

## Editor's Introduction

Peter NOSCO

In November of this year, more than twenty-two months after the death of his father, the Shōwa Emperor, in January 1989, the new emperor will participate in a sequence of ceremonial activities that will officially confirm and complete his imperial accession in Japan as the emperor of the current Heisei period. The most religious and in that sense "mysterious" of these ceremonies are those known collectively as the *daijōsai*, and it is these which are generating considerable controversy in Japan and internationally as this issue on "The Emperor System and Religion in Japan" goes to press.

The key issue in this controversy is deceptively simple and embarrassingly obvious: Why, if the emperor is not and does not regard himself as a divine descendant of the Shinto deity Amaterasu, should he participate in ceremonies which at least some believe will transform him into a living deity?

It certainly is not the intent of the authors represented in this issue to answer this question, but in soliciting for this special issue four articles by well-known Western scholars and in selecting for translation an additional four articles originally published in Japanese, I have sought to assemble pieces that will shed light on why the question is more complex and subtle than may at first be apparent. For the issues that arise in this regard in the late summer and early autumn of 1990 are fundamentally no less debatable than those issues that have surrounded the imperial institution since at least the sixth century.

The first two articles in this issue contextualize the emperor-system-and-religion-in-Japan problematic historically and conceptually. Sasaki Kōkan's lead article, "Priest, Shaman, King," articulates and outlines the major issues that arise when one attempts to assess comparatively the sacerdotal and numinous qualities of the emperor system. Sacral kingship, of course, is ancient and perhaps universal; it is also subdividable into categories according to when the divine monarch is believed to acquire his numinous properties. According to Sasaki (who follows Origuchi Shinobu in this respect), Japanese emperors are believed to begin life as wholly human entities to whom the imperial spirit later attaches itself and in whom it indwells; this, in turn, creates a new divine personage who stands midway between the traditional functions of the priest and the shaman, partaking of both roles but belonging wholly to neither.

Joseph Kitagawa's article, "Some Reflections on Japanese Religion and Its Relationship to the Imperial System," provides an excellent historical survey of the relationship between Japanese religion and the imperial system from earliest times to the present era. Kitagawa distinguishes in his analysis between "biographical" ("outsider") and "autobiographical" ("insider") perspectives on religious questions. Though the bulk of his article reflects the measured biographical objectivity characteristic of the entire corpus of Kitagawa's work, his autobiographical Epilogue (which begins on page 169) offers a number of fascinating insights with which even close followers of Kitagawa's work will likely be unfamiliar.

One reason why analyses of the emperor system in Japan have been so controversial is because emperors and their custodians have traditionally found it useful to exploit various modes of ambiguity surrounding the imperial person and his quasi government. Accordingly, where Japanese emperors are involved one finds a remarkable range of interpretive license surrounding even seemingly everyday matters, and the third article by Carmen Blacker ("The *Shinza* or God-seat in the *Daijōsai*—Throne, Bed, or Incubation Couch?") illustrates the range of interpretation applied to the analysis of just one piece of furniture (the *shinza* or "god-seat") that appears in the *daijōsai*. This bed-like furnishing stands literally in the center of each of the two halls where the *daijōsai* occurs, and yet it appears that no one actually knows what the purpose of the *shinza* is or has been. Blacker divides interpretations of the *daijōsai* into two broad categories: those that regard the ritual meal as the transforming

moment and those wherein the *shinza* plays a key role. She further subdivides the latter group into several interpretive strategies to which she adds her own: that the *shinza* was traditionally intended for the emperor to sleep upon and to have an incubatory dream from which he emerges in full possession of the divine spirit and soul.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth articles in this issue analyze various religious aspects of issues from the imperial history of Japan's ancient and medieval periods. Robert Ellwood's article, "The Sujin Religious Revolution," reexamines the well-travelled paths of *Nihon-shoki* historiography and finds evidence on the one hand for a radical reordering of ancient imperial reigns, and on the other hand, for a patriarchal religious revolution around the time of Emperor Sujin's reign. According to Ellwood, female deities and priestesses and a "horizontal" cosmology may have been replaced at this time by male deities and priests who ascended and descended between heaven and earth along a "vertical" cosmology. Then, in order to eliminate any record of this radical reordering, the sequence of imperial succession was modified within the official record. Though the issues will likely remain arguable, Robert Ellwood's analysis confirms that the ongoing reevaluation of Japan's pre-Asuka past and the nature of its belief system continues to take place within an arena of exceptionally lively debate.

Though the most immediate religious identification of the Japanese emperor system is with Shinto, there has been a less well known but historically no less important association with Buddhism. Janet Goodwin's article, "The Buddhist Monarch: Go-Shirakawa and the Rebuilding of Tōdai-ji," sheds important light on one facet of this Buddhist imperial aspect in medieval Japan. In her article Goodwin analyzes the nationwide alms-collecting (*kanjin*) campaign to reconstruct the Tōdai-ji, which had been damaged in the Genpei War. According to Goodwin, part of retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa's intention in leading the campaign was to project himself as the latter-day spiritual and political successor to the great monarch Emperor Shōmu of the mid-eighth century—a time when emperors in Japan ruled as well as reigned—and thereby to assert his own stature (and by association that of the imperial throne) vis-à-vis the ascendant *bushi* led by Minamoto Yoritomo. The campaign was a success, but as is well known Go-Shirakawa's attempt to reassert the priority of the throne was not; nonetheless, Goodwin finds in the

campaign important evidence of the unique national stature and presence of the emperor in late twelfth-century Japan—a status related to his manipulation of Buddhist symbols—despite his reduced role as a political actor.

The article by Kamikawa Michio, “Accession Rituals and Buddhism in Medieval Japan,” analyzes the highly elusive Buddhist ordination rituals of medieval Japan. According to Kamikawa, medieval imperial accession was incomplete until the emperor transformed himself first through the performance of a ritualized protocol involving secret *mudrā* and the recitation of *dhāraṇī*, and second by acquiring the restricted knowledge contained within a number of esoteric sutras. Here (as in the *daijōsai*) the orthodox interpretation requires that the emperor be perceived to have transformed himself rather than acknowledge the obvious dependence upon an external agent. If knowledge, virtue, and power may be regarded as the traditional components of authority, here we see knowledge of Buddhist “truths” used to amplify the spiritual authority of the medieval emperor system.<sup>1</sup>

The last two articles in this special issue engage issues from the early modern and contemporary periods. Miyazaki Fumiko’s article, “The Formation of Emperor Worship in the New Religions—The Case of Fujidō,” focuses on the eighteenth-century millenarian sect of Fujikō and its nineteenth-century descendant known as Fujidō. As Miyazaki demonstrates, the emperor was probably at best dimly regarded within pre-Meiji folk religion, but at least within Fujiko and Fujidō he was respected as “someone who put his own life at risk to influence the supernatural beings and avert natural calamities.” Later, under the authoritarian constraints of the Meiji government’s policies, Fujidō was obliged to insert emperor worship into its religious doctrine, an action whose repressive character Miyazaki suggests was concealed by enveloping it within the seemingly benign shroud of traditional folk religion.

The final article by Kurihara Akira, “The Emperor System as Japanese National Religion: The Emperor System Module in Everyday Consciousness,” originally appeared in one of Japan’s popular monthly magazines, *Sekai*. It thus is rather different in tone from

<sup>1</sup> As is well known, an important aspect of the authority of the medieval imperial court in Japan was its possession of esoteric traditions like the *Kokin denju* 古今伝授, secrets of the Way of Poetry.

the other articles in this issue, but it nonetheless is representative of a substantial corpus of popular contemporary thought on the subject of the emperor system and religion in Japan. Kurihara likens the emperor system to a form of political theater which survives only because its audience engages in that voluntary suspension of disbelief necessary for a successful dramatic performance. He further develops this metaphor by proposing that the emperor institution be thought of (borrowing the language of computer science) as a "module" which functions as a symbol system that may be styled "Japanese National Religion."

Ordinarily the *JJRS* has a section for reviews of recent scholarship, and this special issue likewise concludes with a review by Richard Gardner on Gary Ebersole's *Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan*.

---

I am immensely grateful to Paul L. Swanson and Edmund R. Skrzypczak, the editors of *JJRS*, first for kindly inviting me to guest edit this special issue, and then for giving so generously of their time both with the translation of the articles which originally appeared in Japanese and with the editing of those English-language articles which were solicited for this issue. Their expertise and skill have made my own task immeasurably easier and more pleasant.