

## Rites of Rule and Submission

*Interview with Odawara Norio*

*The illness and subsequent death of former emperor Hirohito in January 1989 initiated a growing movement in Japan to abolish the emperor system, a struggle that has joined activists, oppressed people such as resident Koreans and discriminated burakumin as well as "regular citizens" who felt their lives disrupted when the government announced an enforced period of mourning that effectively banned all forms of celebration during the period from the emperor's death to his funeral.*

*Odawara Norio is secretary-general of the Information Center on the Imperial Succession, or Joho Center, and has also been active in an anti-emperor coalition called the Kyodo Kodo. He was a participant in a caravan the group organized, a convoy that criss-crossed Japan, first from Tokyo northward to Hokkaido, and then down to the southern island of Kyushu and back toward the capital, stopping in towns and cities along the way to spread the message and the movement throughout the countryside. In this interview Odawara talks about the caravan and the meaning of the emperor system.*

**You were part of the caravan that drove around Japan. Could you tell us about that experience?**

This was the first mass action carried out by the anti-emperor system movement in Japan. Between 1945 and 1946 the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) did something like this, but only in Tokyo. We were the first to carry out this kind of action, going into the countryside rather than simply gathering in Tokyo. Unless we see the emperor system as something affecting our daily lives we will never be able to get rid of it.

It is, quite honestly, difficult for local people in the Japanese countryside to pass out flyers opposing the emperor system. It is also difficult for people in different regions to form links with each other. In Tokyo, you see, we have the Information Center on the Imperial Succession, and people in the countryside usually communicate with each other through this organization. The purpose of the caravan was to try to form horizontal ties between these movements.

For example, I participated in the caravan in Hokkaido, and when we were moving from Otaru

to Sapporo, the people from Sapporo came to welcome the people from Otaru, and the people from Otaru accompanied the caravan as far as Sapporo. In this way we were able to create some horizontal links.

The second goal of the caravan was, by carrying out this action in a very public way, to break the image that being involved in the anti-emperor system is frightening or somehow dangerous. We showed that it was alright to drive through a town with a truck carrying the banner, "Farewell Emperor," and thus gave people encouragement. We just drove around with seven or eight people on board, workers and students.

In the middle of the caravan, one 16-year-old girl joined us for about three or four days. There were a lot of young people.

**What kind of people were in the groups that received you in the different areas?**

First of all, we sent out letters asking people around the country to receive us. There were some places that initiated the process, but there were others in which we were the ones who did.

In the daytime we handed out flyers and information, and at night we held meetings and parties with the reception groups. In Otaru, for example, a citizens' group received us, and we held a meeting with about 40 people. They knew something of other groups through our newsletter, *Joho Center Tsushin*, but the meeting was their first chance to experience other movements in a personal way. Of course, the ups and downs of the movement in the big cities influence movements in the countryside, and this was also a chance for them to talk about the movements in the cities.

**What was the reaction like in the countryside?**

The reactions were very good. The people in the countryside didn't seem to be tired of getting flyers, as people are in the big cities, and they also signed petitions. The petitions in particular were a big boost for us, because people actually publicly state their names when they sign petitions.

The reaction of women was particularly good, especially from those in their 30s and 40s. Men seemed to be scared. In the meetings there were more men, but on the streets I was impressed by

## INSIDE JAPAN

This isn't to say that Akihito possesses actual power. He doesn't, but these rites create the ideology that there is a ruler/subject relationship and furthermore that this is a good thing. It isn't really for Akihito but creates very favorable conditions for Japan's power structure, including the business world. People see this as a virtue.

In the ceremony of the *Sokui-no Rei*, why do they dress in Heian Period (794-1192 A.D.) clothing? Up until the end of the Edo Period (1867) it was done in Chinese style. If one wants to use the word "tradition" for the present ceremony, it only really means a tradition of a hundred and twenty years. The *takamikura*<sup>3</sup> Akihito used was used previously only by emperor Meiji in 1867.

I am a specialist in ancient Japanese literature. In school history books, they only teach the ancient literature of the Heian period and make people think that is their culture. This policy has only existed since the Meiji period. Children are also taught they only have one single culture. They exclude any people who don't fit into this single culture, including resident Koreans and Ainu. The ceremonies they are holding now are symbolic of this policy.

**What was the reaction of non-Japanese living in the areas you went with the caravan?**

I can't accept Europeans and Americans

criticizing the emperor system without criticizing symbols of their own systems. That's because they criticize it as a thing of the past, but how is the U.S. flag any different from the Japanese emperor? But the Japanese should be very humble when dealing with other Asian people. We did terrible things to them during the war, and many Asian people who are attending the *Sokui no Rei* must have very complicated feelings about it. But they must attend the ceremonies because of the economic imbalances that exist between Japan and their countries.

Akihito has already succeeded to the throne, and this rite is to show the world that he is the emperor and therefore something above all other people. There is a famous anecdote that emperor Meiji stepped on a globe during his *Sokui no Rei*. This is the same thing. For this very reason I can't accept the emperor system.

### Note:

1. Imperial food offering ceremony performed at the beginning of an emperor's reign.
2. "National polity" used in the Meiji period to equate the nation with the emperor system.
3. A shrinelike structure that traditionally symbolized the status of the Emperor as a living got.



The caravan leaves Tokyo.

Rally on the day of the Enthronement Ceremony draws 2,000 to Tokyo's Yoyogi Park.



the reactions from women and elderly people. Many of the people who participated in some way or another were not activists but rather ordinary people. I think this has been a new movement style, where activism and a way of life haven't been clearly delineated.

People say that the citizen's movement is dead. I think it's a good thing, because rather than having thousands of people turn up to see famous people I would rather have a few be involved. Nowadays people are beginning to form movements in their own regions, at their own initiative, with their own methods. This is a change within the citizens' movement.

You see, the same people are carrying out the anti-nuclear and anti-emperor system struggles. This means, in effect, that they have changed their way of living. These are the kind of people who have received the caravan throughout the country.

**Why is it that the emperor system has become such a focal point now? Twenty years ago it wasn't so central.**

There are two reasons for that. The first is the fact that Hirohito died and that we were all able to feel how the emperor system interferes with our lives. Up until that time, we didn't really notice, or care one way or the other, but when Hirohito got sick and the television started carrying that all the time and we had the fuss about *jishuku* (an enforced period of mourning that started even before the death) then we started to feel it as an actual interference.

Also, the government is now talking about how the Japanese population is aging, complaining about high medical costs for older people, trying to raise taxes, and in the middle of that they spent so much money caring for Hirohito when he got sick.

The second reason is that the Left always perceived the emperor system as a problem of power or authority, but for ordinary people who don't even dream of taking power the emperor system seemed unconnected to their lives. But we kept insisting that the emperor system was something deeply tied to our lives.

**So do you think the anti-emperor system struggle will keep going after the *Daijiosai*<sup>1</sup> is over?**

The citizens' movement certainly has a tendency to go up and down, but it doesn't give up on things like the emperor system. As I said before, people have changed their way of living.

In small towns everybody knows who handed

out flyers asking people to come to the anti-emperor system meetings, and those people can't take back what they did. So this movement has become one with continuing prospects.

The Joho Center is also discussing what to do in the next two years, and we have just decided on meetings to continue our struggle until the emperor system is abolished. In the coming ten years the government is going to carry out many events to immerse people in the emperor system. For example, the former emperor's wife will die, the crown prince and his younger sister will have their wedding ceremonies, and there will probably be children, and the former emperor Hirohito's younger brother should die.

**Why are Japanese authorities so sensitive about the anti-emperor issue, more so than with other problems?**

That is because the police feel they must protect the emperor. Today's police are just like the police before the war. They believe the emperor is a god who lies at the center of Japan. We have the word *kokutai*<sup>2</sup>, and that really means that only the emperor lives.

Recently a Japanese magazine, *Bungei Shunju* published excerpts of things the former emperor Hirohito said after the war about what happened. He said it was important to protect the *kokutai*, but this really meant that if the emperor was saved the country would be saved. For that reason the police believe that getting rid of the emperor system is the same as destroying this country.

As far as the police are concerned, they don't care, for example, anti-nuclear power movement. Of course I'm not saying that for the power companies.

**Was there any reaction from the police or right-wingers during the caravan?**

No, there wasn't. The reason is that the right-wingers didn't want to have any trouble during these festivities, and the police also discouraged them.

**What was the authorities' intention in carrying out the *Sokui no Rei* (enthronement ceremony of the emperor) and *Daijiosai*, or what function do they fulfill?**

The *Sokui no Rei* and *Daijiosai* are ceremonies of rule and submission. They are declarations by Akihito that he is a ruler. And Prime Minister Kaifu, as the representative of the emperor's subjects, got up on stage and shouted, "banzai."