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Touching up the Emperor System

Crossing the Divide

Moon Ik-hwan's historic mission to Pyongyang

The Emperor System

and the Limits of Postwar Democracy

An Interview with Amano Yasukazu

From the fall of 1988 to the spring of 1989 the Japanese media have focused relentlessly on the death of an emperor. How did the government, the media and the people respond to Hirohito's long illness and death; and what is the significance of these events for understanding the tenno system of imperial rule?

During the four months of Emperor Hirohito's illness and the following lavish funeral, we have been able to see in astonishing and horrifying detail how the present emperor-centered system sustains itself and exerts its power throughout Japanese society. The mass media, with few exceptions, reported on Hirohito in minute detail precisely as the government directed. From September 19, 1988, when Hirohito vomited blood, every newspaper and broadcasting company employed supreme honorifics, referring to Hirohito in the precise terminology used in prewar Japan.

It is astonishing that the government spent almost 10 billion yen on Hirohito's funeral without so much as a word of discussion in the Diet. The police guard at the time of the funeral was huge and intrusive in the lives of ordinary people. Complaints poured in from people who were repeatedly stopped and subjected to spot checks on the street. Anyone who refused to be checked faced hours of interrogation by the 30,000 police mobilized for the occasion.

How were such impositions possible in the absence of any legal basis?

The answer to this question by an official in the Metropolitan Government was that the emperor is a symbol of the state and we, the citizens, must treat him as such.

At the end of World War II, Hirohito issued a "declaration of humanity" in which he renounced his position as a living god. For most Japanese, the postwar emperor has been a symbol of peace and democracy, and a bulwark against the restoration of the militarism of the prewar era. However, doubts and fears arose among many people during Hirohito's illness and funeral. We could at last see clearly what was at best dimly perceived in the forty years since the war.

During the ceremonies following Hirohito's death, the religious aspects of the emperor system were exposed to public view. We had not seen that

TENNO

The term used to refer to Japan's symbolic figurehead, it is most often translated as "emperor." However, in Japanese, the term has connotations beyond the English equivalent, so that terms such as "priest-king" or "divine authority" are sometimes regarded as more accurate renderings of its actual meaning. The origin of the word can be traced back to a myth of Chinese religion, in which it means "the highest ruler among the gods." Under the present Constitution, the tenno bears no official political power, but his symbolic and emotional influence over the Japanese people invariably impacts the climate of the political life in Japan.

for the last four decades the emperor continued to be the godhead in the world of Shinto religion just as he had been before and during the war. The present constitution explicitly proclaims the separation of state and religion, and guarantees freedom of religion; it also defines the emperor as a symbol of the state, who, in shinto thought, is still a living god. There is only a shade of difference between being a living god and a living symbol.

Let's consider the symbolic significance of Hirohito's funeral from the dual perspectives of a state funeral, which brought leaders from 164 countries around the world, and as religious activity.

At the time of Hirohito's funeral, the government erected a *torii* gate on the funeral site where two rituals were to be performed in rapid succession — a state funeral and a Shinto ritual. A *torii* is the central element in a shrine which purifies all who pass through it. But this *torii* was too small for Hirohito's coffin to pass. The bearers of the coffin could do nothing but go around it to enter the shrine. From this angle, the ritual was absurd. Nevertheless, it persists. It is this persistence and adaptability which enables Shinto and the emperor system to serve as an integrating apparatus of the nation. The Japanese state through the funeral activities symbolically unified the emperor's dual roles as symbol of the nation and as Shinto god.

To understand the contemporary furor surrounding the emperor it is useful to look back to the immediate postwar period when the issues of emperor, state and people were

GENGO

The practice of naming an era for the tenno, adopted from China in 645 when Emperor Kotoku declared the beginning of the Taika era. The most recent eras have been: Meiji (Enlightened Govt.) 1868-1912; Taisho (Great Righteousness) 1912-1926; Showa (Enlightened Peace) 1926- Jan. 7, 1989; and Heisei (Peace and Achievement) Jan. 8 - present. In 1979, the LDP forced a bill through the lower house legalizing the use of the gengo, but the upper house abandoned it. In 1983, the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister's Office advocated the legalization of the practice of gengo.

authoritatively defined. It is widely known that Japan's Constitution was drafted by the United States and imposed on Japan. The American drafts of the constitution emphasized the sovereignty of the people (*jinmin*) and the limited power and authority of the emperor. Yet we now know that with respect to the position of the emperor, Japanese government negotiators won every crucial battle over the Japanese text that is over the Japanese Constitution. Thus rather than an emperor who derives his position from the sovereign will of the people, the Constitution states that the emperor "derives his position from the general will of the Japanese nation (*kokumin*) with whom reside sovereign power." The people have disappeared. They have been replaced by a concept of nation intertwined with imperial will.

MacArthur gave the Japanese two presents. One is the symbolic emperor system; the other is freedom of religion, though he himself tirelessly propounded Christianity in Japan. Whatever the intention of the occupation authorities, however, in the world of Shinto Hirohito was treated as a living god after the war as he had been earlier. After the war the government stopped providing financial assistance to Shinto shrines. But the Shinto world continued essentially unscathed. For example Shinto rituals were performed as before in the Imperial Household Agency.

In other words, there is a dual structure of the emperor system. It is both a political and religious institution; he is a national symbol and Shinto god. So long as his position remains rooted both in Shinto and the state there can be no separation of religion and state. Yet because this issue is politically sensitive, the authorities describe as 'private' the imperial role as shinto god and 'public' the roles of the emperor as a symbol of the state.

The symbolic emperor under the post-war Constitution has played the role of politically integrating an aggressive Japan under the symbol of "peace and culture." The image of post-war Japan which the occupation tried to create, one of culture and peace under the symbolic emperor system, now provides the framework for Japan's increasingly aggressive international stance.

People, even progressives and militants, were largely unaware of the problems of the emperor's dual role during the early decades

the post-war period.

At the time the constitution was promulgated in 1946, the public was excluded from the process and few people were even aware of the position of the emperor. At that time, there were few voices in any way critical of the emperor or even conscious of the issues. For example, at the end of the first general conference of the Japan Socialist Party in December 1945, the participants rose and shouted, "Long Live the Emperor!"

There was little awareness that occupation authorities planned to maintain the emperor system in post war Japan. No debate or criticism was permitted in the process of creating a new constitution. Even in the progressive movement no one made this an issue perhaps because the new emphasis on peace and democracy were so welcome. Only in the 80s did people begin to think about the present emperor system under the Constitution.

In both Asia and the rest of the world, much of the recent discussion has focused on the question of the emperor's responsibility for the war in the Pacific and particularly for the atrocities associated with Japanese imperialism. What do you think about the question of Hirohito's personal war responsibility?

Many Japanese believe that the Japanese Army was responsible for waging successive wars against other countries, wars which brought suffering and disaster not only to other Asian peoples but to Japanese as well. War responsibility in their eyes lies above all not in person of the emperor but in the military. So when the Americans executed Tojo for war crimes, the issue of war responsibility was resolved for these people. This consciousness was partly created by American authorities and partly by the ruling Japanese elite for its own reasons. Cabinet members at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal shielded the emperor from prosecution as war criminal. The result was to shift responsibility for the war and the crimes of war away from the emperor and to focus them on the military and a few ranking government officials. But the personal war responsibility of Hirohito and that of the system can not be separated.

Why has so much critical attention focused on the emperor system within the last year? What is the character of the movements critical of the emperor system?

For the postwar generation educated under a kind of American democratic education, the back side of the dual system was invisible until the recent fuss over Hirohito's illness and death. But now it is clear to see. The problem of the emperor cannot be ignored since it touches the life of every individual. This point has a positive side for us in that people of all generations share the problem and can raise the questions together. For example, in the rallies and meetings we held in the last four months, various people, young and old, men and women joined together. This is rare in the movements in Japan.



Abide by the
Constitution
—Akihito

What about the new emperor Akihito? He comes to the throne free of the taint of war, and even with hints of a liberal image.

In this context, Akihito is playing precisely the integrative role sought by Japan's ruling groups. Upon enthronement, Akihito proclaimed his desire for peace and democracy, his intention to promote the people's welfare, and his support for the present constitution, all words which might dismay rightwing critics but reassure most people. His liberal and democratic image has been carefully nurtured. He is said to have been given a "democratic education" by the American Quaker Elizabeth Vining, and he is the first imperial successor to marry a commoner.

Akihito has in fact been playing an important official role, especially in diplomatic affairs, since the early 1950s. It was Akihito who paid a visit after World War II to pay reparations to those countries whose land and people suffered disasters at Japanese hands during the war.

Akihito's new era is named Heisei, meaning accomplishment of peace. In reality, there is every sign that Japan's rulers are seeking to solidify the postwar emperor system which enables society to indulge in illusions of "peace" and "democracy" and at the same time to expand its economic and military power from Japan outward to Asia and the world.