

The Emperor as the Mirror of Japan

Kobayashi Michinori

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the emperor decided to make a tour of the war-torn nation to give heart to his people, who had fallen into despair. He traveled throughout the land consoling the bereaved and the injured, comforting war victims and orphans, visiting with victims of the atomic bombings, speaking kindly to those who labored in the coal mines.

Thinking of my people,
touched by the calamity of war,
I traveled forth.

This poem by the emperor expresses the weight of his emotions at the time. His words and feelings comforted the Japanese and gave them hope for their country's future. As has often been noted, the emperor played a great role in Japan's postwar reconstruction.

I rejoice at the spirit of my people,
who come out to greet me,
forgetting their misfortunes.

Here we see a relationship in which the emperor's heart reflects the sorrows, the hopes, and the myriad other emotions of his people. The sorrows and hopes that radiate from the emperor's heart are, in turn, reflected by the people. This

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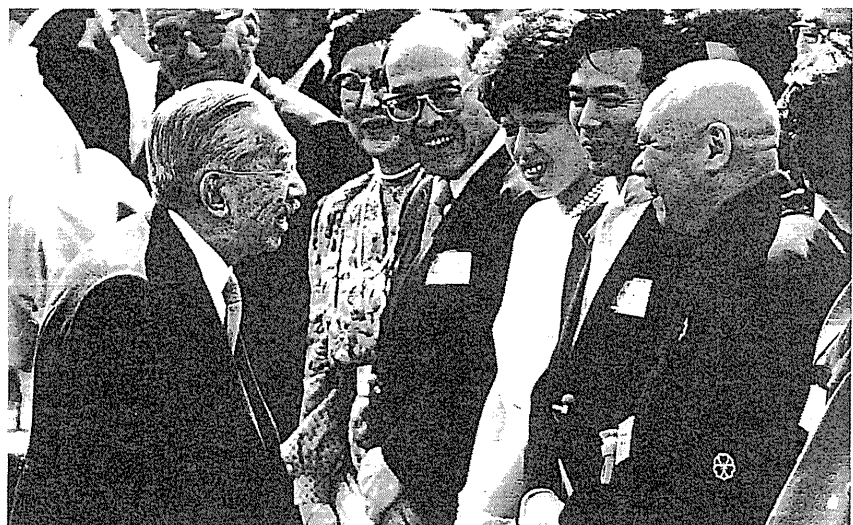
mutual reflection is at the core of the relationship between sovereign and subjects that has always prevailed in Japan.

The emperor as mirror

The emperor is a mirror reflecting every action, expression, and emotion of the people. When the people see themselves reflected in the emperor, they are united with him and with one another. The emperor, too, in mirroring the Japanese people, unites himself with them. In the emperor the many become one; the emperor, in turn, is manifested as the many. This relationship is evident at the various public events where the emperor speaks to representatives from different sectors of society and listens carefully to what each has to say.

This kind of communication, an imperial tradition since ancient times, is preserved in the annual New Year poetry gathering, when the emperor listens to the feelings of his people as expressed in verse and returns that spirit in poetry of his own. The ancient origins of this tradition are attested by the many imperial poetry anthologies over the ages, which include a wide variety of poems by people of every status, from the emperor himself to commoners.

Naturally, the emperor reflects not only the cultural aspect of Japanese society but its political and military aspects, as well. Many men of power have ruled the people, but the emperor has always been the spiritual source of government, keeping a paternal watch over it.



The emperor's annual garden party is an occasion for the monarch to mingle with representatives of various sectors of Japanese society. Here the emperor chats with Yanagiya Kosan (far right), one of the country's premier performers of the traditional comic art rakugo.

The Three Sacred Treasures, which have been guarded by every emperor since the age of the gods, are the mirror, the sword, and the jewel. The most important of these is the mirror. According to the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters; 712), the most ancient compilation of Japanese myth, legend, and history, the sun goddess and ultimate imperial ancestor, Amaterasu Ōmikami, presented the mirror to her grandson Ninigi no Mikoto with the words, "This mirror—have [it with you] as my spirit, and worship it just as you would worship in my very presence."* The emperor is the priest of the sacred mirror and, in a mystical sense, embodies it in his person.

The sword symbolizes the political and the military, or power, while the jewel symbolizes learning, the arts, and religion, or culture. The mirror reflects this diversity and creates unity out of it. Embodying the mirror as he does, the emperor also reflects politics, military affairs, learning, and religion—everything included in the Japanese people's way of life, which is to say, in Japanese culture. Thus the emperor unifies, symbolizes, and expresses Japanese culture as a whole.

The selfless emperor

If the emperor is a clear mirror that reflects everything, his spirit must be unclouded and selfless. This is a goal toward which the emperor, as a living being, must strive ceaselessly, polishing his spirit through spiritual training. Emperors

*Donald L. Philippi, trans., *Kojiki*, Tōkyō, University of Tokyo Press, 1969, p. 140.

down through the ages have done this by performing Shintō rites and by practicing the art of poetry.

This selfless spirit has been cultivated by emperors throughout history. A frequently cited example is that of Emperor Daigo (r. 897–930). One snowy night, thinking how cold the people must be, he removed his clothes and reflected on his subjects. Another example is the time Emperor Gonara (r. 1526–57), lamenting the social unrest and the raging epidemics of his day, copied the Heart of Wisdom Sutra at one sitting as a spiritual exercise and wrote at the end, "I am sorely pained because I am not clothed in virtue as the father and mother of my people."

The present emperor's decision to surrender in 1945 was another manifestation of the selfless impulse to succor the people regardless of personal cost.

Whatever may become of me,
I have halted the fighting.
I can think only of my dying people.

The same self-sacrificing spirit was manifested at the emperor's meeting with General Douglas MacArthur in September 1945, when he offered to bear all responsibility for the war and put his fate in the hands of the Allied forces, asking only that aid be provided for his starving people. Another expression of this compassion was the 33,000-kilometer nationwide imperial tour, carried out over a nine-year period, that the emperor himself proposed to give heart to the people.

Directly experiencing and transcending Japan's harsh fate before, during, and after the war, the

emperor revealed the pure, unclouded spirit of one who had approached spiritual enlightenment. This selfless spirit, like a clear mirror, is the spirit of the emperors through the ages.

Unifying the national will

The reason the emperor has the power to unify the will of the nation is that he fulfills the role of spiritual link between citizen and citizen. In this way the nation's integrity is preserved and its stability as a community ensured. The emperor is the basic principle of this stability.

The unified national will is not a conglomeration of arbitrary wills but a common will cultivated since ancient times, a will formed by language and customs, history and tradition, culture and religion. The emperor exists as the symbol of this common, or general, will. The late philosopher and cultural historian Watsuji Tetsurō aptly defined the emperor as the expression of the total will of the cultural community known as Japan.

The emperor's spiritual authority as the core of the nation has always been the basis on which those holding actual political power have been able to legitimize their rule and to govern. Historically, all efforts to usurp the emperor's position have come to naught because the emperor is not a ruler but a spiritual authority. The emperor's function of unifying the national will has persisted throughout Japanese history. Even in the period of warring provinces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the government was in disorder and the locus of political power was unclear, the emperor's function as the center of political life was preserved. Nor was it destroyed by the upheaval at the end of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) or Japan's defeat in World War II.

It is said that all governments, from the early rule of aristocrats through the warrior-class administration of feudal times down to the modern government that has prevailed since the Meiji era (1868-1912), have used the emperor for their own ends. Because the emperor, as the symbol of the general will of the community, unifies the people through spiritual authority alone, using him is both easier and more effective than overthrowing him. In a sense, even MacArthur utilized the emperor's authority for the Allied occupation. The reason the occupation policies succeeded almost too well is that the emperor system was protected, however minimally, so that the emperor was able to fulfill his function of unifying the nation.

Opponents of the emperor system attack it either as a feudalistic absolute monarchy or as a bourgeois regime; but the emperor system predates the feudal period, to say nothing of industrial bourgeois society. Those who attempt to overthrow the emperor system on such grounds will find that only their own theories are overthrown; the original emperor system will remain.

Dividing authority and power

As a nation Japan has traditionally maintained a two-tiered political framework in which the authority and power—or virtue and strength—necessary to the nation are split between the emperor and those holding political power. This is Japan's traditional form of government, and it did not change with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. In fact, the reason the Meiji government established a constitutional monarchy is that this system was compatible with Japanese tradition.

Constitutional monarchy began to take shape in the seventeenth century, principally in England, as a compromise solution to the conflict between royal authority and citizens' rights. As a result, both the monarch, the symbol of authority, and the government, the representative of political power, became subject to the law. Japan's traditional emperor system embodies a similar division between authority and power, but one that developed peacefully rather than through a struggle between the monarch and the people.

Because of the existence of an emperor who selflessly reflected the common will and who became the fulcrum of power in times of crisis, the nation as a whole never fell into complete disorder no matter how often the government changed. The almost bloodless revolt in 1867-68 that shifted the government from the Tokugawa shogunate to government by the allied Satsuma and Chōshū clans succeeded precisely because, in effect, the shogunate returned its power to the emperor and the Satsuma-Chōshū clique then received this power as supporters of the restoration of imperial rule. In this way, the emperor became the fulcrum of power, enabling a smooth transition. In Europe, where monarchies were constantly changing, this was rarely possible.

The emperor's function as the fulcrum of power in a crisis has played an important role throughout Japanese history. Examples that come to mind are the shifting of the capital to Nara in 710 and to Kyōto in 794; the Kenmu Restoration of 1333-36,

during the interregnum between the Kamakura and Ashikaga shogunates; the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the Meiji Restoration; the attempted coup by young army officers on February 26, 1936; and August 15, 1945, the day the emperor announced the decision to end World War II. During these crises the emperor came to the fore and assumed direct power.

Even the crisis of defeat in 1945 did not shake the imperial institution. Because implicit obedience to the emperor's will had been considered mandatory since ancient times, the nation was united, enabling the military to halt the fighting in an orderly fashion. At this time the emperor exerted an almost mystical authority.

It has often been asked why the emperor was unable to prevent the war even though he was opposed to it. At the outset of the war the will of the nation had already concluded that war was inevitable, and the emperor must always reflect the national will. The imperial rescript declaring war on the United States and Britain in December 1941 contains the words "This is not my desire," added at the emperor's request. This is the only expression of his private feelings. The emperor no doubt wished to abide strictly by the procedures of the Meiji Constitution, which had established a constitutional monarchy; but an even more fundamental factor was the deep-rooted traditional Japanese practice of letting the communal will decide.

Fairly early in its history Japan abandoned the theocratic form of government and divided the functions of religion and government, or authority and power. During crises these functions were temporarily reunited, but when the danger was past they were separated again. This recurrent pattern, which has enabled Japan to preserve its integrity and respond flexibly to circumstances, reflects the political wisdom of the Japanese people.

The emperor and Shintō

A major factor in the preservation of Japan's national integrity has been the emperor's performance of Shintō rites. Every emperor is a priest, praying to the Shintō deities for the peace and security of the nation and its people. At any nation's core, there must be something sacred. In Japan, ultimately, the sacred is preserved through the Shintō rites performed by the emperor.

Shintō is not so much a specific religion as a pure, clear locus that accommodates and reflects Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, even mod-

ern Western culture. The pure, clear spirit revered by Shintō is the locus of Japan's supple culture, where all things can coexist. Christianity, for example, spread at an astonishing rate when it was introduced to Japan in the mid-sixteenth century. Had it not been used to cloak Spanish and Portuguese territorial ambitions, Christianity in all likelihood would not have been prohibited and Japan would not have been closed to the West for 250 years.

The flexible Japanese psyche can assimilate anything. When modern Western culture encroached in the Meiji era, the Japanese accepted it with a naive wonder and curiosity. Even socialism and communism could be assimilated as long as they did not destroy the mirror that is at the center of the Japanese spirit; in the process they would doubtless be transformed into something characteristically Japanese.

In fact, at various times throughout the ages, emperors, even as they assiduously performed the Shintō rites, have patronized Buddhism as well: the six Buddhist sects of the Nara period (710-94), the Shingon and Tendai sects of the Heian period (794-1185), and the Zen sects of the Kamakura period (1185-1333). This is evidenced by the religious titles that have frequently been bestowed on high-ranking Buddhist priests by the emperor. In the same spirit, since the Meiji era the imperial family has adopted many of the customs of European royalty, providing a model for Japan's modernization.

The emperor is not simply a political entity but also—and even more—a cultural and religious entity that embraces a variety of religions and protects them impartially. In doing so the emperor, like a mirror, reflects both what is virtuous and what violates virtue, accepting all and reconciling their contradictions. The Shintō rites the emperor performs, being the wellspring of Japan's political, military, religious, and cultural being, are the most important means of preserving the integrity of Japanese culture.

The emperor's yearly cycle of rites begins with prayers offered to the four directions on New Year's Day. The emperor rises while the nation is still asleep, purifies himself, dresses, and, in the garden in front of a shrine in the Imperial Palace known as the Shinkaden, prays to the imperial ancestors and to the deities of heaven and earth in the four directions for the peace and security of the nation and the people.

The Kannamesai and Niinamesai are the most



The emperor plants seedlings in the palace rice paddy as part of the annual cycle of rites performed by the imperial household.

important of the annual Shintō rites performed by the emperor. In the Kannamesai, rice and other grains from that year's harvest are offered to Amaterasu Ōmikami at Ise Grand Shrine in Mie Prefecture, and thanks are given for the harvest. To this great festival the emperor sends an imperial envoy, through whom he offers the first fruits from the special paddy within the Imperial Palace grounds. Similar thanksgiving rites are also conducted within the Imperial Palace. In the Niinamesai the emperor not only offers newly harvested grain and gives thanks for the harvest but also partakes of the grain with the deities.

Secret rites

The Daijōsai, which takes place only when a new emperor has been formally enthroned, is a more elaborate version of the Niinamesai. The emperor is the highest Shintō priest, and the Daijōsai is the rite performed when this high priest takes office. In this sense, the emperor is a human being and at most the representative of the deities.

However, a more careful look at the Daijōsai indicates that it is also a rite in which the emperor becomes one with the imperial ancestors. Secluding himself in the innermost chamber of the Dai-

jōgū, a shrine specially built for the occasion in the Imperial Palace grounds, he receives the spirit of Amaterasu Ōmikami. Through this secret rite the spirit of Amaterasu is transferred to him, and he is reborn as the "scion of heaven."

Although the emperor is thus endowed with mystic qualities, he himself is clearly not a deity. The emperor's so-called declaration of his humanity, issued on MacArthur's demand, states that it was mistaken, during the militaristic period, to posit the racial superiority of the Japanese on the basis of the emperor's divinity. There is no declaration that the emperor is a human being, for as the priest to the Shintō deities, the emperor has always been human.

This "declaration of humanity," however, served as the starting point for the postwar "open court." The imperial family was gradually made over in the image of the ideal family of today's mass society as a result of postwar theories of a "democratic" imperial family. If this trend continues, it will inevitably lead to the cheapening of a precious institution.

It is true that every monarchy must be open to a certain extent, but there are also aspects that must remain closed. In addition to a human aspect, a monarch must possess a mystical aspect. In uniting with the people for the prosperity of the nation, the emperor must descend to the level of the people and become one with them. This is his human aspect. But being the most sacred element of the nation, he must of course have a mystical aspect as well. This sacred element is represented in the religious rites he performs and through which the integrity and continuity of Japan are safeguarded.

The disorder into which the imperial rites have fallen as a result of a liberal interpretation of the "open court" and the principle of separation of church and state is jeopardizing Japan's cultural integrity. The imperial rites and the myths that surround them are unscientific, to be sure, but they cannot be discarded simply for that reason. A nation must have myths. These myths preserve national integrity, and national integrity makes possible political and cultural richness and historical change. In Japan, it is the emperor—a mirror that both reflects and reconciles the culture's diversity and contradictions—who embodies the core of the nation's integrity. (Courtesy of Sankei Shimbun Sha)

Translated from "Kagami to shite no tennō," in Seiron, June 1986, pp. 60-69; abridged by about one-fourth.