



Japan has no Clothes

by Eun Jung Cahill Che and Yumiko Nakagawa

On Dec. 23, 2001, Japanese Emperor Akihito, in his personal birthday interview, acknowledged Korean ancestry in the Japanese Imperial bloodline. He stated, "I, on my part, feel a certain kinship with Korea ... the mother of Emperor Kammu [who ruled Japan from 781-806] was of the line of King Muryong [who ruled in Korea 501-523] of the Kingdom of Paekche [in Korea]." This declaration undermines the myth of purity of "Japanese blood," which has long served as a foundation of national identity in Japan. Though widely known to be a myth, explicit denial of the purity of Japanese blood by the head of the imperial family, a lasting symbol and keeper of that purity, is the first public articulation of this truth. Ironically, it was the emperor who pointed out that Japan has no clothes.

More remarkable than the comment itself, which was not news to many Japanese or Koreans, was the lack of discussion that followed. The Japanese media virtually ignored Emperor Akihito's remarks. The unwillingness of the Japanese media to take up and discuss the significance of his remarks represents the reluctance to truly engage in a debate on Japanese national identity. Unfortunately, the South Korean media interpreted the lack of response from Japan as a refusal to acknowledge the blood ties between Japan and Korea. But there is more to this than meets the eye.

In addition to the myth of blood purity, the Japanese national identity has been historically premised on a principle of exclusivity: Whoever is different from us is not Japanese. Using exclusivity as an organizing principle creates a hollow identity that is not to say that there is not substance at its center, but that the substance is amorphous and needs to be shaped. This outside-in definition helps define what Japan is not, but there is no real sense of what the Japanese national identity is.

Another problem of hollow identity is that existing differences among Japanese leads to exclusion. Such identity forces each individual to be just like others. Thus, the voice of the Okinawans, with its different historic and cultural background, is not properly appreciated in national politics. The voice of the Ainu as an indigenous group is not represented and the culture is vanishing. Ethnic Korean Japanese are allowed to be Japanese citizens only when they acquire Japanese names and disinherit their ethnic heritage, including their language.

The lack of debate on national identity prevents the formulation of a clear and final national collective history of World War II. It also creates a serious perception gap between the government and the public. As seen in the history textbook controversy: 99 percent of Japanese public schools rejected the revisionist textbook that had been cleared, along with several others, by the government review committee.

Why begin this discussion now, when there are economic and defense issues to worry about? How the Japanese people define who they are, what the Japanese people and the collective of Japan not as bureaucrats and politicians but as citizens with full participation in the determination of their country choose will shape the role Japan will play in a changing geostrategic environment. It will help its relationships with other countries and raise questions on how to defend the nation. It is precisely because Japan is now faced with these problems that the debate must begin in earnest.

Specifically, a discussion on Japanese national identity will have an effect on any amendment of the Peace Constitution, which is linked to the debate on the rearmament of Japan's Self-Defense Forces. Will the Japanese people chose to forgo their self-defense capability? Does pacifism outweigh the right to self-defense? If the status quo will be maintained, how should the burden on Okinawans be shared? On economic side, it will affect what kind of role Japan will pursue in international society. Are the Japanese people willing to remain a major economic power that receives little appreciation for financial contributions and foreign aid? Last, but not least, this also suggests how Japan wants to construct its relationships with its neighbors in Asia as well as in the future.

A true discourse on national identity transforming the amorphous center of hollow identity into an intelligible form requires unyielding self-examination. Japan, as a nation of individuals, needs to initiate this discourse based on a principle of inclusivity of the historical and current diversity of all Japanese people. This will require Japan to disentangle itself from the myths that allow it to sidestep the uncomfortable and painful realities of the world. It is fitting that the Emperor opened the door to this debate and it is now the Japanese people's responsibility to pass through.

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