

Hirohito and the Declaration of Humanity

Portrayals of the Emperor in American Media

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During World War II, American journalists often wrote about Japan's idea of imperial divinity. American reporters portrayed Hirohito as the subject of intense worship, believing that the average Japanese citizen saw their emperor as a divine being in human form. On January 1, 1946, Hirohito issued a "declaration of humanity" (*ningen sengen*), rejecting the notion that the emperor was more than human. While this proclamation was quietly accepted in Japan, the American media eagerly spoke about the changing nature of Japanese divinity. The emperor, now human in the eyes of the world, was free to be viewed in a more mundane light. This led to a profoundly different portrayal in American media, as the reporters were now able to view and share information about Hirohito the man, instead of the divine emperor.

The emperor of Japan has historically been a key figure in Japanese religion. In the Shinto belief system, he is a "manifest deity" or "kami in human form" (*akitsumikami*).¹ *Kami* is perhaps best left in Japanese, as there is no clear English word to encapsulate the meaning. A 1943 article from *Foreign Affairs* explores the situation thusly:

They called the spirits *Kami*, a word which means powers above and beyond full human comprehension. These were personalized forces that governed the world – gods, if you like, although that word does not adequately translate *Kami*. Divinity is a better term, perhaps. And divinity was everywhere, in personalized form, but in different guise wherever it might appear. After that, we may assume, it was not difficult for the primitive philosopher to come to the conclusion that since divinity was everywhere, and he and all things were in touch with divinity, then all must be, in a sense, divine. A sort of pantheism? Yes, but it was something more. It was a conception of a universe fashioned and controlled by a divinity which manifested itself in personalized form.²

Hirohito, the fabled descendent of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, is indeed the supposed link between humanity and divinity, thus a *kami* in human form.³

¹ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 316.

² C. Burnell Olds, "Japan Harnesses Religion in the National Service," *Foreign Affairs* 21 (April, 1943), 536.

³ Olds, 536-537.

While some experts were aware of the distinction between *kami* and the Western notion of being a god, the average American at the time probably was not. While he was rarely referred to as a god outright, Hirohito was commonly termed the “Son of Heaven” in American newspapers and magazines. This similarity to an appellation for Jesus – “Son of God” – must have seemed perilously close to blasphemy to an audience full of Christians.⁴

Prior to America’s official involvement in World War II, American newspapers and magazines viewed the Japanese notion of divinity as a laughable curiosity. A *Life* article about Hirohito in 1937 bemusedly states “To Japanese he is, in all seriousness, a divine descendent of the Sun Goddess, the incarnate head of the Japanese divinity idea that makes the conquest of Asia a holy destiny for the Japanese race.”⁵ This initial amusement faded quickly after the bombing at Pearl Harbor and tensions between the United States and Japan escalated. Through the lens of war, the Japanese emperor’s god-like status seemed more sinister. “Shintoism is a cult,” a 1945 *United States News* story explains, “it has no religious content and has ethical content to the extent that it is designed to support the idea of the divine origin of the Emperor.”⁶

Nor was the American press content to leave Hirohito simply as a divine figure. The American newspaper and magazine writers constantly attempted to impress upon their audience the import of the Japanese emperor, resulting in even more far-reaching analogies. A 1945 article in *Life* says, “The Emperor of Japan is neither a man nor a ruler. Nor is he simply a god living in Tokyo. He is a spiritual institution in which center the energy, the loyalty and even the morality of the Japanese.”⁷ Another *Life* article, this one from 1940, proclaims, “[He is] *practically*

⁴ Dower, 309.

⁵ "Hirohito, Emperor of Japan, Calls His Reign Era of Radiant Peace," *Life*, December 6, 1937, 22.

⁶ Joseph Clark Grew, "Dual Role of Emperor," *The United States News*, August 17, 1945, 33.

⁷ "The Japanese Emperor is Japan," *Life*, August 20, 1945, 38D.

identical with the Sun. If you are Japanese, it actually hurts your eyes to look at the Emperor, just as it hurts your eyes to look into the blazing sun.”⁸ A 1945 *United States News* article quotes a “senior Japanese statesman” as saying:

The Emperor is to the Japanese mind the supreme being in the cosmos of Japan as God is in the universe of the pantheistic philosopher. From him everything emanates; in him everything subsists; there is nothing on the soil of Japan existent independent of him. He is the sole owner of the Empire; the author of law, justice, privilege and honor, and the symbol of the unity of the Japanese nation. He has no pope or archbishop to crown him at his accession. He is supreme in all temporal matters of state as well as in all spiritual matters, and he is the foundation of Japanese social and civil morality.⁹

By the end of the war, the American people had been bombarded with such images of the emperor. Not only was he a *kami* in human form, he was the sun and the earth to his people, the spirit of his nation incarnate.

There were exceptions to the rule, but they were rare. An oddly prescient example came in the form of a 1941 article in *Harper's Magazine* called “The Emperor Next Door.” In it, Willard Price describes the emperor as a simple man with a love of nature’s beauty:

He is a man of tastes that can be satisfied in a small garden or the waters beside it. I saw him once standing on the grassy point listening to the sounds of the village, turning his head in the direction of this sound or that as it dominated over the others. Only one whose own ego did not clamor could have enjoyed as he seemed to the low note of the Nichiren drum on the mountain side, the ‘Nat-to-o-o-o’ of the steamed-bean vender, the flutes of pilgrims, the distant chorus of his guardsmen in their barracks, and – most thrilling sound of all to the mood quiet enough to receive it – the crystal stair of song of the *uguisu*, Japanese nightingale, perched high in the pines over the tile roof of the palace.¹⁰

The article also describes the increasing divide between Hirohito the man and Hirohito the divine emperor. It says, “Within the palace garden, the Emperor is very human; outside, he is everyday

⁸ Ernest O. Hauser, "Son of Heaven," *Life*, June 10, 1940, 70.

⁹ "The Future of Hirohito: Why Emperor is Spared," *The United States News* (April 6, 1945), 19.

¹⁰ Willard Price, "The Emperor Next Door," *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1941, 121.

more of a god.”¹¹ Yet even this piece lacks any sort of intimacy. In the end, the emperor is described more like a caged bird than a whole and complete person. “Who knows whether the wistfulness of a peasant to look upon his Emperor is any more than the wistfulness of an imprisoned Emperor to walk among his people? Is the glamour that stirs in the imagination of a child standing outside the palace gate any more colorful than the Emperor’s dream of a world which he may never intimately know?”¹²

After Japan’s surrender in August, 1945, the status of the emperor was called into question. The debate about Hirohito’s role in a new regime had been hotly debated even before the war’s end, but one common idea was to strip the emperor of his divinity.¹³ A *United States News* piece from October, 1945 states, “The Son of Heaven, Hirohito, lost a good deal of his Shinto divinity when he rode out of his Tokyo palace on Sept. 26 and called on General Douglas MacArthur, his boss...The proposed reform of the Japanese constitution, which will be done under MacArthur, will probably demote Hirohito from the status of god and make him a constitutional monarch scarcely more powerful than the British king.”¹⁴

On January 1, 1946, the emperor issued an imperial rescript, which was printed in newspapers nationwide. The first part of the document was a reiteration of the 1868 Charter Oath, but tucked away at the end was a new passage:

I stand by my people. I am ever ready to share in their joys and sorrows. The ties between me and my people have always been formed by mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends or myths. Nor are they predicated on the false conception that

¹¹ Price, 120.

¹² Price, 117.

¹³ "Can Hirohito Help Us? Issue Delaying Peace Plans," *The United States News*, July 27, 1945, 13-14.

¹⁴ "Ex-God Descends," *Life*, October 24, 1945, 40.

the Emperor is divine, and that the Japanese are superior to other races and destined to rule the world.¹⁵

It is from this passage that the name “declaration of humanity” (*ningen sengen*) arose.

Later that day, General MacArthur commented, “The Emperor’s New Year’s statement pleases me very much. By it he undertakes a leading part in the democratization of his people. He squarely takes his stand for the future along liberal lines.”¹⁶ The American press was equally enthusiastic. *Christian Century* ran an editorial two weeks later reflecting on the current state of affairs:

Before the war, few people in Western countries took seriously the Japanese myth that the reigning emperor was a god. To them it was simply incredible that a nation as modern as Japan seemed to be could nurture at the heart of its national life a fable so fantastic. But the Japanese soldier put an end to this skepticism...His conduct on a thousand battlefields left no doubt that the average Japanese accepted the emperor as divine. The emperor and not an elected assembly was the source of temporal power. He was not only the spiritual center of the state; he was the physical incarnation of Japan in this life, and in the life to come its protector. Now all that is gone.¹⁷

The Nation praised it as a shrewd political move saying, “Far-sighted conservatives have recognized that unless the throne is disassociated from the oligarchy, and brought much closer to the people it may eventually bear the brunt of the democratic attack which is now in preparation. A constitutional monarch in tweeds makes a much smaller target than a divine-right monarch in uniform.”¹⁸

In Japan, however, this proclamation was less than revolutionary. Perhaps this was due to a fundamental misunderstanding about Hirohito’s divine status. While he certainly was meant to encapsulate both abstract concepts and a real sense of humanity, how literally that dichotomy

¹⁵ Dower, 314.

¹⁶ Stephen S. Large, *Emperor Hirohito and Shōwa Japan: A Political Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 147.

¹⁷ "Japan's God Abdicates -- to Whom?" *The Christian Century*, January 16, 1946, 70.

¹⁸ "Emperor Hirohito's Denial of His Own Divinity," *The Nation*, January 12, 1946, 15.

was internalized is essentially unknown. As Takeshi Fujitani writes in his book *Splendid Monarchy*, “[He was] thus emperorship as well as emperor, mystical but palpable, transcending and yet directing, divine but human, and exempt from all human failings but responsible for all national accomplishments. The emperor’s dual nature [was] logically difficult to sustain.”¹⁹ While Americans believed the Japanese tended toward viewing the emperor as divine, it is not unreasonable to assume that they might have viewed him as more human. As Stephen Large’s biography of Hirohito states, “Whether the Japanese were much impressed by this renunciation was doubtful. Few of them had seen the Emperor as a god in any Western, Christian sense; worship of the Emperor had always been little more than a formal act of profound respect for a higher religious authority.”²⁰

The rescript itself might also explain why its reception in Japan was underwhelming. The compound used in the rescript to express the divinity of the emperor was *akitsumikami*. While this was not an altogether unfamiliar word, it was far from a commonly used term. When the draft of the rescript was presented to the cabinet on December 30, it was necessary to have the phonetic readings (*furigana*) of the term written out so the ministers could interpret the reference.²¹ If some of the most educated men in Japan needed prompting to understand it, it is unlikely that the average Japanese citizen was able to grasp the full implications of the term.

While the English version of the rescript was relatively straightforward, the Japanese one was somewhat obscure. The emperor purportedly was in favor of the rescript in theory, but he was uncertain why he was being asked to deny a divinity he had neither emphasized nor maintained.

¹⁹ Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 159.

²⁰ Large, 148.

²¹ Dower, 316.

²² The idea that he was a divine being is one with which he had reportedly never agreed, as he had actively questioned the idea during his childhood.²³ While the emperor himself was willing to renounce his divinity, others were less enthusiastic about the idea.

Deputy Grand Chamberlain Michio Kinoshita wrote of the editing process, “It may be permissible to say that the idea that the Japanese people are descendents of the gods is false but we cannot allow it to be said that the idea that the *emperor* is a descendant of the gods is false. So on my own initiative I decided to change the statement to say that it is a false concept to say that the emperor is a living god.”²⁴ Other accounts attribute this crucial change to the emperor himself, as in this passage from John Dower:

The emperor was willing to deny that he had ever been a ‘god’ in the Western sense or even in the more ambiguous Japanese sense, but he was unwilling to deny that he was a descendent of the sun goddess as the ancient eighth-century mytho-histories [the Kojiki and the Nihongi] had set forth, as the Meiji emperor’s own constitution had proclaimed, as the entire cycle of rituals he performed as a Shinto high priest had indicated, and as twentieth-century ideologues had reiterated ad nauseum.²⁵

This semantic change has drawn a lot of criticism in recent years. As Herbert Bix wrote in his biography of the emperor, “Hirohito’s failure to deny his reputed descent from the sun goddess, Amaterasu Ōmikami, stands out.”²⁶ Daikichi Irokawa commented, “Can this statement truly be called a declaration on being human?”²⁷ At the time, however, these questions were unasked and somewhat unnecessary. The declaration of humanity was intended to read differently for two

²² Kiyoko Takeda, *The Dual-Image of the Japanese Emperor* (New York: New York University, 1988), 117.

²³ Edwin Hoyt, *Hirohito: The Emperor and the Man* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 37.

²⁴ Daikichi Irokawa, *The Age of Hirohito*, trans. Mikiso Hane and John K. Urda (New York: Free Press, 1995), 127.

²⁵ Dower, 315.

²⁶ Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 561.

²⁷ Irokawa, 127.

distinct audiences. For the international readers of the rescript, it was intended to be a sign of a former 'god' stepping down from his original pedestal. For the Japanese, the implications were a little more subtle. The combination of the declaration of humanity and the Charter Oath were meant to, in the words of Large, "enhance the position and person of the Emperor as a secular sovereign. In short the rescript was seminal in promoting the new image of a 'human emperor' (*ningen tennō*)."²⁸

His new role as a man of the people was a thorough exercise in public relations. According to Meirion and Susie Harries, authors of *Sheathing the Sword*:

A stream of endearing facts issued from the Palace: the Emperor limits himself to four cigarettes a day, the same ration as his people; the Emperor only eats rice once a day because of national shortages; the Emperor refused to give up his golf in the teeth of the militarists' ban on all alien sports. "His collection of sea shells is...one of the most complete in existence. For another thing, it isn't everyone who can take a fan between his toes and fan himself. Not only can the Emperor Hirohito perform this stunt, but he is able to do so whilst swimming. He can also swim in the rain holding an open umbrella in one hand."²⁹

His new down-to-earth portrayal resulted in a new form of speech about the emperor. For the first time the emperor openly bore the brunt of his nation's dirty jokes. For example, *chin* was a term the emperor used in speeches to refer to himself; differently inflected, it was a word for penis. Thus, the joke went, "If Japan is a human body, MacArthur is the navel. Why? Because he is situated above the *chin*."³⁰

On the American side, the papers and magazines immediately began releasing information to the American public about Hirohito's softer side. *Life*'s February 4, 1946 issue contained an article named "Sunday at Hirohito's", with pictures of the emperor eating with his family,

²⁸ Large, 148.

²⁹ Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *Sheathing the Sword: The Demilitarisation of Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 83.

³⁰ Harries & Harries, 83.

inspecting samples in his biology lab, watering some house plants, and even reading the “funnies” in the newspaper with one of his children. The magazine seemed none too happy about it. “The not very subtle purpose of the Jap imperial household is to present Hirohito as a democrat, father, grandfather, citizen and botanist.”³¹ The final, full-page image of the article is truly the *pièce de résistance*, depicting the emperor in a cozy armchair reading a newspaper near his “celebrated” busts of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln.³²

With time, the perceived absurdity of these images was eventually accepted as status quo. Even *Life*, the very magazine that had derided the staged and insincere nature of the 1946 photos, enthusiastically published images of Hirohito’s first ride in an airplane in 1954.³³ A 1964 *Life* special issue on Japan had only a few brief pages devoted to Hirohito. The theme? “A gentle ruler and his wife go on a search for shellfish.”³⁴

The emperor waded happily into the pools left in the volcanic rocks by the falling tide. While his chamberlains maintained a respectful distance, he and the Empress searched the bottom. Soon he found a starfish. “What is it?” asked the Empress. He showed it to her and then moved on in his search. They found a heavy piece of wood lodged in the rocks and turned it together. Then they found an inert *umi ushi*, which literally means sea cow, a rocklike creature shaped like a potato. The Emperor, who has written a book on the variety of mollusks to which *umi ushi* belongs, observed, “This is an easygoing chap, not in the least bit alarmed at being caught.” The Empress laughed in delight and they went home.

This sort of informal view of the emperor was unheard of before and during World War II, when Hirohito was still a divine being. Few authors would have dreamed of portraying the emperor as an ordinary man. Even after the declaration of humanity, the image of the wartime Son of Heaven was fresh in many people’s minds. But as time progressed, the staged photos

³¹ “Sunday at Hirohito's,” *Life* (February 4, 1946), 78.

³² “Sunday at Hirohito's,” 79

³³ “Hirohito Submits to the Air Age,” *Life*, September 13, 1954, 67.

³⁴ “The Emperor,” *Life*, September 11, 1964, 45.

began to seem more sincere; the canned press pieces, more candid. Eventually Americans came to accept Hirohito really was a man, not the “god” of previous depictions.

In the words of historian John Dower, the *ningen sengen* was “hailed by the Americans and British...a clear sign that [the emperor] had sincerely repudiated the pretense to divine descent that had constituted the core of prewar emperor worship.”³⁵ However, Dower is skeptical of the rescript’s importance. He believes it “fell considerably short of being the sweeping ‘renunciation of divinity’ Westerners wishfully imagined it to be.”³⁶ Dower also believes the statement was issued to “defuse the question of imperial divinity for foreign consumption.”³⁷ He writes, “It essentially amounted to little more than a semantic game to satisfy the Westerners. He was never a ‘god’ in the Western sense of omnipotence and omniscience, he argued when the issue arose late in 1945, nor was he ever a *kami* or ‘deity’ as Japanese understood this admittedly ambiguous concept.”³⁸ Other modern historians have expressed similar views. Herbert Bix believes that Hirohito primarily “found the myth of the living god to be helpful for amplifying his voice in the policy-making process and for strengthening loyalty to himself in the military.”³⁹ He also writes that the rescript allowed the emperor to “downplay, without ever explicitly repudiating, the Shinto foundation myths that, in any event, few Japanese still believed.”⁴⁰

Depictions of Hirohito before the end of World War II portrayed a divine being, more god than man. Some articles even went so far as to claim he was more than a leader, more akin to the

³⁵ Dower, 308.

³⁶ Dower, 308.

³⁷ Dower, 310.

³⁸ Dower, 314.

³⁹ Bix, 294.

⁴⁰ Bix, 561.

sun and the earth to his people. It is unclear to this day how much of the Japanese monarchy's divine heritage was actually relinquished through the *ningen sengen*, something totally lost on the American audience. To the Japanese readers of the rescript, the overall effect was one of creating a *ningen tennō*, an emperor of the people. To the American readers, by contrast, it showed the emperor giving up his divine title in order to appease the international audience. American writers were initially skeptical of this abrupt change from god-like emperor to average man, but with time even they warmed to the image of a family man. In this respect, the *ningen sengen* helped the world embrace Hirohito as a man like any other.

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