

Status of Imperial family predates nation itself

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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Golden Week is coming up. And this year it really does look golden. It starts April 29 with Greenery Day, and if you just take off May 2 and 6 you'll get a full 10-day vacation!

A holiday on April 29 was originally held to celebrate the late Emperor Hirohito's birthday. It was renamed Greenery Day after he passed away, as he was an avid botanist.

As you know, until the end of World War II the emperor was considered a god. Even now, in spite of the Emperor's public declaration of his humanness, there is a certain god-like air about the Imperial family—reflected in how the Japanese people sometimes call the Emperor "the being above the clouds."

What makes this status possible? Let's look at things from the point of view of language.

The recorded ancestral roots of the Imperial family go back to the mythologies included in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. According to myth, they are descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu-omikami. She (or her spirit) is supposed to reside in the Ise Grand Shrines in my hometown, Ise, Mie Prefecture. The current emperor and family members make periodic visits to the shrines to pay their respects to her. Like Mecca for Muslims, Ise used to be, and still is to a certain extent, a place Japanese want to visit once in their lifetime.

Of course, historically, it seems obvious that the ancestral clan of the Imperial family gained power through religious, political and military struggles, presumably over hundreds of years, just like all leaders from the past.

Unfortunately, there was no Japanese writing system at the time—although the language itself did exist. So there is no written record of when the descents of today's Imperial family first consolidated power. The story of their struggles was instead handed down orally for generations. By the time these stories were written down in the 5th century A.D. (using kanji brought to Japan from China around that time), all the characters in the stories had taken on a mythological nature.

Contrast this with the "Three Kingdoms" saga of China. The acts of the numerous talented leaders in this sophisticated power struggle were precisely written down so that the characters remain almost purely as historical figures. Even if some of them are treated nowadays with respect at monuments, shrines and temples in China, they have little

chance of becoming gods.

Take Abraham Lincoln's status in the United States. He has an almost god-like authority to some Americans, and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. is not unlike a temple. Even so, he can never become a deity. One cannot be easily mythologized when so precisely documented.

Deities require mystery. Gods are gods only if something about them can never be proven scientifically or comprehended intellectually. Recorded in words, a thing becomes history. In Japan's case, the Imperial system and family predate the writing system, so their origins are lost in the dimness of a mysterious past.

Linguistically, Japanese retains a sense of the Imperial family's "specialness" through several traditions. For instance, it is something of a shock to many Japanese people, akin to blasphemy, to hear the emperor called "Emperor Hirohito" in English. This is, in part, because first names are seldom used even among common Japanese adults, let alone regarding the emperor. To these people he is Showa Tenno. You would no more call the late emperor "Emperor Hirohito" than you would call Queen Elizabeth II, "Queen Liz." Japanese emperors are usually referred to according to the pattern: reign period name + Tenno. The current period, Heisei, means something like "peace and accomplishment." So, the current emperor could be thought of as "The Emperor of the Period of Peaceful Accomplishment."

Obviously the mystery is being promoted—we have no name to refer to the "person."

What about Tenno? This term is used only to refer to Japanese emperors. All other emperors in the world, historical or living, are called Kotei, never Tenno. As *ten* means "heaven," Tenno can be interpreted as "Emperor from Heaven" or "Heavenly Emperor" (Because of this, Chinese people who understand the literal meaning of the kanji and get its direct impact sometimes feel the term has an arrogance to it.) Now considered to be in its 127th generation with the birth of a daughter to Crown Princess Masako three years ago, the Japanese Imperial family is one of the longest-lived Japanese institutions, predating, in some real ways, the nation itself.

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