

Images of the Meiji Emperor & Empress Haruko

The Meiji Emperor was a celebrity. Tall, handsome, and athletic, he was perfect for the role of symbolizing a new nation. His "handlers" (as we would call them today) portrayed the emperor in two modes: modern and ancient. In the modern mode, the emperor was modeled after the major European monarchs. This was his most common image, in which he typically appears clad in a medal-bedecked military uniform. But the emperor was also the living embodiment of the mysterious power of the ancient imperial line, and we occasionally see him clad in full court robes. Haruko, his principal wife, was the first empress to be a significant public figure. There will be more on her later in the course.



Modern mode above;
ancient mode below

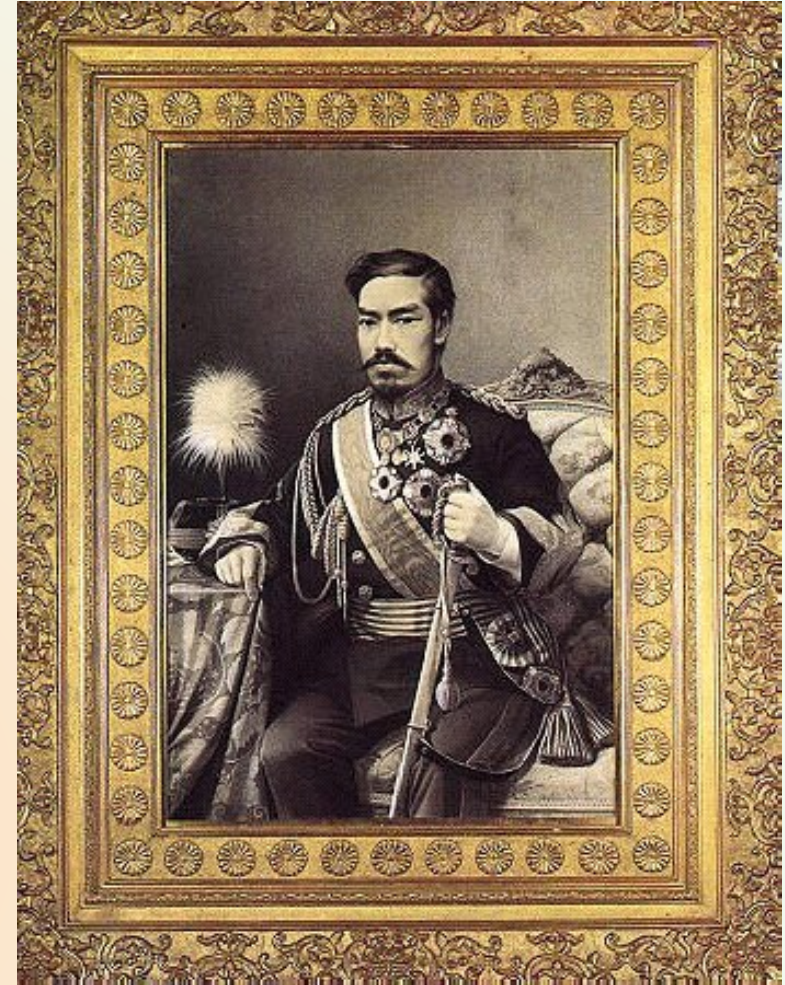




☞ Left, top:

Empress Haruko, ca. 1870

Although female emperors had occasionally ascended the throne in Japan's premodern past, empress Haruko was the first wife of a reigning emperor to play a prominent public role. Modern mode.



☞ Left, bottom:
Ancient mode

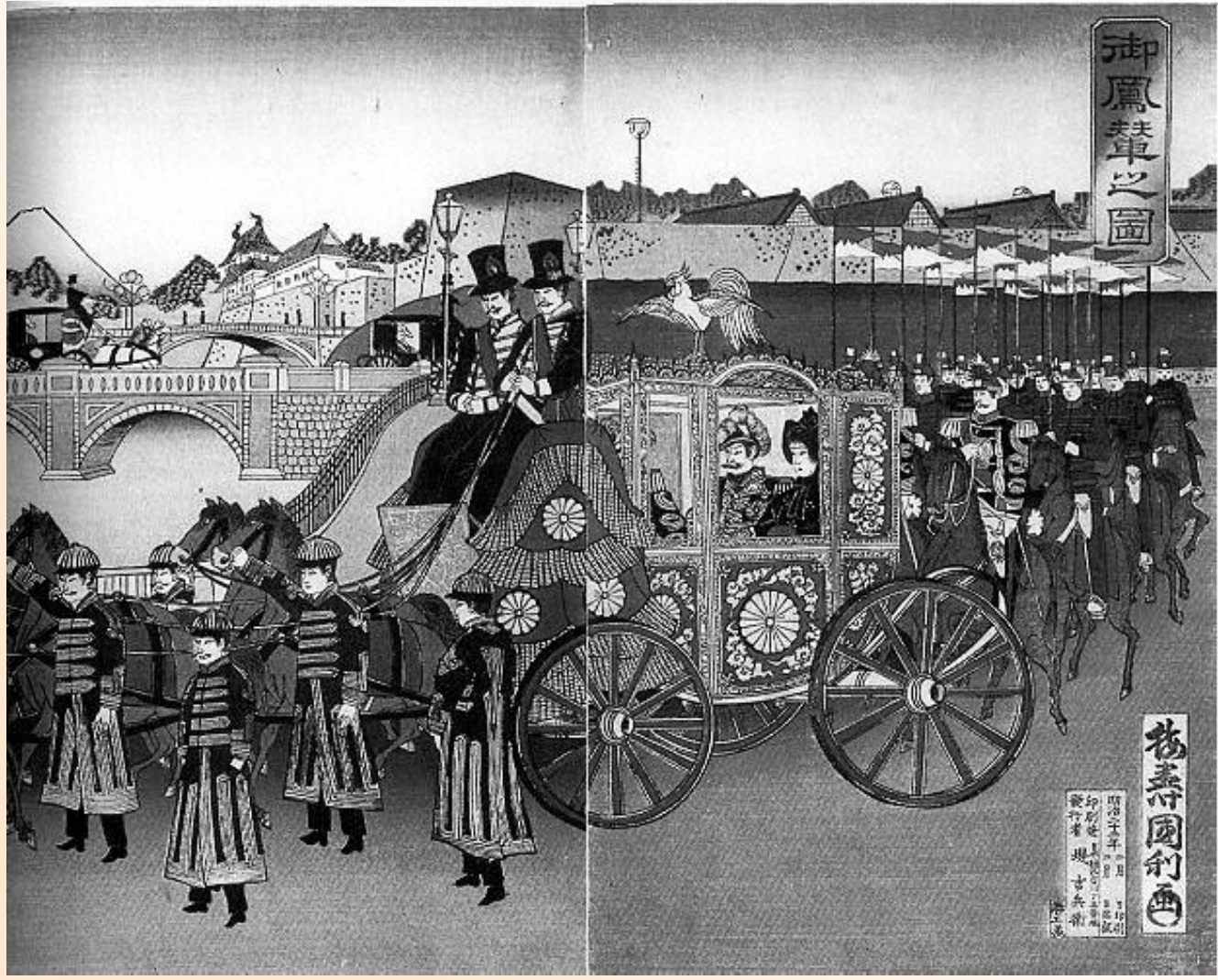


Above ▲

Formal portrait of the Meiji Emperor, ca. 1870

Japan's modern emperors operated in two modes: 1) as a modern monarch; and 2) as the ancient source of political legitimacy and embodiment of the mysterious national essence.

Modern mode.



Above left: Emperor as warrior, modern mode. Above right: Emperor & Empress in procession, ca. 1870s. Here the Meiji emperor and empress Haruko are shown in public procession. During the 1870s and 80s, the Meiji emperor, sometimes accompanied by Haruko, was frequently in the public eye--"on display" one might say. Modern mode.



Right ☞

Mixed modes. Here is an amazing poster from 1928 advertising a memorial ceremony for the Taishō Emperor (Meiji's son). The ceremony is to be held in Kyōto, the locus of ancient imperial roots, but the poster mixes both modes.

Notice the buildings, amusement park, and the airplane flying overhead. On the other hand, notice the ancient calendar (bottom images in the circle), the sun, and the raven (in the sun) and hare in the moon--two ancient Chinese symbols.



Above: Meiji emperor at his enthronement, ca, 1866

Here is the emperor as traditional, quasi-religious source of Japanese political legitimacy.

Ancient mode