





# *Emperor Showa*

*by IZUMOI Aki*



*Translated by  
Sekai Shuppan Co. Ltd.*

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# Chapter 1



## 1. AN HEIR IS BORN

On the night of April 29, 1901, the moon shone brightly over the Imperial Palace, illuminating the oaks, zelkovas, and beds of moss pinks in the garden. At 10:10 p.m., the first, robust cries of an infant resounded inside the palace. Princess Sadako, who had married Crown Prince Yoshihito (later Emperor Taisho) on May 10 of the preceding year, had given birth to a baby boy, Emperor Meiji's first grandchild. The entire nation rejoiced at the news of the royal birth.

In 1867, executive authority was restored to the emperor when the Tokugawa Shogunate, which had ruled Japan for 265 years, was overthrown. With the dawn of the new era, the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese were reminded that their nation boasted a long line of emperors, who ruled Japan not by force, but with compassion.

The five-article Charter Oath was issued in 1868. Japan embarked on the path to modernization, adopting useful aspects of Western culture. In 1869, telegraph wires were laid between Tokyo and Yokohama, and gradually extended thereafter. In 1871, a postal route connecting Tokyo and Kyoto, and another connecting Tokyo and Osaka, were inaugurated. By 1872, Japan had a modern educational system. Old institutions were reformed, and new ones established.

New construction in Tokyo of Western-style, brick edifices—train stations, banks, and office buildings—in Ginza and

Marunouchi transformed those districts. In 1889, the Meiji Constitution was promulgated, providing for the establishment of the Diet (parliament), and dictating the way in which politics would be conducted from then on.

But across the sea, events that cast foreboding and gloom over Japan were occurring. Japan recognized Korea's independence, and strove to promote friendly relations with that nation. However, China was intent on keeping Korea under its control, and reacted with displeasure to Japan's efforts.

When the Tonghak Uprising escalated in southern Korea, the Japanese government mobilized troops to protect Japanese nationals residing there. Emperor Meiji sent written instructions to Japanese diplomats in Korea, and made other attempts to achieve a peaceful settlement of the uprising. But in 1894, the emperor was forced to declare war on China in the interest of national security, when a Chinese battleship opened fire on a Japanese fleet.

With the defeat of China in 1895, the era of Japanese expansion began. But as soon as Japan had established a presence in a tiny corner of Asia, France and Germany, incited by Russia, issued a series of protests, demanding that Japan return the Liaodong Peninsula to China. The three nations threatened to wage war against Japan if it refused to comply.

Emperor Meiji was reluctant to involve his subjects in another conflict, believing that they had suffered enough. At an Imperial Conference, he made the decision to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China. Meanwhile, Russia, France, and Germany (and Great Britain) were devouring China like vultures picking at carrion. In China, a secret society called the Yihetuan (called the "Boxers" by foreign residents), which sought the expulsion of all foreigners from China, committed violent acts against those foreigners, and instigated a siege of foreign legations.

In Japan, stock prices plummeted, and there were runs on banks. Company after company went bankrupt. Precisely because there was so little joy in their lives of the Japanese in 1901, the birth of a royal heir brightened their spirits.

The infant weighed about 3,000 grams at birth. His father, Crown Prince Yoshihito, was 24, and his mother, Princess Sadako, 18. Emperor Meiji, his grandfather, was 50.

The formal naming ceremony was to take place when the prince was seven days old. Auspiciously, that day coincided with the Boys' Festival (May 5). On that day, the Ministry of the Imperial Household announced that the prince born on April 29 would be named Michinomiya Hirohito. Hirohito was his formal name, but he was addressed as "Michinomiya" or "Prince Michi" during his childhood.

The Chinese characters for the prince's name were chosen to convey the hopes his grandfather placed in his future. Emperor Meiji wanted him to become an open-minded, magnanimous monarch — one who would devote himself to the happiness of the entire human race. When the Japanese people heard this news, they looked up at the paper carp streamers, *koinobori*, high in the deep blue sky, their hearts full of hope and joy.

Both of Prince Michi's parents were of excellent character. Crown Prince Yoshihito was a kind man who didn't have an evil bone in his body. Having observed the daily lives of ordinary people, he was inspired to write and recite innumerable Chinese poems, many of them for farmers — prayers for good weather and bountiful harvests.

His mother, Princess Sadako, was the daughter of Duke Kujo Michitaka, the head of one of the five families who had held the positions of *sessho* (regent) and *kanpaku* (chief councillor) since the 9th century. Previously, Japan's emperors took concubines to ensure the birth and survival to adulthood of a male heir. However, when Sadako became a member of the imperial household, that practice ceased. Sadako bore four children.

Sadako lovingly nursed Emperor Taisho, whose health was never good. When he was particularly unwell, she stayed by his side, day and night. After her husband's death, when she became Empress Dowager Teimei, Sadako devoted herself to aiding victims of leprosy, for which there was no cure at the time. She was

instrumental in establishing sanatoriums for lepers. Akashi Kaijin, a poet afflicted with the disease, dedicated the following two verses to the empress.

*Surely Empress Teimei must be the reincarnation of  
Empress Komyo of ancient times,  
Who took the poor and sick under her wing.*

*So overwhelmed am I by gratitude to Empress Teimei  
for her kindness and generosity  
That if I dared to put it into words, I would say that  
I do not regret having been born a leper in the Land of  
the Rising Sun.*

## 2. CHILDHOOD

On July 7, 1901, the day of the Tanabata Festival, and 70 days after he was born, Prince Michi was given over to the care of Count Kawamura Sumiyoshi, who resided in the Azabu district of Tokyo. Entrusting the care of royal heirs to someone outside the imperial family was a tradition that had been observed for many years. It was rooted in the belief that the child would grow up healthier and stronger than he would if reared in the palace by servants.

Three years and four months later, when Count Kawamura died, Prince Michi moved to the Akasaka Detached Palace, where his younger brother, Prince Atsu (later Prince Chichibu) resided. Devoted to his sons, the crown prince would walk across the garden to visit his sons whenever the opportunity arose. There he would delight Prince Michi and Prince Atsu by playing tag with them.

Emperor Meiji, too, was extremely fond of Prince Michi. Most people, even adults, would be awestruck upon entering the ante-room to the emperor's office. But the three-year-old Prince Michi would walk into the study and say, "Grandfather, show me that," pointing to an object in the room. The emperor always obliged.

When Prince Michi grew a little older, Emperor Meiji told him that eventually, he'd need to learn to ride on horseback. He

presented the little boy with a rocking horse, which the two brothers spent many happy hours riding.

Both of them slept in the same bedroom. One would expect siblings only a year apart to quarrel, but they never did. They always played together harmoniously.

When Prince Michi was three years old, he was taken on a trip to Hakone. The mayor of Kanagawa Prefecture filled a huge basket with fish, a gift for the little prince. The next year, the mayor sent word that he'd like to see Prince Michi again. When the message was delivered to Prince Michi, he said, "Oh, the man with the fish!" The Imperial Household staff members entrusted with his care were continually marveling at how much he remembered.

When he was five or six years old, he rode a real horse, though a small one, at indoor stables in Aoyama. Not long thereafter, Prince Michi went to the palace gate to catch a glimpse of the outside world. He saw a newsboy running down the street, the bells attached to his waist jangling, shouting "Extra, extra!" The special edition he was hawking carried news about the Russo-Japanese War, which was then at its height. Prince Michi found some bells and some old newspaper. He then proceeded to run around the palace grounds, shouting "Extra, extra!" Whenever he encountered someone, he would hand him a scrap of paper.

One day after the war had ended, he went to visit Emperor Meiji. Seven dignitaries who had been awarded medals for their achievements in the war (including Ito Hirobumi, Yamagata Aritomo, Matsukata Masayoshi, and Inoue Kaoru) entered the room where Prince Michi and his brother were waiting.

They frightened Prince Atsu, who fled. But Prince Michi stood still for a moment looking at the seven impressive figures. Ito approached him and said:

"Are you Prince Michi?"

Prince Michi nodded and said, "Yes. Who are you?"

"My name is Ito. Your grandfather bestowed a great honor on me today, so I came to express my gratitude."

"Oh," said Prince Michi, nodding. "Who are those men over there?"

Ito introduced Commander Yamagata and the other five officers, who greeted the young prince.

“Which medal did you receive today?”

Ito pointed to one of the many that adorned his chest.

“What about the others?”

“This one is from a foreign country.”

Ito then proceeded to provide explanations of each of his medals to the little prince. Most children would have been nervous or fearful when surrounded by seven formidable dignitaries, but not Prince Michi. The men were amazed and remarked on how special this child was, perhaps because he was destined to become emperor.

Adachi Taka, a lady-in-waiting, took care of Prince Michi for 11 years, from the time when he moved to the Akasaka Detached Palace until he reached adolescence. She later reported that when she observed the encounter between the prince and the seven men, she was so moved that she was on the verge of tears.

At the age of seven, Prince Michi entered the Elementary Division of Gakushuin, the Peers’ School. General Nogi Maresuke was appointed headmaster of the school. Because he was selfless, conscientious, and decisive, he was adjudged the best qualified to supervise the prince’s education.

One day the prince was wrestling, wearing his school uniform, and tore his trousers. When he went home, he told Taka, “Mr. Headmaster said that I shouldn’t wear clothes with tears in them. I should put a patch on the tear. He said I shouldn’t be ashamed to wear clothes that have patches on them. Please sew a patch on my trousers.” When Taka complied and returned the trousers to him, Prince Michi said, “This will be fine, because Mr. Headmaster said so.” From then on, he proudly wore trousers and socks that had been patched.

One day Headmaster Nogi posed a question to the prince. “How do you come to school when it rains?”

“I’m driven in a carriage.”

“From now on, wear a coat and walk to school, even if it’s raining.”

The prince never rode to school in a carriage again, regardless of the weather.

One snowy morning, the headmaster saw the prince warming his hands over a large charcoal brazier. He said, “Your Highness, when it’s cold like this, you shouldn’t stay inside. You’ll feel warmer if you go outside and run around the athletic field two or three times. Children are meant to be outdoors.” Prince Michi followed his instructions immediately.

During a mountain-climbing excursion, Nogi asked the prince, “Your Highness, do you always run when you ascend a mountain? And what do you do when you descend?”

“I don’t run going up — just going down.”

“Your Highness, it’s all right to run when you’re ascending, but you should descend slowly, one step at a time.”

Whenever the opportunity arose, Nogi provided advice, even on seemingly trivial matters. Prince Hirohito obediently listened to and heeded that advice.

Prince Michi couldn’t tell when his friends were lying, because he himself never lied or cheated. He believed everything they told him. Adachi Taka reported that so many times, she was touched by his pureness of heart.

When Emperor Meiji died, Nogi followed him, taking his own life. Two days before his death, Nogi nonchalantly bid farewell to the young prince. He gave the prince *The True Facts of the Central Realm*, written by the 18th-century military strategist and Confucian philosopher Yamaga Soko. When he presented the book, Nogi said, “This book is about an altruistic, benevolent emperor. It is too difficult for you to read now, but have one of your attendants read it to you and explain the parts that you don’t understand. When you grow up, read it yourself, again and again.

The thoughtful, intuitive boy sensed a different air about Nogi, and asked, “Is Mr. Headmaster going somewhere?”

When one of his servants addressed the headmaster as “General Nogi,” Prince Michi said, “You must call him ‘Mr. Headmaster,’” demonstrating his heartfelt respect for the educator. After all there were many generals, but only one headmaster.

Nogi, believing there was no greater way to show his respect and admiration, joined Emperor Meiji on his journey to the other world.

Prince Michi, who was only 11 at the time, had lost both his grandfather and his mentor. When he heard the news of Nogi's passing, all he said was "Mr. Headmaster died, too, did he?" But it was obvious that he was overcome with sadness, though he bore his grief in silence.

Despite his youth, Prince Hirohito must have been aware of his grandfather's greatness. He also must have known, deep inside, which attributes a human being should possess to achieve that sort of greatness.

In that time of sorrow, it was the empress, his mother, who took the young prince under her wing and comforted him. She endeavored to help him convert that sadness to something nobler. Even after he became emperor, Prince Michi never forgot her kindness.

### 3. PREPARING TO LEAD A NATION

When his father assumed the throne as Emperor Taisho, Prince Michi became crown prince. Thereafter, he was addressed as "the crown prince" or "Prince Hirohito." When he graduated from the Elementary Division of Gakushuin, instead of advancing to the Intermediate Division of that institution, he studied at a special school established to educate him and located in Takanawa. It was there that he acquired the knowledge needed to lead a nation. In addition to Prince Hirohito, there were six students at the school. The illustrious naval officer Admiral Togo Heihachiro was chosen as headmaster.

The curriculum was very broad, consisting of ethics, Japanese literature, history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, the natural sciences, the Chinese classics, French, calligraphy, art history, law, economics, the earth sciences, physical education, martial arts, horseback riding, and military science. All the instructors were distinguished scholars, including the president of Tokyo University and a former minister of education.



Prince Hirohito wrestling with Mr. Yatomi,  
Prince Takamatsu's tutor

One of them, Sugiura Jugo, the ethics instructor, took his mission very seriously. He saw that the prince had been blessed with noble character, and strived to raise it to an even higher level. Sugiura consulted with many of his colleagues, and gave considerable thought to the content of his classes.

Ultimately, he had an epiphany. Sugiura discovered the educational goal to be attained by someone who was destined to be emperor. It was to nurture in the crown prince a warm heart like the sun, which sheds its light on all people and all things.

To achieve that goal, he decided to concentrate on the imperial regalia (the Three Sacred Treasures), the Charter Oath of 1868, and the Imperial Rescript on Education.