swords, the metal would be melted down to create a statue of the Buddha, thus endowing the population with the deity’s favor in lifetimes to come. Confiscating weapons from the lower classes was therefore aimed at controlling their ability to resist rule while coaching it in religious terms meant to cow them into idolatry of the ruler seen to be

providing for their immortal souls. Buddhism used in this manner could also be seen as becoming a tool in Hideyoshi's hand wielded at controlling the populace and providing his actions with moral legitimacy.

The careful segregation of classes and the tamping down of the population's ability to revolt was continued in Hideyoshi's attitude towards his own samurai allies. In order to control the samurai class, Hideyoshi kept the wives and heirs of the *daimyo* as hostages in his own impregnable fortress, (which had been built on the site of the former Shinran Buddhist temple as a display of power in and of itself). He also moved the *daimyo* around in order "to strengthen their loyalty to him rather than to the people of their local areas," (Murphey, 227). In addition there was an edict which stated that *daimyo* could not make alliances through marriage or swearing of oaths without the express approval of Hideyoshi, (Lu, 195).

Tokugawa Ieyasu who took up power after Hideyoshi's death continued many of Hideyoshi's implements of control: keeping *daimyo* families hostage, a sword hunt (and a gun hunt), disallowing alliances between *daimyo* without his approval, built a fortress as a symbol of power, strict social hierarchy in segregated class lines, and control of agricultural production and peasants, (Murphey, 250-52). He also instituted some new forms of government, one of which was the 'alternate attendance' scheme for samurai wherein samurai were kept busy and in dire economic straits by being forced to trek from their home domain to the capital every other year, (Murphey, 251). He required an "Oath of Fealty" from his vassals in order to cement their loyalty, (Lu, 204-205), and he also promulgated rules which didn't allow for fortification work to be done on the vassals

territory because it could be seen as insurrection and seditious to the nation's peace, (Lu, 206).

The spread of his rule through force and power as exemplified in these laws, though, was only icing on the cake for Tokugawa Ieyasu: for he was of the correct descent to claim Minamoto ancestry and could thus claim the title of shogun. Tokugawa was also granted a "decree from the court at Kyoto which gave him additional legitimacy," (Murphey, 228). In addition he killed the surviving heir of Hideyoshi's in order to destroy all possible Japanese threats to his supremacy, (Murphey, 228).

The foreign threats were a different story, one which Tokugawa also countered with internal religions in order to compensate for the spread of Christianity which he too viewed as "disruptive and even a threat to the state," as did Hideyoshi, (Murphey, 254). The religion used predominantly in the Tokugawa period was Neo-Confucianism, not only as a counterpoint to Christianity, but also as a "buttress for preserving existing relationships between rulers and ruled and thus for keeping Tokugawa society orderly and justifying the Tokugawa shoguns' exercise of power, (Colcutt, 130). Ultimately, Tokugawa rule closed the country to the foreign proselytizers as a way of keeping power to themselves, and keeping the country clean of outside influences for a time.

Tokugawa rule had the power of force, being the largest landholder in Japan, proved said force at the Battle of Sekigahara and in killing Hideyoshi's son. He used his power as a weapon to keep the samurai, peasants, and missionaries in line with his own policies, and in addition he legitimized his rule through hereditary and imperial support. Tokugawa rule was the culmination of this period of Japanese history in which rule was combined with right to rule and the ability to rule by force.

Time has a way of going on though, and eventually not only was the country opened back up, but the merchant class which both Hideyoshi and Tokugawa had tried so hard to suppress in their class segregation edicts, rose as the dominant force in Japanese society. Tokugawa wrote in a letter to his successor that, “The strong manly ones in life are those who understand the meaning of the word patience,” (Murphey, 254).

Legitimate rule can last for centuries, but there will always be someone patiently waiting for a chink in the armor at which to strike. Legitimization through power worked in the feudal period of Japanese history. The strongest samurai could unify and rule the country while suppressing all threats, but this only lasts for so long. Inevitably each dynasty falls, and in the end of the Tokugawa period, though power reverts to the imperial family, the rising merchant class and capitalism are not far behind. Political legitimacy is all well and good, but money speaks of a different power.

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