Resurrecting Ancestral Charisma: Aristocratic Descendants in Contemporary Japan

Japan today magnifies the familiar split image of itself, one half looking to the future with insatiable zest for change and novelty, the other half facing backward to the past to recapture tradition and continuity. Ironically but understandably, the unprecedented magnitude of economic prosperity and technological advancement that is enabling Japanese to rush to obtain the newest possible things is also funding and expediting a nostalgic journey in search of their roots and history.

The split is not between change and continuity but rather between two perspectives of change. After all, tradition is not something that exists ‘out there’ ready to be retrieved, but is a product of cultural construction and reconstruction, oftentimes to provide a rationale for some vested interest or even for a revolutionary change as in the case of the Meiji ‘Restoration.’ Bestor calls this type of propensity for tradition-creation ‘traditionalism,’ which is to be distinguished from tradition itself.1 In this paper I analyze the ‘resurrection’ of ancestors as a form of traditionalism manifested in affluent Japan.

An NHK survey in 1984, which was generally meant to demonstrate a ‘reversion’ of Japanese to religious conservatism, showed a widespread sense of attachment to the dead and ancestors. For instance, 57 per cent of the survey sample were found to pray at the butsudan at least occasionally, and 28 per cent every day; 89 per cent visit cemeteries on days of major annual rites for the dead (bon and higan) at least occasionally, 69 per cent regularly; 59 per cent feel ‘connected with ancestors in the depths of their hearts.’2 Furthermore, in a recent study Reid found that ‘25 per cent of the Christian respondents to his questionnaire had butsudan and that these Christians were similar to non-Christian Japanese in conducting periodic ancestor rites, performing routine rituals in front of the altar, feeling connected with ancestors, and otherwise exhibiting ancestor-oriented behavior.’3

I assume that such resiliency in the ancestor-oriented faith and ritual has much to do with the fact that ancestors participate in constructing the identity of a descendant.4 It seems that the ancestor-‘other’ and the descendant-‘self’ enter into one another through various psychosocial mechanisms: projection and introjection in psychoanalytical terms, reflexivity and symbolization in culturalist terms, ‘taking the role of other’ in interactionist jargon.
The ancestor-other participates in the construction of the living self in two contrastive but interrelated directions. On the one hand, ancestors are beyond a descendant’s control as much as genes are and bind him/her to a certain ascribed identity. This belief tends to be allied, transcendentally, with the karmic chain of destiny. On the other hand, insofar as ancestors are nothing more than a symbolic creation, their images are subject to contemporary political and ideological trends and technological manipulations as well as the personal needs of the descendant generation. Ancestors are as inventable as traditions are. In the latter perspective, ancestors may appear as resources at the disposal of a descendant to build up and sustain a desirable identity of his/her own. Particularly relevant to such manipulability is the general elusiveness of the categorical boundary of Japanese ‘ancestors,’ as demonstrated by Smith.

I apply the above generalization to descendants of the Japanese aristocracy to show that the two-fold impact of ancestors is felt and expressed by this group of Japanese in a striking manner. Many call themselves ‘fatalist’ in that they find their lives and careers predetermined by their ancestral status, allowing them little freedom to pursue their personal choices. At the same time, aristocratic descendants (and those around them) find their ancestors a valuable source of self-esteem and symbolic capital to tap for new careers. Both views of ancestors coexist in the same individuals. Let me begin with a historical sketch of the Japanese aristocracy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By the Japanese aristocracy I mean the status group called Kazoku (capitalized to avoid confusion with the ‘family’ also pronounced as kazoku), the flowery lineage. The term refers simultaneously to the status group as a whole, to each member family, and to individuals.

As a formal entity, the Kazoku existed for 63 years between 1884 and 1947. This group ranked below the royal lineage group capped by the emperor and above the rest of the population. The latter was further differentiated into the shizoku, the gentry composed predominantly of former samurai vassals, and heimin, commoners, who made up an overwhelming majority of the Japanese, including the former outcaste now known as new commoners. The Kazoku members were of diverse backgrounds and can be grouped into three major subcategories: the kuge who had served the imperial court in Kyoto; the daimyo who had owed loyalty to the military government headed by the shogun of Edo; and the meritorious nobles who rose, in most cases, from the modest status of lower-ranking samurai vassals due to their performances contributive to the state. The Meiji Restoration marked the division between the first two groups (Kuge-Kazoku and Daimyo-Kazoku) as old nobles on the one hand, and the last group as the newly ennobled (Shin-Kazoku or Kunkō-Kazoku) on the other. In addition to these, the Kazoku included more peripheral members such as priests of specially recognized shrines and temples and the chief administrator-vassals (karō) of powerful daimyo. Under the Kazoku system, all these men of diverse origins were