
Herbert P. Bix

Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan
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A Conversation with Herbert Bix

Q: You have written extensively about Japanese history, teach it, now receiving the Pulitzer for general nonfiction — this is truly your life's work. What is it about Japan that fascinates you?

A: It's definitely the people. Through my wife's family, and the many Japanese friends I've made over the years, my appreciation of Japan and interest in its history, politics and culture has grown. But the question that initially kindled that interest was why the United States fought a war with Japan.

Q: *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* argues that Emperor Hirohito was not a passive puppet of Japanese militarism in the years leading up to World War II, but rather, an active participant in the planning of the war who delayed surrender to preserve his rule. How long did the research for this book take and did you know at the beginning that it would take the direction it did? What did you learn from the process?

A: I spent at least ten years on the manuscript. Before I even began I was interested in the problem of the "emperor system," and in why Emperor Hirohito did not figure at all in accounts of the process that led to Japanese expansionism in the 1930s? Was it really true that he related to his own armed forces only as a robot or puppet? And why wasn't the ideology that sustained emperor worship and animated the imperial state an object of study for students interested in explaining the road to Pearl Harbor? I had all these questions in mind at the start of the 1980s when I did a schematic piece on "emperor-system fascism" which later appeared in *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. At that time only anecdotal data and hagiography was available on Hirohito himself. Japanese historians spoke not about the occupant of the throne but about the "emperor system," which meant the institution, the social basis for the prewar monarchy, and the ethos and psychology that informed the monarchy. Anyway, for various reasons I had to abandon this subject. My attention turned to peasant studies and peasant uprisings. When I had finished writing *Peasant Protest in Japan (Yale 1986)*, I was looking for another project that would cover a long sweep of historical time. The Showa Emperor died in January 1989, and shortly afterward there appeared the diary of his Vice-Grand Chamberlain, Kinoshita Michio. Appended to the diary were interesting new documents concerning a dictation that Hirohito, with the help of his aides, had made in the late winter and spring of 1946. The next year, 1990, the Japanese journal *Bungei shunju* published a shortened version under the title: "The Monologue": eight hours of talk by the Showa Emperor. After reading this material I immediately saw that it was possible to focus a study on Hirohito, the imperial house, and the ideology of emperorism. I had been teaching Japanese history for a long time. Now I thought I would pull together my previous studies and reinterpret many major events of 20th century Japanese history. That's what I wanted to do at the outset. I began to write my book at the start of the 1990s and continued working on it throughout Japan's so-called "lost decade" of uninterrupted economic recession and rising government debt. Cabinets were changing at short intervals; conservative politicians were talking about the need for reform, but they were practicing business as usual; and the press was reporting more and more stories of incredible corruption by bureaucrats, including those in the Foreign and Finance ministries and the police. Although Japan's international situation and strategic position in East Asia was quite unlike what they had been before World War II, and the military was no longer on the scene as an active player, the parties and the bureaucracy seemed to me to be acting as they had in imperial Japan. They were putting their organizational concerns ahead of the general public concern, acting in their own rather than the national interest. Well, the longer I worked on *Hirohito*, the more I saw these opportunities to bring out implicit parallels in political behavior between inter-war and wartime imperial Japan and the Japan I was living in at the end of the 20th century. Maybe I would be able to furnish the historical background for understanding the distinctive Japanese system of irresponsibility in decision-making, I thought. The problem of accountability gradually became a central theme of the book because I have been concerned with that problem for a long time. I knew too that the issue of the emperor's role in the war had been raised right at the end of World War II, and that some Americans on the left understood that Hirohito was absolutely central to the Japanese war effort. Mainstream scholars in the academy paid them no heed though. The Cold War really had a distorting effect on the kinds of histories of Japan that were written. First the anthropologists, next the political scientists and finally the historians uncritically accepted the official American Occupation view of Hirohito as a figurehead emperor who had played no meaningful role during the war. I learned otherwise. Hirohito had interacted with his governments and his Imperial Headquarters; seldom had he allowed his generals and admirals to fight the war just as they wished. Of course, this did not mean that he was dictating policy or calling all the shots. He wasn't a conqueror by nature, and war certainly wasn't essential to his personality. But he was, in ways that I document, an active, essential participant in the events that unfolded around him, including the bombing of Chinese cities and the attack on Pearl Harbor. When I completed the book I also realized that I had written a study of what happens to a nation when its head of state, after having committed crimes and been derelict in the performance of his duty, is granted immunity from punishment and remains in an honored position of authority. American policy makers bore a heavy share of responsibility for this outcome. Also, I learned from writing the book about the whole spiritual, ideological, religious matrix of ideas and beliefs that underlay 1930s and early 40s Japanese expansionism and militarism. That aspect too had been neglected by most writers on the war.

Q: What is the reason that Hirohito was not tried for war crimes following World War II?

A: The Truman administration and General MacArthur both believed the occupation reforms would be implemented smoothly if they used Hirohito to legitimize their changes. So for great power reasons of state on Truman's part and reasons of political advantage on the part of MacArthur, Hirohito was granted a virtual political pardon. Japanese ruling elites also exerted tremendous efforts to protect Hirohito from the Tokyo war crimes trial, and they succeeded in enlisting the support of many influential Americans. Having said that, one shouldn't draw the conclusion that Hirohito was absolved of war crimes. His case just wasn't adjudicated.

Q: Has the book been well received in Japan?

A: My biography of the Showa emperor is not available in Japanese so it's still too early to tell. Meanwhile many Japanese newspapers and journals have printed reviews and discussions of the English language original. All the ones I've seen have been positive and fair. I've also received many kind, instructive letters and postcards from Japanese readers who read through the entire English text. These too have been helpful. In June I told the *Asahi shinbun* that I had sought to encourage Japanese and American re-evaluation not only of the Asia-Pacific War—especially its origins and termination—but also of the continuing issues of leaders' war responsibility and immunity for heads of state. Perhaps when the Japanese translation appears in 2002 Japanese thinking on these matters will be further influenced. I

hope the Japanese edition will also contribute to a clearer awareness of the dangers inherent in the practice of using the modern monarchy and its symbols as a basis for patriotism, or to buttress mistaken domestic and foreign policy.

Q: History usually has a broader message in that we can all learn something from the mistakes and successes of the past. What is the deeper message to be taken from the history contained in *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*?

A: In order to project the emperor as both peace-loving and politically impotent, postwar Japanese governments were forced to distort, conceal, and partially destroy their historical record. In returning to that voluminous record I tried to examine it sympathetically, and to present Hirohito accurately and fairly. At the same time, I gave special attention to how he was reared and educated, and how he became the man he was. Through examining Japanese history through the prism of such an unusual human life, I think we gain a better appreciation of the political process in imperial Japan. I've already mentioned the problem of impunity and the need to combat immunity for heads of state. I would also add the need to be vigilant about the danger of militarism, which can arise in any society. Since the end of World War II the voice of the American military in Asian affairs and especially Japan-U.S. relations has been overly strong, elevated by networks of overseas bases and forward deployments. I hope *Hirohito* sensitizes readers to this problem. Last there is a need for comparative historical study of decision-making leading to war. I hope my book stimulates comparative study of the Japan-China war and the US war against Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Q: What was it like to hear that you'd received the Pulitzer for your work? What was the immediate effect? Long term? What did you do to celebrate?

A: I never expected to receive the 2001 Pulitzer award, so I was very surprised. The immediately and the long-term effect have been to make me very busy. As for celebrating, I really didn't do any that I can remember, except maybe see a movie. But my wife and I did attend the Pulitzer awards and spent two most enjoyable days in Manhattan meeting HarperCollins people, my agent, and some Japanese friends.

Q: What is next for you?

A: Next summer I hope to start the research for another book.