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Emperor, Shinto, Democracy: Japan's Unresolved Questions of Historical Consciousness

By Herbert P. Bix

Japanese archaeologists and historians have long rejected the government's claim that Japan has had 124 emperors from the mythical Jimmu, descendant of the Sun Goddess, to the controversial Showa Emperor Hirohito, whose pre-World War II reign brought havoc to Asian and Japanese people. The scholars recognize that most sites of ancient imperial tombs should be treated as objects of scientific inquiry rather than as religious remnants of discredited State Shinto. But bureaucrats of the Imperial Household Agency, claiming to follow the Imperial Household Law, interpret the rules and control the tombs. They will neither allow the tombs to be treated as ordinary historical sites for investigation nor release copies of documents pertaining to them or to more recent emperors. Professing concern for the peace, calm, and privacy of emperors, but really fearing public scrutiny of the imperial institution and its "traditions," they continue to deny permission to excavate the tombs.

Recently, Toike Noboru, a professor of imperial history at Den-en Chofu University in Tokyo, invoked Japan's freedom of information law in his effort to make the numerous imperial tumuli that dot the Japanese countryside accessible to historical knowledge.[1] At stake is not only the possibility of writing a more lucid account of the origins of the Japanese people but also a less idealized history of the modern imperial house. Blood myths of an unbroken line of imperial succession for ages eternal" (bansei ikkei) and Japan as a "divine land" (shinkoku) could be better understood. Indeed, the entire field of ancient Japanese history would benefit if the oldest tombs were excavated, and the question of the imperial family's descent from Korea could be resolved. We might also learn more about why keepers of the imperial secrets go to such great lengths to conceal this strong likelihood. Even Emperor Akihito has said that the mother of the so-called "50th emperor," Kammu, had Korean blood and "it made him feel a certain closeness to Korea." [2]

But Akihito has never said anything that could offer support to scholars who call for release of the historical papers of his deceased father, Hirohito. Apparently the Japanese public lacks the right to learn more about the activities of its most important 20th century monarch. For how else to explain the failure to mount a movement to revise laws and regulations of the Imperial Household Agency, which were enacted by the Diet and are, presumably, laws like any other.

Today bold scholarly efforts to pry open the Imperial Household's sanctuary—its administration of graves, storehouses, archives, and other related properties of hundreds of emperors, empresses, dowager empresses, and imperial family members--need to be situated in a larger constitutional and historical context. Only then can we see behind them the conflict between legacies of the old and the new imperial order, and ultimately between the principles of monarchy and democracy. Bring the virtually autonomous "symbol monarchy" and its high-handed, secretive administrative practices into the picture, and the tombs issue will also illuminate other problems of historical consciousness that trouble Japan and disturb its relations with Asian neighbors.

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Tomb identification, restoration, and repair marked the first stage in the construction of Japan's modern monarchy. The costly work was begun in the early 1860s under Emperor Komei, father of the Meiji emperor who served as the guiding light for Japan's modern transformation. For decades the Tokugawa feudal regime had opposed the identification of such burial sites. Only in its final crisis years did it suddenly relent and cooperate in the project, which continued until the Meiji Restoration. The grave of 14th century Emperor Go-Daigo, one of the few monarchs who actually combined real power and authority, was the first to be identified. Essentially, the tombs and mausoleum denoted points of continuity with the ancestors buried in them, purportedly stretching back in time to the age of the gods. In that sense they signified exactly what Komei and the "scholars of National Learning" most wanted to establish: namely, the permanence of the imperial order, its connection with the gods, and thus his own divinity. [3]

Following the revolutionary changes that began in 1868, the resurrection of emperorship continued. More burial mounds were identified, and this activity became part of a major oligarchic effort to foster belief in the myth of an unbroken line of imperial succession. Numerous caretakers and performers of funeral rites became involved in tomb maintenance, which developed into a major function of the Imperial Household Ministry, predecessor to the Agency. By the time of Meiji's death in 1912, the Japanese people had been bound, in theory, to the emperor and his divine ancestors. But Japan's bureaucratic elites still worried about the fragility of their new monarchy, based on hereditary male succession. Their worries increased during the reign of Meiji's son, the chronically ill Taisho, of whom few expected anything. Already it had been made a crime even to say that the emperor was not a living deity. In the 1920s lese majesty laws were tightened and teachings on the national polity [kokutai], or the meaning of the throne in Japanese life, further systematized.



When Hirohito, the only emperor ever to be educated under the new imperial system, ascended to the throne at the end of 1925, the defining political principles, formalized in the Constitution (1889), the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), and kokutai thought, began to be re-emphasized. But among ruling elites, fear for the survival of the monarchy persisted.

Meanwhile the number of graves identified as "imperial" kept on increasing. When Japanese soldiers started dying in Manchuria during the early 1930s, Yasukuni Shrine, charged with commemorating their spirits and mobilizing the nation for war, took on new importance; so too did the emperor's dispatch of emissaries to the grave sites of his imperial ancestors, but especially to Ise Jingu, shrine for the spirit of the Sun Goddess, and to Yasukuni.



After Japan's defeat in 1945, U.S. officials, with the active cooperation of Japan's old guard "moderates," reformed and constitutionally preserved the monarchy, for without constitutional support it might not have lasted. Unwisely, they kept Hirohito on the throne. They did, however, transform the emperor into a vague, ill-defined "symbol" bereft of political power, but left undecided the question of whether he is the head of state. They also abolished State Shinto, formally disestablished but did not abolish Yasukuni Shrine, and wrote a rigorous separation of politics and religion into the Constitution. Because U.S. occupation officials treated postwar Yasukuni the same way they treated Hirohito—keeping him on the throne and indulgently shielding him from the Tokyo War Crimes Trial—the shrine was eventually able to restore its authority and resume its close connection with the monarchy. Hirohito paid his first post-occupation visit to Yasukuni in 1952, his last in 1975.



Hirohito and MacArthur, 1945

Three years after that final visit, the name-list of the newly enshrined martyrs arrived at the Imperial Household Agency. Hirohito learned that fourteen A-Class war criminals, including former Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, an individual who had not died in the war and whom he blamed for his alliance with Nazi Germany, had been secretly enshrined. His visits to Yasukuni abruptly ended, but he continued to send imperial family members to attend the shrine's spring and autumn rites, a practice that continues to this day. Akihito has never visited Yasukuni. [4]

For four straight decades, from the mid-1950s through the late 1980s, Japan's economy had grown, holding in check the undemocratic tendencies of its polity. During that time, Yasukuni, together with the Central Association of Shinto Shrines, its main support organization, repeatedly attempted to regain state protection and revive the practice of official public visits by ministers of state. A concurrence of crises at the end of the 1980s—the temporary weakening of the LDP, Hirohito's death, and the end of the cold war—soon altered the political atmosphere in Japan.

Nationalism is once again on the rise throughout East Asia. Japan, having sent troops to Iraq and accommodated to post 9/11 U.S. strategic planning, has entered a stage that could produce irrevocable alterations in its constitutional provisions and image as a peace state. The ruling conservative politicians have turned to legal compulsion to force patriotic expression, and increasingly seek to impart only one subjective meaning to it, which all must embrace. Singing the national anthem (kimigayo) and raising the sun flag (hinomaru) during school entrance and graduation ceremonies are typical examples.

Recent efforts to revise Japan's Basic Education Law also reveal restorationist impulses that are stirring again beneath the surface of conservative politics. The present Education Law, for example, was enacted in 1947, nearly two years after defeat, in reaction to Emperor Meiji's Education Rescript, which had disavowed universal ideals and promoted militarism, loyalty, and filial piety. In the current post-9/11 situation the two leading business federations (Keidanren and Doyukai) and the leading political parties blame the Education Law for the ills of society and seek to rewrite it along with the Constitution. Rather than address real economic problems and the dissolution of middle class social norms that lie behind the present tribulations of Japan's school system, conservative politicians pose as guardians of morality and rush ahead with revision schemes. [5]

The same restorationist inclination can be seen in the way some of Japan's elites cling to their old perceptions of the Japan-China War and Pacific War, ignoring differences with China and Korea. The behavior of Prime Minister Koizumi well illustrates the problem. Koizumi follows in the footsteps of former prime minister Nakasone, but unlike Nakasone he persists in visiting Yasukuni despite diplomatic protests and demonstrations in China and Korea. The postwar Yasukuni re-presents the prewar view of Japan's modern wars and actively combats the results of the Tokyo Trials. Thus Koizumi's visits highlight the gap in historical consciousness between Japan and the Asian neighbors it attacked and occupied during the first half of the twentieth century. His actions carry the danger of jeopardizing critically important economic ties. Were it not for the willingness of all sides to keep politics and economics separate, their respective nationalisms could narrow and spiral out of control. For Korea and China also remain locked into pre-World War II images of Japan.

In Japan neo-nationalist views of the lost war have moved into the mainstream, but public opinion remains divided over Koizumi's stand on official visits to Yasukuni, with more than half opposing them. At the same time, the public also strongly supports revision of the Imperial Household Law to accommodate a future female successor to the throne. Unfortunately, there has been no public debate, as yet, over far more fundamental questions: What is the relationship between the symbol monarchy and Japanese democracy in a time of rising nationalism? Should the monarchy, predicated on gender discrimination and inseparably connected with Yasukuni Shrine, be removed from the Constitution? Should it even continue to exist in the Twenty-First Century? If it should, then on what grounds, and at what cost to the constitutional rights and freedoms of imperial family members? [6]

Finally, if Japan is to protect its democratic institutions and rebuild political relations with China and Korea, then public debate over the Security Treaty with the United States must also be reopened, and the historical legacy of that military alliance reassessed to prevent Japan's Pentagon ties from undermining its democratic processes. Mass movements demanding the ouster of all U.S. bases on Japanese soil could stiffen the will of Japanese politicians and force them to place relations with Washington on a new foundation. For U.S. political elites seek to perpetuate Japan's energy dependency, limit its diplomatic options, and check its tendency to draw closer to its neighbors in an economic community that could be of benefit to all peoples of the East Asian region.

Notes

1. See Reiji Yoshida, "New Weapon Wielded in old tomb Debate," *The Japan Times* (June 4, 2005); Richard Lloyd Parry, "Guardians of Japan's Forbidden tombs Resist Bid to Dig Up Past," available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-1615280,00.html>
2. Umehara Takeshi, "Nihon no dento to wa nani ka," *Asahi shimbun, eiseiban* (May 17, 2005).
3. Asukai Masamichi, "Kindai tennozo no tenkai," in Asao Naohiro, et al., eds., *Iwanami koza, Nihon tsushi, kindai 2, dai 17 kan* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten,

1994), pp. 234-35.

4. Yoshida Yutaka, "Yasukuni jinja, gokoku jinja," in Yoshida Yutaka, Hara Takeshi, Iwanami tenno, koshitsu jiten (Iwanami Shoten, 2005), p. 324.

5. Sato Manabu, "Genba no mirai wa akenai," Asahi shimbun, eiseiban (March 30, 2003).

6. Okudaira Yasuhiro, "Ima koso 'tennosei' sonomono ni kokuminteki rongi o 'jotei' ronso ni igi ari," Shukan kinyobi, No. 545 (Feb. 18, 2005), pp. 12-13; Yasumaru Yoshio, "Seido sasaeru josei e fuka—kozoku no jiyu ya jinkaku keisei to wa," Asahi shimbun, eiseiban (Feb. 16, 2005), p. 13.

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