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Trouble at the Top: Japan's Imperial Family in Crisis

by David McNeill and Herbert P. Bix

Introduction (DMN)

In June this year I had the opportunity to visit the inside of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo when I covered the official visit to Japan of Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern as a correspondent for the Irish Times newspaper.

On a sunny morning, I arrived with a small party of photographers and journalists inside the Palace ground, set in 300 sprawling acres of greenery in the very heart of Tokyo, much of it off limits to the public that pays for it. We were met by a kunaicho (Imperial Household Agency) official, a superbly unpleasant and sniffy bureaucrat, who did not feel the need to smile or even greet us in the usual formal Japanese way. He immediately raised a fuss over the dress code of an RTE (Irish television) cameraman, sparking a mad scramble for a jacket before our 11 am deadline to meet the Emperor.

On the way to the Emperor's official meeting room for foreign dignitaries, the Household Agency official complained that it was "rude" to turn up in informal clothes to meet "his majesty." He then berated me for walking in the center of the long hallway leading to the meeting room. "Only his majesty walks in the center," he said banishing me to the edges of the carpet. In the meeting room we were told we would have 90 seconds to photograph the Emperor as he arrived to greet Mr. Ahern. We should be careful not to make any noises when he entered the room. We would leave directly afterward.

I mention this incident to give a flavor of the life of the beleaguered Princess Masako since she gave up a diplomatic career for life beyond the royal moat. Surrounded by people like our handler, with their total dedication to the emperor cult and the countless arcane rules that structure it, and under intense pressure to produce a male heir, it's all too easy to imagine the princess' state of mind. As the Imperial correspondent for Japan's top news agency said: "Now you know why she has become ill. There are so many old rules like these that must be making life unbearable for someone who was used to having a lot of freedom. On top of that she has to produce a child. I feel very sorry for her."

The plight of Masako is just part of a much wider institutional crisis. Although still revered and discussed in semi-mystical terms by ultra-nationalists and a dwindling number of older Japanese raised to believe the Emperor was a god, most youngsters are indifferent to the Imperial Family. The Emperor and his offspring have struggled to find a role in a country that does not allow them the same outlets for charitable and military pursuits as the UK royals; like their British counterparts, the Japanese Imperial Family is increasingly out of touch with social attitudes that have changed enormously, even since the death of the Showa Emperor (Hirohito) in 1989.

The kunaicho-driven pressure on the princess to have another child, despite her age and obviously delicate mental and physical health, is representative of a particular conservative faction in Japan that wants a male heir to preserve the institution at all costs. This faction has never been particularly comfortable with the assertive, cosmopolitan aspects of the princess' character that have made her a doyen of the foreign press, even though these qualities put her closer to the prevailing attitudes and lifestyles of contemporary Japanese women, a majority of whom are working and delaying marriage and children.

That this faction is increasingly at odds with mainstream opinion in Japan is obvious from the growing popular support for a female emperor, reflected even in mainstream political circles. Yoko Komiya, shadow minister of justice in the opposition Democratic Party of Japan recently told a foreign reporter that 80 percent of the public favored changing the Constitution to allow this: "My opinion is that succession should be to the first child, whether it is male or female, as this is an age of equality."

All this may or not be the prelude to something more fundamental, a questioning of the basic role of the monarchy perhaps in a country where such discussion has until now been successfully hemmed in by conservative political opinion, a largely pliant media and the not insignificant threat of ultra-right violence. The current Emperor Akihito is ill with cancer at 70. His 44-year old son Naruhito, Masako's husband, who is next in line to the Chrysanthemum throne, has given many signs that he dislikes the current setup. There has been a notable weakening in the taboo-value of the Imperial institution since 1989 and much of the family's dirty linen is regularly washed in public forums such as the weekly female press. No sane commentator would write off an institution that is still of enormous symbolic and political value to conservatives in Japan, but clearly significant change looms.

The question explored in the first of the two pieces below inspired by the recent flap over Princess Masako's health (much of which emerged in marginal publications in Japan or in the foreign press) is this: why do the mainstream media so utterly fail to reflect this changing landscape? Here I had an opportunity to talk to several senior Japanese and foreign correspondents as well as a number of commentators on the Imperial scene. In the second piece, Herbert Bix sets these recent developments in their wider context.

The media and the Imperial Family

By David McNeill

For a family that prefers to keep a low profile and adopt a kind of bland civil servant image, these are trying times for the Imperial Household. Swathes of the world's dwindling forests have been felled to fuel media speculation on the health of Princess Masako, her relationship with her husband Prince Naruhito and their struggles to produce a male heir to the world's oldest hereditary institution. Much of the blame for this unwanted attention lies with Naruhito himself, who sparked the latest media feeding frenzy with a barbed press conference in May.[1]

Since 1965, the emperor has watched his offspring bring nine female babies into the world and not a single male, a poor batting average that once would have been solved by pressing into service an Imperial womb-for-hire (known as 'karibara'). Today, the responsibility for continuing the purportedly 2600-year patriarchal line has fallen on the frail shoulders of the ex-Ms. Owada Masako. Unsurprisingly, she seems to have buckled under the pressure.

Following her husband's press conference, the media speculated that the princess was depressed and had had a nervous breakdown, possibly following a lapse into the language of the stud farm last year by the Imperial Household Agency's Grand Steward, Yuasa Toshio, who said that he wanted the couple to have another child. Masako, said the press, may be refusing to sleep with her husband and is terribly worried about her daughter Aiko, who may have a developmental disorder. Relations between her and the Emperor and Empress are extremely poor and "she is waiting for them to die."

But which media are responsible for these stories? Not the big news gathering organizations in Japan which despite (or as many prefer to argue, because of) their exclusive membership in the IHA press club seldom report major scoops. Famously, it was the Washington Post that first told the world about Princess Masako's engagement to Naruhito in 1993, after the local newspapers had sat on the story for months. It was the London Independent that suggested in 2001 that Princess Aiko was the product of in-vitro fertilization, although it was widely rumored in Japan. And it was The Times that carried most of the above detail about Masako's current condition in a May 21st piece called "The Depression of a Princess."

It's all part of a long tradition of royal reporting in Japan by Big Media: kid gloves lobbying the softest of softballs to an institution that still seems suspended somewhere between heaven and earth in the journalistic pantheon. Even Furutachi Ichiro, the new anchor of Japan's flagship liberal news program, Asahi's Hodo Station, decided in the aftermath of the Masako flap to criticize the foreign press as fuyukai (lit. 'disagreeable' but closer in meaning here to 'disgusting'), rather than explore the issues it raised or, heaven forbid, join hands with his foreign colleagues in trying to expose unaccountable and un-elected power.

As Richard Lloyd Parry, author of the May 21st article says: "Japanese journalists knew all about Masako's illness and it didn't surprise any of them when we spoke to them. So why didn't they run the story? In my view it's because of the strange institutional taboos that still surround the Imperial Family, which are very murky and not rational and which have a lot to do with Japan's war and postwar history. This period has not been properly dispelled or digested. There is still unfinished business."

Not one reporter ever asked Emperor Hirohito about his responsibility for the war in Asia, potentially one of the great stories of the last half-century. This is despite the enormous pool of journalists assigned to cover the Imperial Household Agency from the press club on the second floor of its headquarters. According to one former Imperial correspondent for a major newspaper: "At any one time about 20 to 25 journalists from different news organizations cover it, but there are hundreds of journalists registered in the IHA press club, in case of an accident or incident related to the Emperor. In our newspaper alone, there are 30 people registered. It's a huge club."

These journalists have exclusive access to briefings by agency officials and Imperial family members, and usually prepare their questions collectively before submitting them for vetting, shunning most sensitive issues. Their dismal performance over the years has earned the establishment press in Japan a reputation for at best timidity, at worst incompetence: "The Japanese media industry in general is hopelessly bad at what it does, but the IHA press club shows the worst aspects of the Japanese media," says Asano Kenichi, professor of journalism at Doshisha University and an ex-Kyodo News reporter. "The journalists there are not doing their job of informing the Japanese public about what goes on." [2]

The correspondents speak

But let's not overestimate the investigative prowess of the foreign press, who rely for all their stories on local sources, often reporters working in or close to the IHA press club. "I have great respect for Japanese journalists who I count as colleagues and friends, says Lloyd Parry. "I couldn't work without the work already done by these people." These journalists, and a host of former correspondents and Imperial watchers, fill the vacuum left by the sketchy reporting of Japan's first family by Big Media by feeding 'peripheral' outlets: the weekly and monthly magazines (excluded from the IHA press club) and the foreign press, endless tidbits of gossip and inside information from their privileged Imperial ringside seats. One way or another, much of what goes on beyond the Imperial moat finds its way into print, although often in a hopelessly distorted and unreliable way. [3]

Sometimes the insiders do this for drinking money, sometimes out of friendship with tabloid and other journalists and sometimes out of civic duty in a taboo-ridden system that many also find frustrating. The current Imperial correspondent for a major Japanese newspaper said: "I probably put in writing less than one-tenth of one-percent of what I see and hear. For a writer, that's a kind of torture. It's a real struggle to slow yourself down and just learn to watch." His colleague, who writes for a news agency goes further: "Not everybody agrees with me but personally I believe reporters should leak information when it is important and they cannot get it published, although I don't think they should do it for money or tell lies. It's a public service because there are many publications that don't have access."

So how do these much-maligned correspondents feel about their jobs and the recent reporting of the Masako issue? I interviewed two current and one former IHA press-club member for this article. Two work for major newspapers and one for a news agency. [4] Although they denied there was any taboo on reporting the Imperial Family, all refused to allow me to use their names, or even the organizations they work for. One spoke in such a secretive whisper my tape-recorder barely picked him up. We could have been doing a story on the Yakuza rather than on one of the most boring posts in Japanese journalism. Nevertheless, all three correspondents gave considered, thoughtful and sometimes surprising replies to most questions. From here on the interviewees will be referred to as Correspondents A, B & C.

Two of the journalists had very harsh things to say about The Times Masako piece. Correspondent A said it was a 'tsukuri-banashi,' (lit. a made-up story), another that it was 'laughable.' Correspondent B said there was no way The Times could have known the things in the article because nobody does, except Masako and a handful of close friends. Correspondent C was more conciliatory and said The Times piece was useful because it had shaken things up and got a discussion going. For the record, Lloyd Parry stands by the 'fairness and accuracy' of everything in the May 21st article. "Nobody, officially or unofficially, has come to complain about the story. Obviously the information about Masako does come from a person close to her. And as for the source of the information about Masako's relations with the emperor, that was a quotation from a Japanese journalist who is in a position to know. We judged it to be a point of view representative of more than one person we interviewed."

My three interviewees, like all Imperial correspondents, have an opportunity to meet the emperor face to face at least once a year in the Tochigi Prefecture Imperial retreat for an informal chat. Would they question him this year (in September) about the Masako affair? All gave an unqualified no. Correspondent A said this was part personal (he didn't believe that Masako disliked the Emperor), part cultural (it's not 'Japanese' to make the other person deliberately feel uncomfortable in such a setting) and part political (there was nothing to be 'gained' by asking such questions, and probably a lot to be lost, implying he would be thrown out of the press club). Correspondents A & B said that Princess Masako's illness, the state of her marriage and the test-tube baby story are "personal issues." Correspondent B cited the need to be "120 percent accurate on Imperial stories." When questioned why, he said: "If I make a mistake on a business or crime story I have to make a formal apology. If I make a mistake on a story about the emperor, the head of the newspaper has to apologize."

Prof. Asano feels these answers are evasive. "The need for 120 percent accuracy is a double standard because they don't act this way for other stories. If they are unsure, they should ask someone in authority for their opinion and a quote. They should provide the information and let ordinary readers decide for themselves." As for the issue of privacy, Prof. Asano is even more blunt: "The Imperial Family is the ultimate symbol of Japan and they need a male successor, so they shouldn't have any secrets from the public, and this includes their sexual activities." Richard Lloyd Parry agrees that some issues, including Masako's depression, are 'private' but adds: "We heard the story about Masako's illness in January or February but decided not to use it because it was a personal matter. But in May when her husband blamed the Imperial Household for her illness the question was in the public domain, and you couldn't understand the story fully until you got the rest of the information. So at that stage we decided to run it."

All the correspondents claimed, however, that if they had a story that was judged important enough they would write it. Asked to give an example, Correspondent A said if the IHA announced that Masako had indeed had a nervous breakdown but asked journalists not to write it, he would ignore them. But he was not sure it would get past his editors: "Newspapers in Japan are very conservative. The managers are usually in their fifties and sixties. They're afraid of the ultra-right. You have taboos in Islamic societies and in Christian societies. This is our taboo. The Imperial system is still the backbone of Japan. It's not possible to criticize it basically."

But why not, and why not ask about Masako? If a journalist takes six months off work he has to provide an explanation. Shouldn't she be held accountable? Correspondent B agreed but explained the dilemma of Imperial correspondents as follows: "It's no good arguing that we should treat the Imperial Family like ordinary people. We have to accept what is special about these people. This doesn't mean that we have to respect them just because they're the Imperial Family, but we have to accept the objective truth that they are different. They're not like television talent. Legally they're special. The constitution says these people have no legal rights. They have no political power. The Emperor can't walk away from his job. All he can do it pray. That's his job. It's really quite cruel. But that is the objective truth within which we operate and we have to respect that."

Who cares?

Does any of this matter? Interest in the Imperial Family in Japan is low and declining. Most young people do not even know the name of the man who is married to Princess Masako. Polls show that even the social attitudes of those who are interested have left behind an institution that is, in the words of Professor Herbert Bix, "totally out of sync with the times" and one that "can no longer function as a model, let alone a symbol of national unity." The taboo on reporting Imperial issues, all the Imperial correspondents claim, has declined since the death of controversial war Emperor Hirohito. Better then, perhaps, to let the emperor and his family fade gently from history.

Dr. Ivan Hall, author of *Cartels of the Mind*, wonders if they will: "Many of us worry about the monarchy here, because they are what gives the nationalist right its respectable center. It is the ultimate linchpin of the myth of Japanese uniqueness, because the emperor is supposed to be descended from the gods, and the lodestar for the most repressive ideas of racial superiority." The Imperial Household is also backed by powerful sections of the Japanese establishment, including many members of the LDP and the Association of Shinto Shrines, a powerful right-wing organization that represents some 20,000 Shinto priests.

Which leads to a final thesis. Perhaps Big Media in Japan, rather than informing the Japanese public about the Imperial Family and bring it down to earth, as say the British press has to its monarchy over the last two decades, helps to protect it and ensure its aura of "mystery" and uniqueness. As evidence, take the famous (at least outside Japan) incident on December 18, 2001 when Emperor Akihito, in the middle of a period of bitter controversy about history textbooks, spoke in detail about his own Korean roots.^[5] The speech was front-page news in Korea but barely made the inside pages of two Japanese newspapers: the *Asahi* and *Sankei*. Prof. Asano believes he knows why. "The newspapers here were too worried about the implications of that speech and the reaction from nationalists so they ignored it. The only reason why the *Asahi* and *Sankei* published it is because they publish all press conferences on their Web sites so somebody spotted it there."

At least one Imperial correspondent agrees. "If you want to argue that we protect the mystery (*shimpiteki na bubun*) of the Imperial Family, I think we do. But no matter what we do the family will have to reform. And the more they reform the more the mystery will decline. That's their dilemma."

The Troubled Imperial Family and the Constitution

By Herbert P. Bix

On May 10, 2004, before leaving on a short European tour, Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito disclosed at a press conference that his wife, Princess Masako, who had earlier withdrawn from official duties, had "completely exhausted herself" and was unable to accompany him. For this he blamed her surroundings. "[T]here were moves to reject Masako's career [as a diplomat] and her character," he complained to stunned journalists gathered at his Togu Detached Palace in Tokyo. His heart-felt words immediately ignited debate. For Naruhito spoke as an aggrieved husband, defending his partner's right to freedom and dignity under the postwar constitution. Never before in public had that been done. Could the bureaucrats really have lost control of the Crown Prince's image?

Immediately some royal watchers deduced that either the Imperial Household Agency or Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, were to blame for her poor health. A careful observer of the Japanese scene, Richard Lloyd Parry writing in the *London Times*, cited this allegation of a Japanese journalist, offered in the wake of Naruhito's cryptic statement. To wit: "Masako has become an imperial drop-out." She is "hostile towards the Emperor [Akihito] and the Empress [Michiko], and . . . waiting for them to die. It sounds horrible and shocking. But this is the truth of what's happening inside the Crown Prince's household and the public doesn't know about."

Actually, the Japanese public senses only too well that the current state of the imperial family is a picture of unhappiness. Equally well understood, especially by Japanese officials who have a vested interest in preserving it, is the monarchy's fragile nature. Since the Meiji era, succession and image problems have beset the modern patriarchal institution. Writers who understand the historical roots of the monarchy's deepest problems have emphasized the consciously intended, political nature of Naruhito's statement. Seki Hirono, in his article in the *Asahi shimbun* (satellite edition), June 12, 2004, for example, claimed that an "isolated" prince was attempting to highlight the overly close connection between the postwar-reformed monarchy and the Japanese state, and draw attention to the failure of the Constitution of Japan to guarantee the human rights of imperial family members. In an indirect way Seki was also coming down on the side of constitutional reform.

Recent Japanese public opinion polls suggest the underlying social changes behind the Crown Prince's remarks of May 10. For the past several years, polls have shown a major change on the issue of a woman emperor. In the first survey on this issue (*Kyodo Tsushin*, December 1975) 54.7 percent of respondents said the emperor had to be a male and 31.9 percent said that it was OK if a female became emperor. Fourteen years later, shortly after the death of the Showa Emperor Hirohito, the majority of Japanese still favored male succession. But by the late 1990s, that trend had reversed, with nearly 50 percent of respondents in a *Kyodo* survey favoring a female emperor and less than a third wanting the throne limited to a male.

This trend grew stronger after December 2002, when Princess Masako, under great pressure to produce a male heir to the throne, miscarried. When she finally gave birth to a baby girl, Aiko, in November 2002, nearly 69 percent of all respondents favored a female emperor; only 3.7 percent opposed the idea. Today more than 80 percent of the Japanese people are eager to move into an era of female emperors. The Crown Prince's defense of Masako can only strengthen this trend.

If the imperial institution, not to mention the whole heritage of monarchy itself, has become more burdensome for the royals than for the Japanese people, does this not reflect the deeper changes that have occurred in Japanese society over the past sixty years?

Consider how marital patterns and lifestyles have changed since General MacArthur, partly for his own short-term political reasons and partly in compliance with Truman administration policy, had the monarchy written into the Constitution of Japan. Today marriage occurs late, divorces are frequent, women have fewer children, and many women continue to work after marriage. Conversely, an increasing number of men take part in child rearing and contribute to housework. In this twenty-first century society, with its diverse male and female lifestyles, the imperial family (thus by extension, the politically powerless monarchy) can no longer function as a model, let alone a symbol of national unity. Nor can the older, masculine-type of public discourse on the emperor have much appeal when the psychology to support it is eroding and the Imperial Household Law that undergirds the imperial institution is totally out of sync with the times.

Perhaps this is why the ruling Liberal Democratic Party so strongly supports the compulsory singing in the public schools of the national anthem (*Kimigayo*) and the display of the national flag (*hinomaru*). Anthem and flag, not the emperor, have become the real symbols of contemporary Japan. Should one conclude, then, that "nationalism without the emperor" has finally come into its own? Certainly the possibility is there, which is why revision of the Imperial Household Law to allow for female succession can realistically be imagined. And although no party is proposing the emperor's deletion from the constitution, that idea too has been publicly aired. Neo-nationalist political entrepreneurs bridle at such talk, of course. They still see use-value in the constitutionally-guaranteed monarchy, and have not abandoned the idea of manipulating the imperial house for political purposes.

Nevertheless, the discussion of female succession to the throne has become part of Japan's constitutional revision debate, along with proposals to jettison Japan's peace principle, inscribed in the preamble and Article 9. Some of the strongest friends of institutionalizing female emperors are gathered in the newly ascendant Democratic Party, which looks forward to rewriting the constitution in its entirety. As the major conservative parties in the ruling coalition forge a popular mandate for constitutional revision, heavy-handed U.S. pressure complicates their internal disagreements. Under the leadership of LDP Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, Japan has unknowingly allied with America's religious wars and is cooperating with the Bush administration's 'world-threatening' plans for the militarization of space. And so their debate goes on with the Japanese people morally disadvantaged by their U.S. alliance. How these issues play out in the future is bound to shape the nature of the imperial institution and, indeed, the nature of Japanese politics.

1. The full text of Prince Naruhito's remarks can be found on the Imperial Household Agency's Web site at: <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/press-crown/prince2004-0510.html>. The cast of characters behind the Imperial Moat and their proper titles can be found at: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Imperial_Household_of_Japan

2. Interesting to note here that South Korea, which has a similar, much-criticized press club system, has recently begun to dismantle it. See N. Onishi, "South Korea Dissolves Ties That Once Bound the Press to the Powerful," *New York Times*, 13 June, 2004

3. It should be noted too that for years the British press shared a similar attitudes to the Queen and her family. As old footage of BBC interviews with members of the British royal family make clear, obsequiousness was a job requirement for court reporters. Like their Japanese counterparts, British publications also sometimes relied on foreign publications like *Paris Match* to broach royal topics before they felt able to cover them. It is only in the last 20 years that royal taboos in the UK have tumbled amid intense tabloid competition for a dwindling readership, led by the Murdoch-owned *Sun*, a newspaper percolated by anti-royal sentiment, despite the often fawning language used to refer to the Windsor family. See Peter Chippendale and Chris Horrie (1998), *Stick it up your Punter: The Uncut Story of the "Sun" Newspaper*, Pocket Books.

4. The Big Media correspondents are usually assigned to the IHA press club on rotation, often in two-year intervals. There is much speculation about the selection procedure; some critics such as Prof. Asano say only the elite and the ideologically safe are allowed to stand in the shadows of Imperial family members, although Correspondent C said he was known in his newspaper for his anti-royalist views.

5. Among other things, Emperor Akihito said he read in an eighth-century official history document that the mother of Emperor Kammu (736-806) was of the line of King Muryong, who ruled one of three ancient kingdoms on the peninsula.

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