



Emperor Hirohito and the Turbulent Shōwa Era*

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The reign of the Shōwa Emperor (1926 - 89) was a turbulent one. The preceding reign had witnessed the growth of liberal thought— “ Tai-shō democracy ” and humanitarianism; but the devastation of the Great Kanto Earthquake and Fire of 1923 and the economic and social unrest brought on by the Showa Panic (Shōwa Kyōko, 1930) triggered an abrupt about - face, turning the nation toward ultranationalism and militarist fascism. The first half of the Shōwa era, known in Japan as the “ dark valley ” when militaristic ideology gripped the country, lasted about twenty years, from 1926 to the end of the war in 1945. The latter half of Shōwa, beginning on August 15, 1945, was a time of momentous upheaval— what we might call the second opening of modern Japan — as it embarked on the process of democratization. Including the period of rapid economic growth, it lasted more than forty years.

As far as the nature of the emperor system was concerned, too, Shōwa was an unprecedented era of drastic change. In considering the imperial institution during the Shōwa era, we ought first to look at its characteristics, going back to the beginning of modern times.

The Meiji Legacy

From the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to today, two overlapping images of the emperor have coexisted in Japan. Inherent in the Meiji Restoration itself were two conflicting and contradictory views of the emperor system: according to one, “ the world [the nation] under heaven belongs to one person ” (*tenka wa hitori no tenka*; YOSHIDA Shōin), that is, the country is ruled by an absolute monarchy. According to the other, as expressed by late Edo - period Confucian scholar YAMAGATA Taika (1781 - 1866), “ the world [the nation] under heaven belongs to the people ” (*tenka wa tenka no tenka*), an interpretation that emphasizes the popular will. The former based the legitimacy of the emperor on lineage— “ an unbroken line

of descent for ages past ” (Meiji Constitution, Article 1) — and treated him as a transcendental value, an object of virtually religious devotion. The latter view found its way into the first article of the Five Clauses of the Charter Oath issued by the Meiji Emperor which read, in part, that “ Deliberative assemblies shall be established and all measures of government shall be decided in accordance with public opinion, ” and it further stressed “ conciliar thought ” (*kōgi yoron*).

Practically speaking, “ conciliar thought ” was a slogan to serve the Meiji government’s political aim; by inviting the daimyo throughout the land to have a voice in national affairs, it could weld the diverse political forces in the country into a “ conciliar body. ” The slogan, however, had the potential, going beyond the political intent of its authors, of paving the way toward universalistic “ democracy. ” As I shall explain below, it is often regarded as both the indigenous and endogenous source of democracy in Japan.

This dual image was developed by elder statesman Itō Hirobumi (1841 - 1909), architect and promoter of the modern emperor system, into a key apparatus for political integration in the process of building a modern state. It was embodied in his double interpretation of the position and function of the emperor in the Meiji Constitution of 1889.

One image, as typified by such phrases as that “ the emperor is sacred and inviolable, ” was of a mythological, absolutist, authoritarian sovereign with unlimited prerogatives transcending the Constitution. The other, as Itō himself explained in the meetings of the Privy Council held for the establishment of the Meiji Constitution, was of a constitutional government, which, by definition, limited the prerogatives of the monarch, and an emperor who exercised the rights of sovereignty in accordance with the Constitution. The latter was the view of the emperor as a limited monarch.

The common people were inculcated with the image of an absolutist emperor through the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) and moral education textbooks. To intellectuals and politicians, meanwhile, the emperor was presented as a monarch limited by the Meiji Constitution, which in turn gained the support even of advocates of popular rights who were conversant with constitutional theory. By putting the charismatic figure of the Meiji Emperor in the limelight, the talented Itō was able to steer the imperial “ chariot ” on a steady course, though it was pulled, in a sense, by steeds of two completely different, mutually contradictory personalities.

The mythical, authoritarian image of a sovereign emperor was championed and developed by constitutional law scholars HOZUMI Yatsuka (1860 - 1912) and his student UESUGI Shinkichi (1878 - 1929). This view was ideologically over - emphasized by the military clique and civilian rightist forces during the first half of the Shōwa era, and, propelled by pressures from them, even the Ministry of Education thrust upon the people an ideology of ultranationalism aimed at “ clarifying the national polity ” through such texts as the *Kokutai no hongi* [Fundamentals of the National Polity] and *Shinmin no michi* [The Way of Subjects].

There were others, however, who sought to bring out the “ esoteric ” view of the monarch of limited authority from under the shadow of the absolutist sovereign popularized among the people from the time of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution, and to give it legitimacy. Among the most prominent were Tokyo Imperial University professor of constitutional law MINOBE Tatsukichi (1873 - 1948), exponent of the theory of the emperor as an organ of the state, and his political science colleague YOSHINO Sakuzō (1878 - 1933), a leading theorist of *minponshugi* and advocate of democratic ideas.

Looking back over the formative period

of modern Japan, we can see the two conflicting, contradictory views of the emperor struggling to take the lead. For a certain period, under the able and charismatic Emperor Meiji and with the skillful guidance of statesmen like Itō Hirobumi, the double structure was kept both dynamic and in balance. But there were other times, when the two sought different courses and competed with each other, until one of the “ steeds ”, in the attempt to take over and pull the chariot alone, forced the other to its knees.

This is what happened in 1935, when right - wing and militarist forces, supported by a populace thoroughly steeped in the ideology of absolutism since the Meiji period, attacked and ultimately buried Minobe’s organ theory. The problem of the emperor’s dual image remained a critical one even after the end of the Pacific War; in the policy of the Allied Occupation of Japan and in Japanese approaches to postwar reconstruction, how to interpret and evaluate the shifting roles of the emperor, and which image to consider the legitimate one, continued to be controversial issues.

Hirohito and the Organ - Theory View

Emperor Hirohito was born in 1901 and grew to young adulthood during the heyday of Taishō democracy. In 1921, at the impressionable age of twenty, he traveled to Europe, touring chiefly Great Britain. There he met and became acquainted with Westerners, the British royal family in particular, giving him a first - hand opportunity to learn about and observe the constitutional monarchy of the sovereign who “ reigns but does not rule. ” As the guest of the Scottish Duke of Atholl, he was deeply impressed by the openness of the aristocrats he met, who mingled on close and friendly terms with the local people. These experiences, along with the young crown prince’s inborn character, contributed to his development as a liberal. Advised by relatively liberal - minded elder statesmen such as SAIONJI

Kinmochi (1849 - 1940), he favored the idea of a limited monarchy and the theory of the emperor as an organ of the state that were compatible with the ideals of Taishō democracy.

In 1935, when the attacks against the organ theory erupted, then Imperial Household Chamberlain SUZUKI Kantarō recounts (see HARADA Kumao, *Saionji kō to seikyoku* [Prince Saionji and Political Crisis; popularly known as the “ Harada Diary ”], Vol. 4) hearing the emperor remark that he preferred state sovereignty to imperial sovereignty. Still, Suzuki says, Hirohito went on to say that since the sovereign and the nation were indivisible in the case of Japan, it probably made no difference which prevailed. A sovereign monarchy was apt to lean toward autocracy, he felt, and it was great if a distinguished scholar had come forth with a theory that could make imperial sovereignty and the sovereign as organ of the state compatible, since it could check the absolutist tendencies. “ They may criticize Minobe’s theory ...but how many people of Minobe’s caliber are there in Japan these days? It’s a terrible shame to bury a brilliant scholar like that. ” And, he went on, “ Weren’t the army attacks on the organ theory riddled with contradictions ? After all, the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors stipulated that the emperor ‘ shall be the chief of the military,’ and in Article 4 of the Constitution, it says ‘ The Emperor is the head of the Empire ..., ’ in other words, an organ of the state. ”

In the *Honjō Diary* (diary of aide - de - camp HONJŌ Shigeru (1876 - 1945), too, we find remarks such as that for March 11, 1935, when the emperor said to Honjō that “ although there might be a difference in status between the two of us, he [the Emperor] did not believe that physically there was any difference between himself and the aide - de - camp whatsoever, [and ...] that he found it very upsetting, mentally and physically, that he was being turned into an entity without any freedom whatsoever in

order to discredit the organ theory. ”

Right after the February 26, 1936 incident broke out, Emperor Hirohito had this to say to War Minister KAWASHIMA Yōshiyuki: “ The [rebels’] action is a matter of grave concern to me. They have murdered some of my most trusted senior advisers and generals. It is as if they were strangling me gently with a silken cord. Their actions are deplorable — violating the Constitution, deviating from Emperor Meiji’s instructions, staining the national polity, and obstructing its clarification. ”

When Général Honjō conveyed the war minister’s request that an imperial agent be sent in order to honor the rebel officers occupying the prime minister’s official residence who were “ prepared to commit suicide and let the soldiers return to regimental quarters if their request for dispatch of an imperial agent is honored, ” the emperor said, “ If they wish to commit suicide, let them do so. It is unthinkable to dispatch an imperial agent to such men. ”

As is clear from the above episode, even though Hirohito personally saw his position as that of a constitutional monarch and was in favor of the emperor as an organ of the state theory, he was actually a sovereign burdened with a contradictory role forced upon him as a living deity by militarists, ultra - rightists and others. The ideology of Shōwa Ishin — the “ restoration - revolution ” of Shōwa — was gaining momentum. He was, in effect, used as a tool for clarification of the fundamental nature of the Japanese state and for ideological promotion of militaristic fascism.

Surrender and the Emperor System

Throughout the latter half of World War II, especially as Japan’s surrender seemed imminent, intense debate arose among the Allies concerning the Japanese emperor, the nature of the emperor system, and policies for democratization of Japan after the war. Within the

U.S. Department of State, too, opinion was divided between those demanding abolition of the emperor system and those calling for its continuation, and the debate lasted several years.

Proponents of abolition of the emperor system judged that the system was the core of the mythical views of the state and history that regarded the emperor as a living god, the views upon which ultranationalism and opposition to the organ theory were based.

The belief, they argued, that the Japanese were a people destined to rule over the world, a belief that led to their armed invasion of neighboring Asian countries, was based on a mythological view of the emperor as the embodiment of Japanese racial superiority. Japan's emperor was equated with Japanese imperialism, the cornerstone of its economic and social system, and democratization of Japan would be utterly impossible if the emperor system were not removed. Among well-known proponents of this position were leftists of the Chinese Nationalist Party, such as Sun Fo, eldest son of Sun Yat-sen, and Prof. Owen Lattimore, American specialist on Asia at Johns Hopkins University. A similar stance was dominant in China, the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia, where public opinion, too, overwhelmingly supported abolition of the emperor system.

According to a Gallup poll reported in the *Washington Post* at that time, about 70 percent of the American public wanted some kind of punishment for Hirohito. Newspapers in China, the country that had suffered most from the invasion of Japanese troops, were even more harsh, demanding that he be executed or sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor and that all the other members of the imperial household be sent to and detained in China.

Advocates of keeping the emperor on the throne, on the other hand, cited the latent energy of indigenous democracy in liberalism going back to the early Meiji period, and most notably

in the Taishō democracy of the 1910s and 1920s. This position was championed by a group of people informed about and favorable to Japan and who trusted Japanese liberals, Emperor Hirohito included, out of personal acquaintance. They believed that democracy would prevail only if the military clique and right-wing militarists, who had grasped the reins of government in the early Shōwa era and led the nation into aggression and war, were expunged. They also calculated that the imperial institution might be the only political element capable of exercising a stabilizing influence, like the “queen bee in a hive” (Joseph C. Grew), and that it could encourage the people, with their collective behavioral and thought patterns, to pull their nation out of the devastation of war and build social unity and stability. Among the individuals who took this position were former U.S. ambassador to Japan Joseph C. Grew, former British ambassador Robert Craigie, and American specialist on Japanese history Professor Hugh Borton.

After the war, the Allies prepared two quite different prescriptions for democratizing Japan. This stemmed from the two inherently different images that had been projected by the emperor system since the Meiji period. Depending on which aspect was stressed, the prescription — for preserving or abdicating the emperor — would be determined. It was because of the Potsdam Declaration, issued just before the end of the war, calling for the democratization of Japan, and stating that the form of government of Japan should be established “in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people,” that the Occupation forces were always very sensitive to Japanese public opinion regarding the emperor system. Thus, when 92 - 93 percent of various public opinion polls indicated support for Hirohito, they opted for a compromise solution, legitimizing the emperor as the symbol of national unity, while at the same time launching radical democratic reforms of the

political, social, and economic systems.

Renunciation of Divinity

One of the most important achievements of the Shōwa Emperor during his sixty - two - year reign was perhaps his renunciation of divinity, sometimes called the “ Declaration of Humanity. ” In the imperial rescript of January 1, 1946, a little more than four months after Japan’s surrender, Hirohito stated, “ The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine, and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and destined to rule the world. ” This passage, explicitly negating the divinity of the emperor and repudiating the myth of Japanese ethnic superiority, as being descendants of the Sun Goddess and thus destined to conquer the world, was a main theme of the New Year’s rescript, together with a passage, placed at the beginning of the rescript, that cited the Five Clauses of Charter Oath by Emperor Meiji when Japan embarked on its modern nation - building effort. Hirohito inserted the Charter Oath in his Declaration of Humanity as a guide for building a new democratic Japan.

It is said that the rescript had already been drafted by mid - December 1945. Whether the initiative came from the emperor (or the Ministry of Imperial Household) or from the Occupation authorities is disputable. At least, it is clear that Dr. R.H. Blyth, a scholar of English literature and teacher in the Peer’s School (Gakushūin), served as liaison between the court and SCAP headquarters. One can assume that the emperor himself and imperial household authorities were aware of international public opinion at the time and cognizant of the likelihood that the emperor might be forced to abdicate or be tried as a war criminal. At a press interview in mid - October 1945, former prime minister Konoe Fumimaro

said the emperor was seriously concerned about the possibility.

The only way to cope with the crisis and assure the continuance of the emperor system, it was thought, was to renounce the view of the emperor as a mythical, divine being which was both the target of international criticism and the source of national fanaticism. When Emperor Hirohito received the Declaration of Humanity draft prepared on the basis of preliminary consultation between Occupation and imperial household authorities, he remarked that he quite agreed with the document, but wondered why he should have to deny a divinity that he had never possessed to begin with.

Close associates told the emperor that such a declaration was necessary because people throughout the world believed the emperor considered himself to be a “ living god. ” He agreed, but insisted that the Charter Oath by his grandfather be inserted. He apparently hoped to pass on the spirit of the Charter Oath, which he always thought of as the source of indigenous democracy in modern Japan and wanted to make it a guideline for the nation.

During the war a number of pastors and believers in the Holiness Church and other Christian denominations were tripped up by leading questions posed by police such as “ Who is superior, the emperor or God? ” and “ Is not the emperor also a human being who will be judged for his sinfulness? — and then imprisoned on charges of *lèse majesté*. Not only Christians but many other Japanese suffered on charges of *lèse majesté*. The Declaration of Humanity was significant in that the emperor himself denied the basis of *lèse majesté*.

The Issue of War Responsibility

Even before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo Trials) to try TŌJŌ Hideki and other Japanese war criminals opened on May 3, 1946, there was much discussion both in Japan and abroad regarding

the emperor's war responsibility, especially his moral responsibility. The question of whether he should abdicate, too, was discussed widely in the media in Japan and abroad. Leading political scientists and legal scholars argued that world opinion would be harsh if the monarch who had given his seal of approval to wars of aggression were to remain on the throne; they further stated that the emperor could not possibly be retained as the symbol of the new Japan seeking to rebuild itself as a nation of peace.

The emperor himself was keenly aware of his responsibility for the war. On October 27, 1945, when he first visited General Douglas MacArthur at the U.S. Embassy, the American commander - in - chief apparently had the uneasy feeling that Emperor Hirohito might plead his own cause against indictment as a war criminal. Since the end of the war, the emperor had been at the head of the list of war criminals as far as some of the Allies were concerned. According to MacArthur's *Reminiscences*, however, Hirohito did not plead for his own life. On the contrary, "What he said was this: ' I come to you, General MacArthur, to offer myself to the judgement of the powers you represent as the one to bear sole responsibility for every political and military decision made and action taken by my people in the conduct of the war. ' A tremendous impression swept me. This courageous assumption of a responsibility implicit with death, a responsibility clearly belied by facts of which I was fully aware, moved me to the marrow of my bones. " (p. 288)

The two men met several more times after that initial visit to exchange views, and MacArthur is said to have remarked that " The Emperor has a more thorough grasp of the democratic concept than almost any Japanese with whom I have talked. " (Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur — His Rendezvous With History*. New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1956, p. 286). The favorable impression and feeling of personal trust

in Hirohito led MacArthur to the decision that the emperor should be retained. He was also aware that using the emperor to help achieve democratization and the other aims of the Occupation would be far more effective than putting a monarch that 92 percent of the populace supported on trial and hoping to overcome the hatred and resentment bound to ensue from such a trial. Ultimately, the United States and Great Britain both concluded that retaining the emperor was unavoidable in order to fulfill the objectives of the Occupation with the minimum outlay of material and human resources and in the shortest possible term.

At the International Tribunal in Tokyo, after a sharp clash between Sir William Webb of Australia, who had been appointed president of the tribunal and was a firm exponent of the widespread Australian view of that period that the emperor was responsible for the war and should be put on trial as a war criminal, and chief public prosecutor Joseph Berry Keenan, who was responsible for carrying out the political - level decision of MacArthur and the Allied powers, the emperor was not indicted as a war criminal. Webb remained consistently opposed to the exemption of the emperor from the trial, ultimately writing a separate opinion of protest against the immunity of the emperor at the trial's end. Another dissenter was Justice Bernard of France. The Tokyo Trials came to a close on December 29, 1948.

A New Constitution, defining the emperor as " the symbol of the unity of the people " and " his position " as deriving " from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power, " was officially announced on November 3, 1946 and came into effect the following year on May 3. However, prior to this, general elections of both houses of the Diet, which served as a kind of constitutional referendum, were held in April 1947. As a result of the election, the overwhelming majority of successful candidates were

supporters of the new Constitution, and in this sense, the new supreme law of the land was indeed chosen by the Japanese people at the time.

During the four decades after the war, Japan performed a miracle of recovery, preserving its cultural traditions as an Asian society and utilizing the fruits of modern technology and civilization to achieve remarkable economic growth and social development. Its accomplishments were acclaimed by the world as a model case of modernization in the non - Western world. What were the main factors and driving forces behind this development? I believe that they were the physical and spiritual energy of the Japanese people unleashed after the war as well as the postwar reforms democratizing society — the revision of the Constitution, the land reform, and other pervasive changes made in political, economic, and social institutions.

There has been a tendency during recent years to attribute Japan's postwar success to

Japanese traditions predating the war. But I believe that it is important to trace that success to the very fact that out of the two elements inherent in modern Japan since the Meiji Restoration — the two principles symbolized by the dual image of the emperor — at last the element affirming human dignity and democratic thought had been extricated and freed from the humanity-negating absolutist and authoritarian element. Indeed, should we complacently and uncritically accept Japanese tradition, in the depths of which lurk elements of absolutism, exclusivism, and authoritarianism, we would misinterpret the significance of postwar development. Such thinking is fundamentally flawed; it could only take us back to the sterile and unproductive past. It would be not only harmful and dangerous for Japan, but would allow Japan to abandon its duty to make amends for the wrongs it afflicted upon its neighbors in Asia.

