The Funerals of the Japanese Emperors

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Emperor Hirohito of the Shōwa era (1926–1989) died on January 7, 1989, after a prolonged illness and a reign of unprecedented length. The state funeral took place on February 24, the 49th day after death, as prescribed by Buddhist funerary ritual. However, the last rites were performed according to so-called "traditional Shinto ritual"—at least in part, since political considerations made some compromise with state ritual, not connected with any religion, necessary. The kunaichō *(Imperial Household Agency) did not permit a close scrutiny and study of the obsequies performed for Emperor Shōwa, so that we may count ourselves lucky to have this study by the foremost French specialist on the subject and the author of* La mort et les funérailles dans le Japon ancien *(Paris: Publications orientalistes de France, 1986).*

The author examines the historical background and the modern significance of the curious mixture of rites that were observed for the preceding Emperors Meiji and Taishō. His conclusion may take us by surprise: These strangely archaic rituals are not so "traditional" after all, but rather rituals "revived," i.e. fabricated, in the Meiji period as part of the move back to "pure Japanese tradition."

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The title of this article may look a little quaint, smacking of an old-world exoticism or of an erudition aloof from contemporary reality. In fact, that feeling would not be restricted to people in the West. In Japan itself the funeral of the emperor, and the absence of any direct confrontation with the death of the emperor, appear in the eyes of the majority of the people as belonging to a mostly dead past. To show an interest in them might be interpreted as a sign of a nostalgia for the imperial Japan previous to the 1945 defeat. Still, the funerals of sovereigns or chiefs of state, apart from their significance as media

events, inform us in a precise way about the image a society wants to convey of itself. The state funerals in the USSR are especially instructive in this respect. This phenomenon is of all times and a study of the evolution of the funerals of the sovereigns or heads of state in a given society permits us to grasp, as if in a telescopic view, the changes not only in that society's attitudes towards death but also in the conception of sovereignty and the power relationships behind it—and this in spite of the conservative tendency characteristic of such official rites. It is in this perspective that I would like to present here an overview of the history of the funerals of the Japanese sovereigns.

The Funeral of Emperor Meiji

I take as my point of departure the present state of affairs, that is to say the funerary rites celebrated for the Emperors Meiji 明治 in 1912 and Taishō 大正 in 1926, both of which followed approximately the same pattern. Since the figure of Emperor Meiji dominates the modern history of Japan and his funeral served as a model for that of his successor, we shall refer here mainly to the funeral of Emperor Meiji. At the time Japan, having gained victories over China and Russia, had entered the club of the great nations. Consequently, the death of its sovereign placed it in the center of the world's public attention.

On July 30, 1912, at 12:43 in the morning, the Emperor of Japan died. The term used to designate the death of the emperor and which may not be used for anybody besides the emperor is borrowed from the Chinese vocabulary: *hōgyo* 崩御 (crumbling, as of a mountain). In the same vein, one does not speak of the body of the emperor but of his "precious body," *gyokutai* 玉體 . At one o'clock of the same morning the sword and the jewel, two of the three Japanese regalia (together with the mirror), and also the seal of the state were handed over to the crown prince, Yoshito, the future Emperor Taishō—who thus found himself in possession of the objects that guarantee the legitimacy of power scarcely a quarter of an hour after the demise of his father. With the Emperor's death the Meiji era came to an end and a new era, the first year of the Taishō era, began.

On August 13, 1912, the body of the deceased sovereign was transferred to the *hinkyū* 殯宮 , the "palace of temporary interment," which had been prepared in the central pavilion of the palace. The space had been demarcated on three sides by white cloths and shut off on the

fourth side by a shutter. In the center of this enclosure the bier and the coffin were placed on a mat, and a sword deposited on top of the coffin. The further decoration consisted of branches of *sakaki* 榊, a tree of the camelia family and the "sacred tree" of Shinto sanctuaries, and lanterns. The honor guard was made up of high functionaries. Every ten days, for a period of 50 days, offerings of food and textiles were placed before the coffin and eulogies delivered.

On August 29, the deceased was given the posthumous name of Emperor Meiji, under which name he has been known from then on. During his lifetime the Emperor of Japan is simply referred to as "His Majesty the Emperor," *tennō heika* 天皇陛下, and never by his personal name or the name of the era—say, in the case of the recently deceased emperor, "Hirohito" or "Emperor Shōwa." *[Note, however, that the editorial from the* Chūgai Nippō *on page 13 above does in fact break with this custom in reference to the new emperor. —Translator]*

On September 4, the diplomatic corps were invited to pay a visit to the pavilion of temporary interment. As dean of the diplomatic corps the ambassador of Great Britain deposited a silver crown.

On September 13, one month and a half after the demise, the memorial tablet carrying the name of the Emperor was placed in his private chambers, while outside the funeral was being held on the military terrain of Aoyama 青山. At 7:00 in the evening the body was carried from the palace and placed in a gold and lacquer decorated chariot drawn by five oxen. The mortuary parade consisted of three hundred persons carrying torches, drums, gongs, banners, bows, shields, and lances. The procession was joined by the army band and by a group of youths from *Yase* 八瀬, a village situated to the northeast of the ancient capital, Kyoto. The streets had been covered with sand and decorated with white-and-black cloths and lanterns. At 10 o'clock in the evening the procession arrived at the site of the ceremony after having passed under two gates, *torii* 鳥居, identical to those found at the entrance of Shinto shrines. At 11:15 the last rites, salutes, offerings, and funerary eulogies started. It was during this same night that General Nogi 乃木, victor over the Russians in 1904 and national hero, and his wife committed ritual suicide, in order to accompany the Emperor in death. A sanctuary, consecrated to Emperor Meiji and his spouse, was later erected on the site of the funerary ceremonies: the Meiji Jingū, now in the heart of Tokyo.

On September 14, at 1:00 in the morning, two special trains trans-

ported the mortuary convoy to Kyoto. At 7:00 in the evening the body was placed in a sarcophagus, surrounded by *haniwa* 埴輪 (terra cotta figurines) mounted on a cylinder, inside a burial mound situated to the south of the ancient capital. On the morning of the 15th, a last funerary ceremony took place in front of this mound.

One year later, the memorial tablet inscribed with the name of the deceased Emperor was placed together with the tablets of his ancestors. In November of the same year, the new Emperor celebrated the solemn partaking of the first fruits, a ceremony which since ancient times constituted an obligatory complement to the enthronement rites.

Such were the ceremonies held for the Emperor who had succeeded in modernizing Japan so as to safeguard its independence. The modern aspects, such as trains, military terrain, gun salvos, etc., appear as secondary next to traits apparently very ancient, such as night-time processions, oxcarts, temporary interment of one month, imposing burial mound, suicide of a loyal subject, change of the era name, and interment instead of cremation according to a tradition anterior to the arrival of Buddhism. In reality, these funerary rites were made in the image of the Meiji Restoration itself, which combined an accelerated modernization with a "restoration" of a mythical imperial rule of pre-Buddhist antiquity. This return to a fictitious past was in fact a mask for a will to break with the past.

The same can be said of the funeral of the emperors. The aspects most archaic in appearance are more often than not new creations, or at least reconstructions of a long since broken tradition, with the aim of providing Japan with "state funerals," a quite modern concept. Thus, for example, the pavilion of temporary interment, *hinkyū*, harks back to a building set up for the funerals of the sovereigns of the archaic period, but the usage of which had already been discontinued at the beginning of the 8th century. The change of era at the death of the emperor and the coincidence of the duration of a reign with a single era name are observed for the first time with Emperor Meiji, in imitation of a custom observed in China during the last two dynasties. The suicide of general Nogi is still more difficult to explain by tradition. The last mention of suicides of vassals at the death of an emperor would go back to the 5th century and its authenticity is not above serious doubt. On the other hand, the custom of suicide at the death of their lord was en vogue with the samurai until it was severely repressed at the beginning of the 18th century, with threats of reprisals on the

families of those who would thus commit suicide.

The burial in a mound shows a break with a long tradition of cremation and simplified funerals, begun for the emperors as early as the beginning of the 8th century. And finally the construction of a sanctuary, a Shinto shrine, to venerate the deceased sovereign is also an innovation and the logical consequence of a policy of exaltation of the person of the emperor. This had led the new regime already to build a sanctuary for the first emperor, Jinmu 神武 , who had never been venerated up to that time.

This artificially traditional character of the funeral of Emperor Meiji evokes a twofold question: Which funerals served as points of reference; and, which evolution induced the people of the Meiji era to want to reconstitute them?

The Archaic Funerary Rites

From an archaeological point of view, the "archaic funerals" belong to the *kofun* 古墳 (ancient mound) period, which extends from the 3th to the 6th century, and to the beginning of historical times up to the end of the 7th century.The first part of this period is characterized by enormous mounds which can reach 300 meters in length and 40 meters in height and may be surrounded by two or three moats. These tombs, which one began to erect during the lifetime of the sovereign, absorbed a very considerable part of the wealth of the country, partly by the manpower to be mobilized for their construction and partly by the cost of the objects placed in them near the sarcophagus. Especially the arms buried in them must have represented a significant part of the available iron. No single monument of that period can be compared to them and neither palaces nor sanctuaries had such dimensions.

The funerary rites which went together with these constructions are known to us only for the end of the period. These funerals were centered around the rite of the *mogari* 殯 , a provisional depository for the body between death and definitive burial. For this rite a special building was constructed, the *mogari* palace wherein the body was placed and also, as it seems, the women who had surrounded the deceased were confined. The *mogari* lasted mostly three to six months but could also take a year or more. The last great *mogari*, celebrated for Emperor Tenmu 天武 , lasted more than two years. During that period, memorial eulogies were delivered and lamentations held on the New

Year days and in the 3th and 6th months. Also dance and music sessions were occasionally organized. Besides these public and masculine rites, there probably existed rituals celebrated within the *mogari* palace with women as the main participants. The first Japanese anthology of poetry contains poems probably composed for ritual purposes at the occasion of imperial *mogari* rites by the women cloistered within the *mogari* palace. Moreover, we know that a group of specialists, the *asobibe* 遊部 (literally, the clan of the entertainers) was charged with the performance of a dance inside the *mogari* palace. Here too everything leads one to think that women had the responsibility of this dance and that this "entertainment" has to be understood in the proper sense with sexual connotations. In these ancient times, prostitutes were called *asobime* 遊女 .

The *mogari* was concluded by a last rite during which the list of sovereigns from the divine ancestor, Amaterasu, up to the deceased was recited. At that moment the deceased emperor was given his posthumous name and thereby incorporated into the group of his ancestors. Then, in the middle of the night, with torch light and the sound of martial music, the body was transported to its tomb. This last ceremony took place around the 10th or 11th month, that is, at the time of the celebration of the feast of the partaking of the first fruits—feast which, as we saw already, was linked to the enthronement of the new emperor.

One can characterize this *mogari* rite by three traits: duration, paroxysm, and a cyclical conception of time. The *mogari* was, before anything else, a length of time during which the survivors were confronted with the degeneration of the corpse. But, differently from what happened in many other societies and from what will happen later in Japan itself, this duration was not conceived in the first place in function of its point of departure, death, but rather in function of the date of burial which had to take place towards the end of the year.

Although these Japanese rites are known to us only at a time when their sinicization was already far advanced, one finds in them traces of paroxysmic behavior. The first indication thereof is the long duration itself of the *mogari*. Further, there are examples of extreme behavior in mourning, such as mutilations and, seemingly, sacrifices of horses and ritual suicides. Moreover, the violence triggered by the death of the emperor was not limited to demonstrations of sorrow, but appears also in the *asobibe* rite with its sexual components and, generally, in the fact that the period of mourning was also a time of social disorder: rapes

and many coup attempts and rebellions. These disorders were in a way necessary for the good progression of the rite. Since the death of the emperor brought along, in a sense, the death of time and society, one had to assume this death in the form of the disintegration of the corpse and in the form of social and political disorder, so that a new order might be born in the person of the new emperor and in the access of the deceased to the state of ancestor.

Towards the end of the 7th century, when the chronicles become more precise, the *mogari* has already been considerably sinicized and emasculated. Confucian ethics had chased away the women of the *asobibe* rites and the mutilations and sacrifices, which were already falling in disuse anyway, were now forbidden. And moreover, even if the enthronement mostly took place still after the end of the *mogari*, there was no organic connection anymore between the last ceremonies of that rite and the solemn partaking of the first fruits that inaugurated the new reign. Finally, in the descriptions of the last imperial *mogari*, various Buddhist elements appear: monks and nuns participate in the lamentations and ceremonies are held in the great monasteries of the capital.

Temporized as they were by moralizing Chinese influences, the *mogari* ceremonies still remained, at the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century, an imposing rite that assured for a great part the legitimacy of the deceased emperor and therefore also of his successor. But things are going to change drastically with the installation of the capital in Nara.

The Buddhist Funerals

At the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century, one witnesses in all domains an acceleration of the changes provoked by the ever greater importance attached to the Chinese model, represented then by the Chang dynasty at the height of its power. As to funerals, these transformations were effected under the pressure of two factors: the idea of simplification of the funerals under influence of Confucian ethics – one should not ruin the country for the sake of the dead – and the fact of Buddhism infiltrating little by little the realm of death. For a certain time a kind of equilibrium existed between the traditional importance of funerals and the new ideas entering from the continent. From this perspective, the long *mogari* for Emperor Tenmu

with its elaborate ceremonies appears already as an exception. Still, we notice in it the moderation of Chinese rites and the participation, although still marginal, of Buddhist monks. In the funeral of Empress Jitō 持統 in 703, the Buddhist rites are already more important and ceremonies were held in the monasteries every seventh day for 49 days, according to a periodicity and a form that are still observed in our days in the funerary rites of the people in general. But most importantly, the Empress chose to be cremated after the *mogari* ceremonies. She was the first imperial personage to be cremated, following thereby the example of the monk Dōshō 道昭 who had his body cremated three years earlier, and thus inaugurated the custom of cremation of the emperors, which was followed with a few exceptions up to the Edo period. The last *mogari* was celebrated, in 707, for her grand-son and successor, Emperor Monmu 文武 , who also chose to be cremated after the traditional rites.

It was during the following reign that the break with the past and the passing of the funerary rites into the Buddhist orbit took place. In 721, Empress Genmei refused not only the *mogari* rituals but also all official mourning and lamentations, as well as the construction of a burial mound. Instead, the site of cremation became the burial ground and the only rites remaining were the Buddhist 49-day rites. These funerary rites suggest a disjunction between the body of the deceased and his or her *post-mortem* destiny. Indeed, from then on the main rituals are held in Buddhist monasteries, in the absence of the body, which is now considered as a source of impurity one must free oneself of. Emperor Junna 淳和 drew the logical consequence of this when, in 842, he demanded that his ashes be dispersed, but this extreme example did not find any followers. Herewith a disjunction is also effected between the body of the sovereign and sovereignty itself, which now becomes more abstract and disembodied as it were. It was no longer submitted to the process of regeneration which was the *mogari*; and from now on the enthronement of the new emperor took place immediately after the death of his predecessor, although the solemn partaking of the first fruits kept being observed one year later. But, most importantly, more and more the succession was not automatically linked any longer to the decease of the former emperor. On the contrary, abdication nearly became the rule, with the result that there was no longer an interruption in sovereignty, no intermediate period, but instead a kind of abstract permanency.

This revolution in the funerals coincided with the definitive establishment of a fixed capital after the first trial at Fujiwara-kyō 藤原京 under the reigns of Jitō and Monmu. It was also the time of the introduction of codes which, beyond establishing a more rational administrative framework, endowed the state with a new kind of legitimacy and transformed the relationships between the sovereign and the people while transposing them to a more abstract plane. These reforms were accompanied by the adoption of the Chinese system of era names, independent from the reigns of individual emperors. It was, lastly, the moment that the definitive versions of the national history were established, particularly in the sinicized form of annals.

What remained as fixtures of the funerary ceremonies for the emperors after this rupture were: cremation (except for a limited return to interment in the beginning of the 9th century), the relative simplicity of the ceremonies, and the exclusive dominance of the Buddhist rites, many emperors dying in the monastic state they had entered after abdication. For the emperors then, just as for the whole of society, Buddhism was the natural point of reference for the realm of death and posthumous destiny. The deceased emperor was then treated like a monk and the rituals foresaw a stretching out of the legs, since as a monk the emperor was supposed to have died while sitting cross-legged in the meditation position. Under these conditions the funeral of the emperor was no longer an affair of state. On this point Japan distinguished itself from its Chinese model wherein, in spite of the anti-luxury laws, it would have been unthinkable to cremate the sovereign and to deposit his or her ashes in a simple tomb.

The tendency toward simplification of the imperial funerals was subsequently reinforced by the decline of the court and the rise of the warrior power. It is during that period that the Sennyū-ji 泉涌寺 monastery became the site of cremation and burial of the imperial family. The Buddhist monks then obtained the complete monopoly over the death of the emperor, both as to the funerary rites and as to the tombs. The imperial family then simply became one particular instance of a family linked to a given monastery for its funerary rites and anniversary services. This was also a period of dire poverty. In 1500, one did not find the money necessary to buy a coffin at the time of the decease of Emperor Gotsuchimikado 後土御門 .

The Turning Point

The restoration of the political unity of the country under the impulse of the Tokugawa 徳川, at the beginning of the 17th century, brought in fact a big improvement in the position of the emperors, not only financially but also on the level of prestige, since they were the guarantors of the legitimacy of the shōguns. And, simultaneously, the rise of Confucianism and the development of the *kokugaku* 国学 (national learning) school brought about a reevaluation of the person of the emperor, which in turn triggered a revision of the imperial funerals.

In 1654, at the occasion of the death of Emperor Gokōmyō 後光明, the assigned fish dealer of the court remarked that it was against the dignity of the emperor to have his head shaven (like a monk) and to be cremated. Negotiations were then conducted with the monks of the Sennyūji, who had the force of precedence going for them. One finally arrived at a compromise: the cremation ceremony would be held as before, but in a purely formal fashion, the body being in reality interred. This, however, did not always go smoothly. Thus, in 1732, the monks wanted to proceed with the cremation of Emperor Reigen 靈元, but the explosion of a board made them desist. Still, even without cremation, the emperors remained attached to Buddhism and to the Sennyū-ji. Their very simple tombs were covered by a stone monument in the form of a pagoda.

Amidst the rush hour of ideas that augured the Meiji Restoration, the problem of funerals in general and the imperial funerals in particular played an important part. To counteract the Buddhist monopoly on funerals, the Shinto milieu demanded the right to practice their own funerary ceremonies. It is in that context that the Shinto funerary rites for the emperors were created, partly with reference to what one imagined the pre-Buddhist funerals to have been and, most of all, by imitating Buddhist usages. Thus the 50 days of Shinto rites correspond to the 49 days of the Buddhist tradition. It was also the time of a renewed interest in the ancient imperial tombs and the beginning of verification and restoration of these tombs. This atmosphere of nationalist vindication of an archaic past explains why, for the funerary rites of Emperor Kōmei 孝明, the father of Emperor Meiji, in 1866-1867, there was no cremation and the body was deposited, at the end of a long procession, in a tomb cut out of a mountain

slope, thus rejoining the ancient tradition of burial mounds, which were after all artificial mountains. However, notwithstanding the violent anti-Buddhist slogans of the promoters of a return to ancient Shinto, Buddhist monks still were in charge of the funerary rites and a lock of the Emperor's hair was deposited in the sacred precincts of Mount Kōya 高野山 , the center of Shingon esoteric Buddhism.

The restoration of imperial power in the hands of Emperor Meiji could not but entail the "restoration" of funerary rites measuring up to the sacralization of the person of the emperor, incarnation of the nation. The reign of the emperor became anew the measure of time, by a kind of return to the archaic system en vogue before the establishment of era names. Together with this, one tried to give Japan an absolute chronology with as point of departure the founding of the first capital by Emperor Jinmu, in spite of the fact that the historicity of that personage and of that founding had been put in doubt by the scholars of the Edo period, and the fact that the Japanese, in their eagerness to be counted among the great world powers, could no longer ignore the Western calendar which they adopted in 1872.

The funerary ceremonies for the emperor were thus conceived to express the unity of the nation around the emperor and, at the same time, to endow Japan with a ceremony comparable with the state funerals of the West – for example, the one held for Queen Victoria in 1901 – while still specifically Japanese. That "specificity," however, was an artificial creation since it consisted in the suppression of all Buddhist elements, on the pretext that these were not of Japanese origin, while still imitating them and conserving many Chinese traits. In this very ambiguity, the funerary rites for Emperor Meiji were a mirror image of Japanese society at the time, which at the same time affirmed its modernity, in its efforts to be counted among the great powers, and its national identity and will to particularism in the name of an artificially purged tradition. By a strange turn of affairs, the Japanese emperors, who had been the first outside the monastic world to promote Buddhist cremation, thus became the only ones among Japan's urban population to be interred at a time when cremation had become universal – an evolution wherein reasons of hygiene have taken over from religious reasons.

The change in the status of the emperor after the defeat of 1945 should logically bring about a revision of the funerary ceremonies which in theory are still regulated by the code of the Imperial Family.

For several years voices had been raised to demand that these texts be revised and the ceremonies simplified. However, when directly confronted with the problem, everybody appears to have submitted to the intentions of the Imperial Household. The more the health of Emperor Shōwa declined, the more the old reflexes came into play again, honorific expressions which had fallen in disuse since the end of the war making their come-back and the auto-censure of the media intensifying.

Few people at present know exactly which form the funerary rites for Emperor Shōwa took but it is certain that they must be deciphered as the image contemporary Japan wants to project of itself. They also will permit us to see in which way Japan wants to assume its past.

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