

Celebrating the Enthronement: An English Family in Japan

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We are a small Japanese family living in a Japanese city over 500 miles from the great enthronement ceremony at Kyoto. Like the great majority of the Japanese people, we had to stay at home, and do the best we could to celebrate the enthronement there.

There is nothing more decoratively satisfying than the charming paper lanterns of Japan, so when everybody hung out lanterns and a flag that alone was enough to transport us into a world of romance. On this occasion lanterns and flags alike had a plain white ground with a large red sun in the centre, and rarely has such simplicity of means achieved such an attractive end. But, in addition to individual enterprise, the local authorities had enhanced the lively beauty of the scene by arranging flags and lanterns on each side of all the streets, and at each street end had hung the largest flags and lanterns of all in the form of arches. Of course we foreigners also had out Japanese flag and lanterns, and as the weather was rather inclement the youngest member of the family was kept busy in maintaining our little light of loyalty in a Japanese world.

The most important ceremony throughout Japan was the universal three-fold shout of 'Banzai!' timed for three o'clock on November 10. As if I were the most loyal subject (and certainly feeling like one) I joined my Japanese colleagues and the students at the State educational institution where I win my daily bread. In externals the scene was almost Western. The great hall was in foreign style; the students were all in their blue uniforms, whilst the staff wore foreign clothes. Half an hour before the auspicious time were we there, all silently standing, waiting the arrival of the Director. With his arrival, despite his frock-coat and white gloves, all that was of the West immediately vanished, and the simple solemnity and severe silence suggested some unravished bygone age.

Silently the Director bowed to us and we to him; silently we all bowed together whilst the curtains veiling the photographs of the Emperor and Empress were drawn aside; and then the silence was broken by the tense singing of 'Kimigayo', whose strange creening disturbs the foreigner by its novelty, and the Japanese even more by its familiar echo of age-long mystery. After this the Director reverently approached the small whitewood table where lay a scroll, which he unrolled with a bow and read aloud. It was the Imperial Rescript on Education issued by the Emperor Meiji in 1889. In a few simple, homely words the Emperor, by the spirits of his ancestors, adjures the people to educate themselves and their children in the characteristic Japanese virtues of loyalty filial piety, domestic duty, and friendly and honest dealing.

'Banzai!'

Then again, and for ten minutes, silence, during which scarce a limb or muscle moved as we waited for the signal that was to evoke from all Japan the shout of loyalty. A whispered word

and the Director stood in front of us all, and with him we all bowed again to the sacred photographs. Then came the signal. 'Tenno Haika – Your Majesty, Banzai!' shouted the Director, and three times after him we all raised our shout of 'Banzai!'. Then again silence, a sort of echo of all the silence that had been. Then, 'Yasumi – at ease', from one of the military instructors, and slowly and silently we all filed out.

I had been curious about the loyalty of the students generally, owing to recent attacks made on it by the Government in their campaign against 'Radical ideas'. In various ways I had learned that these youths placed the Emperor above all political and social theories. He and Japan were one sacred and indivisible mystery; and, 'Radical' notions or not, at the least they took the Emperor for granted as a fact as eternal as the very sun from which he claims descent; at the most he was a divine power, moving heart, soul, and mind. Except that one student prefaced his words by saying, 'It is difficult for me to speak about the Emperor, because I am a Korean'; but even he meant little more than that it was scarcely reasonable to expect the Koreans to feel vitally interested in a Japanese enthronement, for not yet are Korea and Japan intimately one. The general impression of wonderful loyalty I had received was more than confirmed at the 'Banzai!' ceremony, for, being a foreigner, I took the liberty of an unobtrusive glance at the supreme moment, and every face was rapt with the expression of an acolyte.

The Shrine in the Park

Very different was the setting of the city's 'Banzai!', but the spirit was the same. My wife, denied the opportunity of joining in the educational shout, entrusted herself to the little kurumaya (rickshawman) who on various occasions has undertaken her uplift and, in the literal sense, education, and took her way to Chitose Park, where all the citizens had assembled to do their loyal duty. Little or nothing there that was not entirely Japanese. Flags and lanterns were everywhere, especially around the shrine which was the focus of the ceremony. The groups of local officials in foreign dress were more than counterbalanced by groups of Shinto and Buddhist priests in their rich and beautiful vestments; and the trees overhead and the hills and mountains around contributed their meed of sparkling gold and red to the glory of one who, as 'Son of Heaven', is lord both of men and nature also. Despite the vast crowds, thousands strong, there was little noise of bustle, and as the wished-for moment drew near a silence like that of a desert held all in thrall. The loyal threefold 'Banzai!' was duly shouted, and for some time afterwards the crowd remained silent and still, as if bemused with an echoing silence from eternity. Then, their natural vivacity winning through, they formed a procession along the streets, each with his little scarlet 'Banzai!' flag. In this procession my wife and her kurumaya were caught up, and not until the only Englishwoman in that city had afforded a spectacle of international goodwill and, incidentally, of rarely seen foreign feminine attire to half a mile or more of curious eyes was she able to make her infatuate centaur¹ understand her deep-seated yearning for a quiet life.

But something my young son saw and reported impresses me most of all with the religious character of Japanese loyalty. In the small house of a student friend he saw that the youth's mother had hung up a newspaper photograph of the Emperor in the tokonoma (the sacred

alcove in every Japanese house) together with a written scroll containing some words spoken by him, or, maybe, one of his poems. In front was the little table with pink and white rice cakes and other foods and sticks of burning incense. There the woman knelt at the presumed time when the Emperor himself would be kneeling in front of his own ancestral shrine, uttering her humble prayer for his health and happiness. And millions more would be doing the same; for, let this be remembered, the people are quite aware of the fact that they too are of divine descent along with their Emperor, and therefore when they revere the Emperor and pray for his long life they also revere and pray for themselves. He and they are one family.

NOTES

1, i.e. the rickshawman, here imagined, with his vehicle, as resembling a mythological centaur, part man, part horse.