

The Imperial Family

Role of the Emperor

The emperor takes on the legal role prescribed in the constitution as "symbol of the state and the unity of the people." His duties, in this regard, tend to be ceremonial and symbolic. The emperor can act in other matters only upon the advice, and with the approval, of the cabinet.

The emperor also performs certain religious functions that are not part of his constitutional responsibilities and are considered "family matters" to be witnessed by small groups within the imperial entourage.

The Emperor and Empress of Japan

The new emperor of Japan acceded to the throne immediately upon the death of his father, Emperor Hirohito, at 6:33 a.m. on Saturday, January 7, 1989. At midnight that day, the Showa era came to an end and the Heisei era (the period of the realization of peace) began. The enthronement ceremony was held in Tokyo on November 12, 1990, in the presence of world dignitaries, including Governor General and Mrs. Ray Hnatyshyn.

Emperor Akihito was born in Tokyo on December 23, 1933. Following his graduation from Gakushuin High School in 1952, he studied politics and economy at Tokyo's Gakushuin University until 1956.

The emperor came of age in 1952, assuming the responsibilities of crown prince. He subsequently took on further representational duties at home and abroad; for example, he attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on behalf of his father. En route to London, he travelled across Canada by train, paying official visits to Victoria, Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montréal.

The crown prince visited 41 nations in all parts of the world, including Eastern Europe. He presided as honorary president over various associations and meetings, including the International Statistics Society, the Science Council of the Pacific, the International Games for the Disabled and the Marine Exposition in Okinawa.

Given his father's interest in marine biology, it is not surprising that the emperor developed a similar interest at an early age; he has become a recognized expert on the Japanese goby, a small carnivorous fish species. He has published over 20 articles on the goby in the *Journal of the Japanese Ichthyology Society*, of which he is a member. In recognition of his personal expertise, he was selected a member of the Linnean Society of London in 1980 and, in 1983, was appointed a research associate of the Australian Museum in Sydney.

On April 10, 1959, the crown prince married Michiko Shoda, the eldest daughter of a prominent Japanese business executive. Empress Michiko was born in Tokyo on October 20, 1934. She graduated from Sacred Heart Women's University in 1957.

The emperor and the empress took the unprecedented step of raising their children themselves. Their three children – Crown Prince Naruhito, 31, Prince Fumihito, 25, and Princess Sayako, 22 – have reached adulthood within the setting of the nuclear family. The sons, currently second and third in the imperial succession, have studied at Oxford.