Abdication, Succession and Japan’s Imperial Future: An Emperor’s Dilemma

John Breen

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Abstract

On 30 April 2019, 86-year old Emperor Akihito 明仁 made history. He became the first emperor in 200 years to abdicate, yielding the throne to his son. The trigger for this historic moment was an extraordinary event that took place three years earlier. In August 2016, the emperor appeared on NHK and all TV channels to address the nation. His purpose? To intimate his desire to abdicate. Abdication rumors had been circulating for some weeks, but his address dispelled all doubt. An address of this sort was quite without precedent. The Constitution requires that succession to the throne accord with the Imperial Household Law of 1946, but that law does not recognize abdication. The emperor was thus challenging the law. The challenge, however circumspect, was a political act, and political acts are not permitted him under the Constitution. It is little wonder that he caused a stir; it is no less than remarkable that he got his way.

The emperor’s TV address, watched by some 12% of the population, triggered a national debate that led to Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s government enacting a special abdication bill, which became law in June 2017. It was this bill that enabled Akihito to abdicate, yielding the throne to his son. Emperor Akihito raised fundamental questions about the role of the emperor in 21st Century Japanese society. What are emperors for? What is their place in contemporary Japan? What, indeed, are their future prospects?

Key Words Emperor Akihito, Emperor Naruhito, abdication, Nippon Kaigi, Kobori Keiichirō, Murata Haruki, Abe Shinzō, Sun Goddess, Ise Shrines, senso, sokui, daijōsai

Introduction

On 30 April 2019, 86-year-old Emperor Akihito 明仁 made history. He became the first modern emperor to abdicate. Indeed, his was the first abdication since that of Emperor Kōkaku 光格 over two centuries before in 1817. By the same token, the succession of Akihito’s 59-year-old son, Crown Prince Naruhito 徳仁 on 1 May was an historic moment. For he was the first in modern times to succeed to the throne while his father was alive and well. The trigger for all these firsts was an extraordinary event that took place nearly three years before. On 8 August 2016, Emperor Akihito appeared on NHK and all other TV channels to address the nation. He gave an understated but riveting performance. Speaking of his advanced years and the growing burden of his duties, he intimated his desire to abdicate. Abdication rumors had been circulating for some weeks, but his address dispelled all doubt. An address of this sort was quite without precedent. The Constitution requires that succession to the throne accord with the Imperial Household Law of 1946, but that law does not recognize abdication. The emperor was thus challenging the law. The challenge, however circumspect, was a political act, and political acts are not permitted him under the Constitution. It is little wonder that he caused a stir; it is no less than remarkable that he got his way.
contemporary Japan, and what are their future prospects? This article sets out to explore precisely these questions. The place to start is that August 2016 address.

1. The Emperor’s Words: O-kotoba

The emperor began by framing his reign as a personal search for meaning. He had dutifully carried out the “acts of the emperor in matters of state” as stipulated in Article 7 of the Constitution. These include convocation of the Diet, dissolution of the House of Representatives, attestation of ministerial appointments, awarding of honors, and so on. However, he had “spent [his] days searching for and contemplating on” the meaning of Article 1’s designation of him as “symbol of the State and of the unity of the people.” The Constitution, after all, fails to elucidate what action is required of, or indeed permitted to, a “symbol of the State.” The emperor’s search led him to conclude that he must serve as “an active and inherent part of society, responding to the expectations of the people.”

What matters, he said, is to “stand by the people, listen to their voices, and be close to them in their thoughts.” Many of those who tuned in to his eleven-minute broadcast must have cast their minds back to the visits he made with the empress throughout Japan, especially in times of national crisis. Never was the emperor closer to the people than in 2011 after the Great East Japan earthquake. Historically a distant figure, he made a powerful TV appearance after the disaster struck, articulating his concerns, offering solace and hope.4 He and the empress visited survivors in Saitama, Chiba, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Iwate, Fukushima, and Tochigi prefectures, and, of course, in Tokyo, too.5 In his August 2016 broadcast, the emperor left no doubt that such active devotion to the Japanese people was his calling. It was demanded of him, he believed, as “symbol of the State.”

It was at this point in the broadcast that the emperor broached his dilemma. What to do when an emperor has become too old to serve the people? He acknowledged, only to dismiss, the constitutional answer: the appointment of a regent. A regency was, in his view, no solution. For when an emperor ceases to serve the people, he no longer functions as symbol. His role is done, and he must step down. Emperor Akihito intimated that stepping down was, indeed, his intention. He was especially concerned lest he become a burden to the people. He was thinking ahead here to his own death, and to the “heavy mourning” that would endure for months were he to die in situ as emperor. If he gave up the throne, he would inconvenience no one; his son Naruhito would succeed him, and continue the vital work of public service uninterrupted. Such was his “earnest wish.” Emperor Akihito concluded with a plea to the people of Japan: “I sincerely hope for your understanding.”6 Nowhere in his address did the emperor deploy the word “abdication,” but this was the radical solution he offered.7
2. Abdication

Emperor Akihito’s address was more than an appeal for understanding: it was a personal challenge to the law, and a call for critical reflection on the role of the emperor in the 21st Century. It was undeniably political. During his thirty-year reign, the emperor made several statements freighted with political meaning. In 2001, he declared “a certain kinship with Korea” on learning that the mother of Emperor Kanmu桓武, the 8th Century founder of the city of Kyoto, was descended from Korean immigrants. In 2004, he said it was desirable not to compel Japanese school pupils to sing the national anthem. In 2009, he reflected that the monarchy under the 1946 Constitution was closer to Japan’s “traditional model” than it had been under the 1889 Constitution. The 1946 Constitution, he implied, was more appropriate for the 21st Century. Likewise, in 2013, he praised the postwar Constitution for laying the foundations of peace and democracy. These issues – relations with Korea, the anthem and the Constitution – were all, to differing degrees, political. The emperor’s statements were political interventions, but he had never before questioned the law. Nor, of course, had he played any role in fashioning the law.

What did the Japanese people make of it all? The Yomiuri newspaper, Japan’s best-selling daily, conducted an opinion poll three days after the national TV broadcast and found that it had won the approval of 93% of the population. This figure was reflected in other media surveys. The Asahi reported that 84% supported abdication, while 5% opposed it. The Mainichi survey yielded a somewhat lower 67% approval rating, but it rose to 84% in a second survey. Of those polled by the Kyōdō news agency, 86% approved changing the law to allow abdication. In any case, it was abundantly clear that the emperor’s wish to abdicate accorded with the “will of the people,” albeit after the fact. This degree of popular support was little cause for surprise, given the consistently high ratings the emperor and empress had enjoyed in recent years, especially since the disaster of 2011.

What is interesting is the reaction of ultra-conservative groups, the self-appointed guardians of Japan’s imperial legacy. The most vociferous among them today is Nippon Kaigi日本会議 (Japan Conference; hereafter NK). This is a powerful group, whose board features many Shinto religious leaders. The chief priests of the Ise Shrines, the Yasukuni Shrine, and the Meiji Shrine are among them. But NK matters because Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and the majority of his cabinet are members. How did NK respond to the emperor’s address? NK was swift to deny press reports that it was “vigorously opposed” to abdication, but statements by key NK members suggested otherwise. The most articulate among them was Kobori Keiichirō小堀桂一郎, emeritus professor of Tokyo University and incumbent NK Vice-Chairman.

PM Abe Shinzō addressing Nippon Kaigi’s 20th anniversary gathering, 27
Kobori was “confused” by the emperor’s pressing the government to take extra-constitutional measures to satisfy his personal wishes. He wondered at the government’s apparent compliance, and was dismayed at the precedent set, namely of an emperor successfully challenging the Constitution. For Kobori and his colleagues, however, the real issue lay elsewhere, in the nature of emperorship. Is it really necessary, asked Kobori, for the emperor to engage in those actions that he finds so meaningful? Kobori’s answer was no. “Symbol of the state,” he argued, does not require social engagement from the emperor. That the emperor’s age rendered him no longer able to serve the people was, therefore, no reason for him to abdicate. Kobori blamed the American makers of the “anti-kokutai Constitution” for creating confusion about the emperor’s role.

Other NK members were less measured. Murata Haruki authored an extraordinary opinion piece in the journal Seiron in October 2017. His critique of Emperor Akihito makes for fascinating reading. Murata saw the emperor’s wish to abdicate as symptomatic of his failure to appreciate the unique nature of Japanese emperorship. The emperor cannot refer to himself as an individual, as he did in the broadcast, since he is semi-divine; he has no need for popular approval, since he is neither politician nor performer, but descendant of the Sun Goddess; and he has no business appearing on TV to address the people; it is his ancestors – the Sun Goddess and the first emperor Jinmu above all – whom he should be addressing. Murata found, moreover, that Emperor Akihito had breached the Constitution on three counts: 1) he had failed to consult the will of the people before taking action; 2) he was responsible for the fact that an abdication bill – not the Imperial Household Law – would determine succession for the first time ever; and 3) as a consequence, he had effectively exercised legislative power. All of this, asserted Murata, was “blatantly in breach of the Constitution.”

Nippon Kaigi is, in fact, divided over the abdication issue, but it is clear that what matters to Kobori, Murata and their fellows is not the person of the reigning emperor, nor the Constitution, but the unbroken imperial line that began, so they believe, with the Sun Goddess. Emperor Akihito’s words and actions constituted a threat to their view of emperorship. Clearly, if an emperor can change the rules of succession on a whim, the myth becomes untenable. What then would they and their allies have had the emperor do? On the specific issue of succession, they wanted him to hand the burdensome tasks over to a regent, and stay put. As a general principle, emperors should abstain from the sort of public service in which Emperor Akihito found meaning. They should instead remain within the walls of the palace, perform their acts “in matters of state,” and otherwise devote themselves to prayer.

Emperor Akihito was clearly not averse to praying. Indeed, he stressed the importance of prayer twice in his TV address. “The first and foremost duty of the Emperor,” he insisted, “is to pray for peace and happiness of all the people.” He reflected further that it was always incumbent on him to “think of the people and pray for the people, with deep respect and love for the people.” But for him, prayer alone was never sufficient. The NK position, by contrast, is that “symbol of the State” means precisely the emperor’s performance of prayer at the shrine-complex within the Tokyo palace. The complex in question, built in 1888, is known as the kyūchū sanden, and as the name suggests, it comprises three sites. There is a central shrine for the Sun Goddess (the kashikodokoro), which is flanked by the kōreiden, a shrine dedicated to the
imperial ancestors (the spirits, that is, of all deceased emperors since the time of the mythical Emperor Jinmu), and by a shrine for the myriad gods of heaven and earth (the shinden 神殿). It is worth noting in passing that the rites which Akihito and his father before him performed at the shrine-complex since 1945 are precisely those of prewar Japan; they differ only in that they are private, and no longer public, events.

There is every reason to believe that Prime Minister Abe shared the concerns of his fellow NK members. He appears to have known of the emperor’s wishes since the autumn of 2015, but denied him permission - or so it is claimed - to raise the matter at his birthday press conference in December that year. The emperor’s frustration grew thereafter, and in July 2016, he had the Imperial Household tell NHK of his wish to abdicate. NHK informed the nation in a broadcast on the night of 13 July, and this paved the way for the emperor’s address on 8 August.\(^{21}\) Opinion polls quickly made it clear that a large majority of Japanese were sympathetic to the emperor; the broadcast and print media generated support and sustained interest. The prime minister had no choice but to act.

The choice facing Prime Minister Abe was between a change to the Imperial Household Law, allowing abdication for all future emperors, and the enactment of an abdication bill, applicable to Emperor Akihito alone. The emperor was known to favor the former; the prime minister would only countenance the latter. He moved swiftly to appoint a council of experts to advise him. Over a six-month period starting in autumn 2016, he consulted twenty experts, eight of whom were affiliated with, or openly sympathetic to, NK.\(^{22}\) Their final report recommended the enactment of a one-off abdication bill. The bill was duly drafted and approved by the Diet.

### 3. Succession

Emperor Akihito was reportedly shocked by the criticism leveled at him by certain experts during the consultation period, and he was displeased, too, with the compromised outcome.\(^{23}\) Still, it rendered abdication possible for the first time in 200 years. The emperor duly abdicated on 30 April 2019 in a brief rite in the Matsu no Ma 松の間 chamber of the palace.\(^{24}\) He stood with the empress before an audience of some 300 dignitaries. Prime Minister Abe faced them, and delivered a short speech, expressing his respect and gratitude for the emperor’s reign on behalf of the Japanese people. The emperor responded by articulating his love and respect for the people of Japan. He thanked them for supporting his symbolic role, and concluded with a prayer that the new Reiwa 令和 era might be one of peace and happiness.\(^{25}\)

Then, at 10.30 am on 1 May, Crown Prince Naruhito received the sword and jewel of the imperial regalia in the very brief rite known as kenji tō shōkei no gi 剣璽等承継の儀.\(^{26}\) This regalia transfer took place in the same Matsu
no Ma chamber in the presence of the prime minister, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the Lower House and the president of the Upper House, among others, and was an entirely male affair. In line with prewar practice, the participation of the empress and the many other female members of the imperial family was not permitted. After the transfer of regalia, the emperor proceeded directly to the palace shrine-complex to inform the Sun Goddess and his ancestors of his succession. In a third ritual phase, Emperor Naruhito, accompanied now by the empress, returned to the Matsu no Ma to receive the heads of the three branches of government and some 250 dignitaries, and deliver his inaugural address to the nation.

Here, he spoke of his deep respect for his father and mother for their unwavering devotion to the people. He, for his part, promised to think always of the people and be with them.

He committed himself to fulfilling his constitutional role as symbolic emperor, and prayed for peace.

On 4 May, members of the general public were admitted to the palace grounds, and the emperor and empress appeared on the veranda of the Chōwaden building to greet them. The emperor thanked the public for their felicitations, and expressed his wish that Japan might work with other nations to promote peace in the world. On 22 October, the emperor and empress ascended their respective thrones before an assembly of dignitaries, Japanese and foreign, in the rite known now as the Sokui sei den no gi 即位正殿の儀 enthronement rite. In his brief address, Emperor Naruhito pledged to act according to the Constitution, “while always wishing for the happiness of the people and the peace of the world, turning my thoughts to the people and standing by them.” The afternoon parade, in which emperor and empress were to ride in an open-top car west through the city to Akasaka, was postponed out of consideration for the victims of the recent typhoon, and was re-scheduled for 10 November. The abdication, regalia transfer and enthronement were held as “acts in matters of state.” It is worth pointing out that, although they are broadly secular in nature, they are not entirely so. At the very least, the sword and the jewel that featured in all three rites are sacred objects, and are treated as such. According to Japan’s seventh century state foundation myths, they, along with a sacred mirror, were handed by the Sun Goddess to her grandson before he descended to earth. These objects are testament, in other words, to the sacred nature of Japanese emperorship.

The climax of the enthronement sequence is indisputably sacred in character. This is the daijōsai 大嘗祭 or “rite of great feasting,” which took place on the night of 14-15 November. A complex of wooden buildings, featuring two main pavilions (the Yukiden 悠紀田 and Sukiden 主基田), was erected on the palace grounds. Both pavilions were furnished with bed and shroud to welcome the Sun Goddess. Two different districts of Japan – the Yuki field in Tochigi Prefecture to the east of Tokyo and the Suki field in Kyoto to the west – supplied the rice and millet for feasting. In each pavilion, the emperor offered the Sun Goddess meals of rice and millet and rice wine, before partaking of them himself. He emerged at dawn on November 15, transformed by his mystical communion with his ancestress. The process of emperor making was now complete.

This enthronement sequence – regalia transfer, enthronement and daijōsai – is of great vintage. In some form or other, the rites can be traced back to the 7th Century. They have played a vital role in producing and reproducing Japan’s emperor-centered order for over a millennium. The daijōsai, in particular, has undergone multiple interpretations over time, and its mise-en-scène has changed drastically, too. Only in modern times has it been regarded as the most important of the three
enthronement rites, and this is because it was interpreted now as the ultimate act of imperial piety. It served, by the same token, as dramatic proof that the emperor was indeed descended from the Sun Goddess. It was for this reason that the modern daijōsai as performed by the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa emperors were staged as truly national events; they sought to engage the whole of Japan and, indeed, the empire with the imperial myth.

Emperor Akihito’s daijōsai, the first in the postwar era, took place on the night of 22-23 November 1990. It had the distinction of being the first ever to cause legal controversy. The controversy and its resolution deserve to be more widely known. Articles 20 and 89 of the Constitution provide for the separation of state and religion. And yet, the state funded the daijōsai, which is “religious” to the extent that it features the Sun Goddess. The government fended off accusations of unconstitutionality by citing the “object and effect” principle established in a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1977. The essence of the ruling was that the state may engage with religion, so long as neither the “object” nor the “effect” of its engagement amounts to the promotion of any specific religion. The government’s position was that public funding of the daijōsai contravened neither criterion. Many citizens’ groups disagreed, and took legal action, but their suits all foundered on the “object and effect” principle.

Controversy surrounded the 2019 daijōsai, too, with citizens’ groups poised once more to take legal action against the government, even though they stand little chance of success. This time, however, they had the moral support of Prince Akishino no Miya Fumihito, the new emperor’s younger brother and next in line to the throne. At his birthday meeting with the press on 11 November 2018, the prince queried the wisdom of the government underwriting the daijōsai as it had in 1990. He confessed it left him feeling “uneasy.” The cause of his uneasiness was this: the government sets aside two funds for imperial family use. There is the “court fund” (kyūteihi), totaling some $83 million, which covers all of the emperor’s public activities – his “acts in matters of state.” There is also a much more modest “imperial family fund” (naiteihi) of some $2.7 million, which is for the private use of the emperor and his family.

Both funds are, of course, tax payers’ money, but the prince was uneasy at the government’s insistence on using the “court fund” to underwrite the “religious” daijōsai. This implied that the daijōsai was, after all, a public not private act. The prince’s radical idea, intended to preserve the constitutional
separation of state and religion, was that the daijōsai be scaled back to a point where it might be covered entirely by the “imperial family fund.” The prince had raised this matter time and again with Imperial Household officials, but, he lamented, they had “refused to pay him heed.” He was, indeed, ignored by both the Imperial Household and the Abe administration. No one doubts that the prince was articulating views shared by his older brother and father.

In any case, the daijōsai rite remains essential to emperor-making in Japan. In its postwar manifestation, it merits attention as one further piece of evidence of the sacred encroaching into Japan’s public sphere. By “the sacred,” I refer specifically to ritual performances involving the Sun Goddess, and to the myth of the emperor’s descent from the Sun Goddess, which the rites serve to animate. The postwar Constitution sought to confine the sacred to the private sphere of the imperial court, and yet, in the seven decades since its promulgation – and especially during Abe Shinzō’s premiership – the sacred has become ever more public. Abe’s active association with the Ise Shrines is a case in point. In 2013, when the Ise Shrines underwent their vicennial rebuild, he played a key ritual role, escorting the Sun Goddess on her solemn progress through the night from old shrine to new. In 2016, he hosted the G7 summit in Ise, and took heads of the G7 states to the shrines as though they were a national site. In law, of course, they are a private religious juridical entity. In both 2017 and 2018, Abe participated in the niinamesai 新嘗祭 court rite, which also celebrates the Sun Goddess. The rite is held within the palace’s shrine complex annually on 23 November. It was in this broader context that the Abe administration funded Emperor Naruhito’s daijōsai in November 2019.

2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, which brought emperors out of the shadows of the premodern court, allowing them to occupy the center of modern Japan’s public culture. The myth of the emperor’s descent from the Sun Goddess, which the Meiji government actively promoted and exploited, remains alive and well today. The myth, and the rites that sustain it, will be on more secure footing if the Abe administration effects its promised revisions to the Constitution. Article 20 deals with the separation of state and religion. The government plans to retain the principle of separation, of course, but wishes to render the daijōsai and other imperial court rites as non-religious “social rituals or customary practices.” If, and when, the revisions are effected, there will be no further impediment to the state’s sponsorship of, and engagement with, such events. Their place in the public sphere will be assured.
We have seen evidence that the imperial institution itself is highly contested. The emperor’s 2016 address, the abdication bill that it produced, and the very fact that an emperor abdicated for the first time in two hundred years, have highlighted the multiplicity of views on emperorship in 21st Century Japan. The prohibition of abdication, it should be stressed, is modern. There are fifty-eight known cases of emperors abdicating before the practice was prohibited in the late 19th Century. Meiji bureaucrats ended abdication, fearful that it threatened the myth that guaranteed the stability of the imperial line. Their concerns are shared today by NK members with close ties to the Abe administration.

Let us not forget that there is, objectively speaking, a graver challenge to the imperial institution than abdication. It is the absence of male heirs. Emperor Naruhito’s younger brother, Crown Prince Akishino no Miya, is now next in line to the throne, and his son the 13-year-old Hisahito will succeed him. If Hisahito produces no male heirs, that is it. This dire situation has generated impassioned debate about the pros and cons of female succession to the throne. According to the latest polls, 76% of the population would be happy to see a woman enthroned. There is, after all, ample precedent for this: women have succeeded to the throne on ten previous occasions. What is striking is that 74% have no objection to the offspring of a woman emperor succeeding to the throne. If this were to happen, it would be an historical first.  

Finally, it should be pointed out that, for ultraconservatives, the abdication issue and the future of the imperial line are intimately related. Yagi Hidetsugu 八木秀次, a radical conservative intellectual, who is sometimes referred to as Prime Minister Abe’s “brain,” puts it like this:

“If an emperor is free to abdicate, it won’t be long before a man is free to decline the throne. Abdication, as the free choice of the emperor, can only lead in time to a man’s right to refuse succession. [When this comes to pass,] the emperor system, which depends on an unbroken line of male heirs, will collapse.”  

The historic precedent set by Akihito’s abdication and the absence of male heirs will ensure that Japanese emporership is contested for years to come.

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**Note**

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* A new history of Shinto (co-authored with Mark Teeuwen). Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
  
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Girei to kenryoku: Tennō no Meiji Ishin 儀礼と権力 天皇の明治維新 Heibonsha, 2011.

John Breen is a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, where he edits the journal Japan Review. He taught Japanese and Japanese history at SOAS (University of London) before joining Nichibunken in 2009.


Notes

1 The official designation of the emperor’s address is Shōchō toshite no o-tsutome ni tsuite no tennō heika no o-kotoba 象徴としてのお務めについての天皇陛下のおことば. The address can be replayed on the Kunaichō website, where the Japanese and English transcriptions can also be found: here and here.

2 The full Japanese title of the bill is Tennō no taii tō ni kansuru kōshitsu tenpan tokureihō 天皇の退位等に関する皇室典範特例法. The bill’s nine articles can be accessed here.

3 Source

4 The emperor’s address in the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake can be replayed on the Kunaichō website; the Japanese text and English translation can be accessed there too: here and here.

5 For an overview of the activities of the emperor and empress at this time, see here.

6 The closest critical reading of the emperor’s address can be found in Hara Takeshi 原武史. Heisei no shūen: taii to tennō, kōgo 平成の終焉: 退位と天皇皇后. Iwanami Shoten, 2019, pp.11-68.

7 Abdication is hardly a new issue for the imperial family. In 1946, Prince Mikasa no Miya 三笠宮, Akihito’s uncle, famously attacked the government’s refusal to sanction abdication. The government was effectively “binding the emperor in chains, making him a slave of the cabinet.” (Asahi Shinbun 17 December 2017)

8 For the original Japanese, see here. There is an English translation at here.


10 The emperor offered this view of the postwar constitution at a press conference to celebrate his 50th wedding anniversary. Note that here, too, he mentioned his struggle to interpret the meaning of “symbol of the state and of the Unity of the People.” For the original Japanese and an English translation, see: here.

11 The occasion for this statement was the emperor’s birthday press conference. See, for the Japanese original, here and for the English translation, here.

12 For a survey of polls, see Hosaka Masayasu 保阪正康. Tennō heika “seizen taii” e no omoi 天皇陛下生前退位への思い. Mainichi Shinbun Shuppan, 2016, pp.85-88.

13 The latest poll conducted by the Asahi newspaper in April 2019 shows that 76% of the population “feel an intimacy” with the imperial family. This is the highest “intimacy factor” ever recorded. (Asahi Shinbun, 19 April 2019.)


15 Source

16 Kobori Keichirō has articulated his views most cogently in Kōdō 弘道, the journal of the conservative organization, Nippon Kōdōkai 日本弘道会. See “Tennō = shōchōkan no konjaku.” 天皇象徴感の今昔 Kōdō (January 2018), pp. 6-11. Kobori refers frequently in his recent writings to the “kokutai-wrecking Constitution.”

17 Murata Haruki. “Sakunen hachigatsu yōka no heika no o-kotoba wa.” 昨年八月八日の陛下のお言葉 Seiron 326 (1 October 2017), p. 3.

18 Ibid.

19 Source
For the events behind NHK’s July broadcast, which was watched by 14 million people, see Gomi Yōji五味洋治. Seizen taii o meguru Abe shushō no sakubō生前退位をめぐる安倍首相の策謀. Takarajimasha Shinsho, 2017, pp. 20-24, and Hosaka. Tennō heika, pp. 14-16 and pp. 81-83.

On the advisory council (yūshokusha kaigi有職者会議) and its experts, see Hara. Heisei no shūen, pp. 4-6, and Gomi. Seizen taii, pp. 104-109. The agenda and the minutes of the several council meetings are accessible on the website of the Prime Minister’s Office.

For the emperor’s shock, see both Mainichi shinbun 21 May 2017 and the discussion in Shirai Satoshi白井聡. Kokutairon: Kiku to seijōki菊と星条旗. Shūeisha Shinsho, 2018, pp.16-19.

The official name given to the abdication is Taii rei seiden no gi退位礼正殿の儀 (Palace rite of abdication.)

The emperor’s address in both English and Japanese can be accessed on the Imperial Household website: here and here.

Ken is “sword” and ji is “jewel.” Tō, meaning “et cetera,” refers to the fact that the emperor receives other objects, too. These objects include the state seal (kokuji国璽) and the imperial seal (gyoji御璽) and also the entire palace shrine-complex. This rite used to be known simply as the senso践祚 or succession rite.

This audience is officially known as the Sokuigo chōken no gi即位後朝見の儀 or “Rite of audience after succession.”

This rite was formerly known simply as the sokui rite.


This principle is known in Japanese as mokuteki kōka kijun目的効果基準

For a summary view of the legal controversy concerning the 1999 daijōsai, see Breen and Teeuwen 2011, Chapter 5.

It is, incidentally, this latter fund which pays for the rites performed by the emperor and empress at the palace shrine-complex.

The total budget for the 2019 daijōsai is set by the government at $21 million.

The full text of the prince’s statement on the daijōsai can be accessed on the Imperial Household home page.


The niinamesai is the annual version of the once-in-a-reign daijōsai. The prime minister informed the nation of his participation on Twitter.

For the LDP’s proposed revisions to Article 20, see Jiyūminshutō comp. Nihonkoku kenpō kaisei sóan (2012), p.7

The poll referred to was conducted by the Asahi shinbun, and published on 19 April 2019.

Asahi Shinbun 10 September 2016. For Yagi’s intimate relationship to PM Abe, see also Asahi Shinbun 28 March 2018.