INTRODUCTION

This study circles a century and a half of Japanese history, from about the mid-seventh century to around the beginning of the ninth, extending beyond the Nara period (710–784) at both ends. During the last decades of the seventh century, the Yamato kingdom, which had been ruled by unstable coalitions of lineages whose leaders acknowledged one among themselves as their head, was transformed into a rapidly centralizing state, led by an “emperor” (tennō) who extended his rule through a service nobility recruited from old lineage leadership. A bureaucratic structure was put together, comprehensive law codes promulgated, and grand capitals erected in succession, the whole process framed by the drafting of dynastic narratives. Versions of Yamato history appear at this time, although this is also the sunrise of mytho-historical beginnings for the ruling house, reflecting back legitimizing ends.

Several features that today occupy an important place in Japan’s national identity were created in the decades straddling the eighth century. In the twenty-first century, a tennō still finds himself at the symbolic pinnacle of Japan’s political hierarchy. Nihon, the Japanese name for the country, was adopted around the year 700. Only two generations ago, the Kojiki’s mytho-history was officially upheld as factual truth. The poems of the Manyōshū, an eighth-century anthology, are treasured today as the earliest pearls of a national literature. Shinto, upheld by many as Japan’s indigenous religion, presumably reaches seamlessly from the ancient past to today’s present. The monarch’s title, the polity’s name, a formula and language for rulership, and an indigenous religion can boast a long history in Japan, or so it seems.

A closer look, however, reveals severe ruptures in the putative continuity governing Japanese history with regard to these national icons. By the ninth century, the Manyōshū poems had already become less intelligible because of the script in which they had been recorded. The Chinese graphs, unstable mixtures of phonetic and semantic signs, constituted a puzzle that, over time, blocked access to clear meaning. The Kojiki, whatever legitimizing role it played at the beginning of the eighth century, was pushed aside by the end of it, replaced in importance by the Nihon shoki, Japan’s second preserved history, written in 720, a few years after the Kojiki. Its sequel, the Shoku Nihongi, compiled in the 790s, does not even mention the presumably noteworthy event of the Kojiki’s presentation to the court in 712.
Moreover, for over six hundred years, between the early thirteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, no Japanese monarch received the title of *tennō*, not even posthumously. Finally, nowadays more and more scholars are convinced that most of Japanese history lacked “Shinto” if we understand by this term a modern notion of an autochthonous religious tradition in its own right.

The royal house itself constitutes a peculiar genealogical entity since it responds to no family name such as, for instance, the Tudors. Somehow this lack connotes that the dynasty is not of this world and transcends history. Historians dealing with the ancient period often use “Sun line,” a title deduced from a component in the names of ancient rulers that refers to the myth of origins, suggesting one single dynasty even though since the late seventh century, two branches have consecutively occupied the throne. The first one, lasting only a century, was the Tenmu dynasty (673–770), followed by the current ruling house, harking back to Tenmu’s brother, Tenji (r. 668–671). The image of an unbroken line emanating from the Sun goddess Amaterasu in primordial time was created during Tenmu’s reign. Yet historians now suspect that this fabulated pre-Tenmu past covers not one, but three different historical houses that successively ruled the archipelago or parts thereof.

The historic significance of these iconic constructs was altered when recast in the mold of continuity as they have been in modern times. I intend to historicize these and other developments that took place during this early and important period of creative political experimentation, the results of which had differential afterlives. This entails a fine-grained examination of both the power struggles shaping and shaking the newly formed state structure and the representations called into service to mobilize and further state as well as factional ends. Thus, politics and symbolics are the subject of this study. My use of the term “symbolics,” now usually understood as the study of symbols, is closer to its older meaning of “use of symbols.” It draws attention to the actual adoption or manipulation of symbols, a practice with symbols and parallel to politics, both related to the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority. The state enveloped itself in sacralizing symbols — l’État est sacré — while ritualists and managers of the sacred wielded considerable power — l’Église est pouvoir.

I use the image of a “Tenmu dynasty,” one that did not last, as a way to start historicizing the time frame. The very term is now being revisited by historians. A close reading of data reveals that the notion of a dynastic line originating with Tenmu was already in dispute in the eighth century. In other words, the idea of a Tenmu ruling house was being contested while
under construction, a process that was in part due to flexibility in ways of tracing out lineages and divergent interest groups. Dynasties, as diagramed neatly in family histories and textbooks, appear to be natural and unproblematic. Yet genealogies are more often pieced together with arguably alien symbolic material.

In chapter 1, I examine this process as an ongoing “Bricolage” of constructing a royal line originating in Tenmu by granting posthumous titles to figures who never ruled. A century later, however, much of it is replaced by Emperor Kanmu’s (781–806) own configuration of a lineage with his own preferred dynastic personages. Works of genealogical bricolage accompany dynasties as they branch out over time and as founders or successors rearrange their past. They fix history to the extent needed and endeavor to have their own constructs prevail over those of others.

A number of mythological themes in the Kojiki anchor the supremacy of Tenmu’s descendants and the legitimacy of their rule, which originated in a rebellion. The structure of “Mythemes” in this work is analyzed in chapter 2. More than a tale of origins, this work also presents an exemplar of Yamato’s new regime as a tenka, a realm extending beyond Yamato’s borders properly and acknowledged, to a large extent more in the imagination than in reality, by outsiders.

A divine origin was only one of several “Alibis” (chapter 3) that were devised for Tenmu and his successors to provide their exercise of power with an otherworldly cachet. Tenmu is portrayed in the historical record as a Daoist transcendental, a master of cosmic knowledge, and adept at secret methods of prognostication. These are some of the ways he distanced himself from his predecessors, especially Tenji. The manipulation of signs, portents, and geomancy played an important role in this operation, which culminated in the creation of Fujiwara-kyō, Japan’s first capital, along cosmic delineations.

Tenmu personified a master and drafter of signs. No other historical ruler of ancient Japan has been positioned, by himself and his biographers, as personally within the realm of the supernatural to the extent that Tenmu was imagined to be. The Nihon shoki’s two chapters devoted to Tenmu begin by stating that “[he] was skilled in astronomy and the art of invisibility.”

Keeping control over the field of political semiotics, centered on yin and yang, was essential since the exercise of power was inseparable from the manipulation of symbolics. Tenmu took steps to monopolize yin-yang knowledge, the operational framework of occult knowledge, by declaring it classified information to be housed in a Yin-yang Bureau. The bureau was staffed mainly by men rooted in continental knowledge, refugees from Ko-
rean kingdoms or descendants from earlier immigrants. The indispensable contribution by “Allochthons,” men who themselves or whose ancestors originated in a “different soil” and were familiar with continental practices, constitutes the topic of chapter 4. “Allochthon” is the term that best covers people who could be aliens, immigrants, refugees, prisoners of war, or their ancestors and who lived in the archipelago but whose official identity (kikajin) as originating in a different cultural milieu and geographic soil was consciously maintained by the Yamato state as separate from that of its autochthonous subjects.

The new state assembled by Tenmu and Jitō was a liturgical one. Needless to say, it was amply provided with an infrastructure for taxation and local administration. The Law Codes, however, stipulated a yearly round of ritual events, most of them to secure the ripening of crops and a bountiful harvest. The format for the principal celebrations required that four times a year hundreds of representatives from designated local shrines assemble at the capital, a number that grew to two and three thousand early in the eighth century. These shrine officiants returned home with oblations for their local kami (spirits or “gods”). These regular celebratory reunions implemented the reality of a dynamic centralized rulership and spread consciousness of it throughout the land by word of mouth. Those who had been selected to participate experienced, shoulder to shoulder, the throngs of people from far-flung areas, the magnificence of the capital, and the magnanimity of their ruler, the very heart of the realm that encompassed all. These and other ceremonies were Tenmu and Jitō’s creations, the subject of chapter 5, “Liturgies.”

Daoism played an undeniable role in the symbolics of political ceremony and ritual, even though its presence in the record is elusive at best. Unlike Buddhism, well studied for its obvious contributions to the Nara state, Daoism did not develop over time an autonomous institutional infrastructure. The degree of Daoism’s presence in pre-Nara and Nara Japan is a matter of intense debate today. Archeologists have discovered prehistoric evidence such as mirrors and swords that may have been used for Daoist ceremonies, but we do not know for certain. One can find Daoist elements in early historical narratives prior to the period under examination in this study. I consider both archeology and literature, especially the latter, in chapter 6, where allusions to Daoism are treated as “Deposits,” left buried in the ground or embedded in texts.

Archeological remains as geological deposits generally date from a time without history. We can surmise the Daoist meanings of artifacts not from
knowledge of their use in the archipelago, but only through our understanding of Chinese Daoism. The narrative fragments, on the other hand, are deposits having a different sense. As enchanted images, they were deposited in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which were compiled at a time when acquaintance with Daoist texts was fashionable for the court nobility.

Tenmu marshaled a number of Daoist signs to articulate a supernatural aura for his rulership. They are discussed in chapter 7 as “Articulations.” A court ceremony, later known as the Festival for Appeasing the Spirits (Chinkon-sai), has undeniably Daoist origins. The New Year receptions at the court were organized around symbols with “Daoisant” connotations. In early Heian, possibly earlier, the emperor’s ceremonial coat displayed astral symbolism pivoting around the Pole Star, the heavenly zenith of rulership in Daoist discourse. Nara-era names are replete with Daoist significations.

Revisionist interpretations by Japanese and Western scholars have lately repositioned Shinto, denying it a separate religious arena with an indigenous, specific culture and practice. They have reassigned much of its cultic heritage to Daoism. This question of “Shinto” as an entity in its own right is also taken up in chapter 7.

The Tenmu dynasty was rife with political intrigue; plots were successful, aborted, or merely alleged. A few armed rebellions erupted, one even prompting Emperor Shōmu to leave Nara for several years. At almost any time during the Nara period, there were hundreds of political exiles, many of them members of the nobility, banned to remote areas of the archipelago. In power struggles, usually around questions of succession, plotters engaged in black magic, witchcraft, and the manipulation of portents and supernatural signs, or were accused of having done so. Yin-yang specialists were even found involved, albeit marginally, in some of the plots. Daoism, which Tenmu had arrayed to enchant his rule, was, under these circumstances, viewed as a subversive power.

Rifts and rivalries also characterized the field of religion as houses of ritualists, competing purveyors of symbolic power to the throne, jockeyed for position at the court. A tenuous separation of political authority and ritualist spiritual power was instituted in the 690s by splitting the new Fujiwara clan into two branches. The Fujiwara were to provide legal experts and career politicians to the court, while the Nakatomi continued to function as court ritualists. By the mid-eighth century, however, politics and religion merged when ritualists and Buddhist clerics were appointed to political office. Ise, established by Tenmu and Jitō as the realm’s ritual center with a permanent resident representative from the court in the person of a virgin
princess, became a battleground for Nakatomi ritualists confronting Buddhist encroachments. The internal struggles of the Tenmu dynasty, large and small, political and ritual, are surveyed in chapter 8, “Plottings.”

The next chapter focuses on the power of “Spirits” of the dead, often vindictive and vengeful (onryō), which came to play an increasing role in the management of power and in its contestation. Emperor Kanmu, in particular, had to placate spirits and was thus forced to operate in a symbolic universe that was significantly different from the one created by Tenmu. In this chapter, I also look into the case of Prince Nagaya, who was accused of black magic in 729, a case that may have provided the occasion for outlawing Daoist magic.

In the final chapter, I pull together strands of elements having to do with the value of “Purity.” Toward the end of his life, Tenmu used the notion of purity to signal the central quality of rulership. In the Law Codes, the enthronement of emperors is stipulated to be preceded by a lengthy period of abstinence, far longer than in the Tang model. Nevertheless, Tenmu’s use of purity as the preeminent sign for the center of the realm and its emperor has precedents in ancient China; it is a central value in Daoism, and in aspects of Buddhism as well.

Other features of administrative arrangements, such as the distinction between good and base people, appear to have had overtones of pollution. The theme of purity and pollution, however, becomes more pronounced in later centuries that fall beyond the frame of the current study. For Heian political practice, the preservation of purity isolated the emperor, transforming him into a sacred icon encountered by few, untouched, surrounded daily by precautionary ritual. Toward the end of the Heian period, the counter value of impurity became a stigma that was explicitly, although inconsistently, being applied socially.

**Two Works in English** dealing extensively with early Japanese history, up to and including most or all of the Nara period, are the first volume in the *Cambridge History of Japan*, titled *Ancient Japan* (1993), and Joan Piggott’s *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (1997) (supplemented by a chapter on Empress Kōken-Shōtoku, which brings the story up to 770). They provide helpful entries into the history of the Tenmu dynasty. Equally important is William Farris’s, *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures: Issues in the Historical Archeology of Ancient Japan* (1998). This work presents an overview of archeology’s contributions to our understanding mainly of capital building up to the Heian period. Closer to my theme of symbolics is part 1 of Rich-

Japanese scholars have done an enormous amount of research in all aspects of the history of this period. I would like to mention especially Mizubayashi Takeshi’s studies of the *Kojiki* and Shinkawa Tokio’s research on Daoism. Both these scholars have assisted me greatly through their writings and willingness to answer inquiries. Equally important has been the dynamic research in Chinese Daoism done by Western scholars such as Anna Seidel, Livia Kohn, and many others. Without their insights, Daoism would remain an amalgam of popular and obscure practices, unrelated to power and politics — the field, we have heard too often, where Confucianism set the tone of discourse and practice.

With this book, I found myself in a place and time far removed from where I started. After my study of Tokugawa village politics of class and status, I intended to explore further the subject of social stigma as it was directed at other marginal classes, even though perhaps less severely than was the case with the leather workers to which I devoted a whole chapter in my *Tokugawa Village Practice*. Curious as to the history and origins of the social disvalue of pollution, I perused a good number of studies until my attention was drawn to the simple statement that Tenmu used “purity” and “clarity” as signifiers for the top ranks of the members of his royal family. Looking for social applications of purity, I found little of it in that early period. Increasingly it became clear, however, that I was dealing with the symbolics of politics — ideology in other words — the terrain of a familiar problematic but with a narrative vegetation more luxuriant than I had found in *Tokugawa Ideology*. 