

Still Taboo After All These Years: Japan's New Imperial Heir and the Media

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By David McNeill

In late August, just over a week before Princess Kiko gave birth, *Newsweek Japan* commissioned me to contribute an article on the succession issue. With most of the country expecting a baby boy, the remit was to write a 'very outspoken, opinionated' piece on how 'foreign experts' viewed the latest developments in Japan's imperial drama, with the emphasis on a single rhetorical question: wouldn't a girl be better?

In November 2005, as the debate on changing the Imperial Household Law to allow a female monarch raged, we had written a cover story titled "Does Japan Need its Imperial Family?" (in Japanese, *Koshitsu wa hontou ni hitsuyou?*), which explored among other things why Japan appears to be unique among the world's remaining monarchies in forbidding female rule. That article criticized Japan's Big Media for stifling debate.

It is ironic then that during the translation process for the latest article, which was also projected to be a cover story, *Newsweek* declined to publish. The chief editor explained in an e-mail that he couldn't run the piece as planned on September 6th, the scheduled date of Princess Kiko's caesarean birth. That effectively meant it would never see the light of day because after the birth it would lose all news value.

Was the chief editor surprised by the content? I

had sent a detailed proposal to *Newsweek* before starting, and later a list of interviewees and a full copy of the article's introduction. Throughout the week, e-mails from the commissioning editor had told me to move ahead, with specific instructions to shorten the introduction or seek out more quotes. On final delivery, she said she was very happy with the piece.

The problem, as the chief editor explained later, is that the article would have been sharply at odds with the mood of the country on the very day the new heir arrived. Yet as he also said, hinting at pressure from above, this was exactly the sort of independent niche role *Newsweek* had carved for itself. Moreover, support for a male heir was far from universal, as anyone who dragged his or her eyes away from the fawning TV coverage to talk to ordinary Japanese people quickly discovered. Indeed, given that one survey carried out before the Kiko pregnancy reported that 84 percent of the country supported a female emperor, it is quite possible that ours was the majority view.

There was no shortage of coverage about the imperial bundle of joy, who came into life wrapped in an enormous media blanket and who even spawned at least one scoop a week before he arrived, typically in the magazine press. *Shukan shincho* reported that the baby's father, Prince Akishino, had let it slip that he and his wife were expecting a boy, exposing the official story—that the couple "didn't want to know" the sex (credited to Ichiro Kanazawa, medical supervisor to the Imperial Household Agency)—for the lie many suspected it was.



Imperial Household Agency

An imperial heir is born

In the weeks since, other publications have followed up with sometimes entertaining, if not always enlightening, articles on the drama behind the fixed imperial smiles. The women's magazine *Josei seven*, for example, looked at the tension between the Emperor's two sons, Akishino and his elder brother Naruhito, and gently probed how the new birth might affect their relationship.

But as occurs so often in the case of the Imperial family, the big media pulled its punches. Why had baby Hisahito miraculously materialized to rescue the family now from its succession crisis, effectively terminating the debate on rewriting the Imperial House Law? What did this mean for Japan and Japanese women? Can the tiny prince really shoulder the entire Chrysanthemum burden into the second half of this century? And shouldn't Japan grasp the imperial thorn and debate the biggest question of all: does the country need and want to support the imperial system?

Newsweek, like most other publications, considered these questions too discordant amid the orchestrated celebrations. Perhaps they're right, and I'm not an editor so I don't have to make those difficult decisions. But on the weekend after the birth I saw another kind of discord: a small group of brave women being harassed by ultra-nationalists outside Tokyo's Sendagaya Station as they handed out leaflets that read, "What is there to celebrate about the imperial birth?" The rightists screamed obscenities and threats at the women (in full view of the police) for having the temerity to question the cost and usefulness of the imperial institution. How lonely the women looked, and how emboldened their harassers, I thought.



Children celebrating the birth of a male heir

Journalists everywhere are a cynical lot, simultaneously the watchdogs of power and its

facilitators. In the UK, the gutter press has for years combined a fawning concern for the Queen and her Royal Family with utter contempt for the whole institution; ‘the Krauts’ was the favorite term of abuse in the newsroom of Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, for example, a reference to the Royals’ German background. Correspondents in Japan too quickly learn that their Japanese counterparts privately say far worse things about the imperial family than most foreigners could ever dream up. Over the last six months, I’ve heard rumors that Prince Hisahito was conceived with the help of fertility doctors, that his sex was known months before his birth and even that his grandmother (Akishino’s mother) is a well-known entertainer—all of this from Japanese journalists. The cynicism in my view comes from having so much information and so little opportunity to use it.

Japan Focus can run this article because it is free from commercial and political pressure—a June 2006 cyber-attack aside. The aim in posting it here is not to embarrass the *Newsweek* editors, who I respect enormously, but to do something that Big Media in Japan regularly fail to do: put the facts before those who actually pay for the Imperial Family and let them decide what is best.

Secrets and Lies: A Girl Would Be Better for Japan

One evening last February, I got a call from a researcher who worked for a well-known morning TV wide-show. The director was putting together a feature on foreign reaction to Princess Kiko’s pregnancy for broadcast the following morning. Would I care to comment as the correspondent for a British newspaper?

The call came at about 8 p.m. A crew of four would have to travel to my house 90 minutes west of Tokyo, record the interview then drive back to the city and work all night to make the morning deadline. They must have wanted their

comment pretty badly.

The crew arrived, the camera was switched on and the first question came: what do the British people think about the pregnancy? I had to be honest. Most people in the UK don’t think very often about the Japanese imperial family, I said, but as the subjects of a queen they would universally support the idea of a female monarch. They would therefore be puzzled by the succession controversy in Japan. Why this obsession in the 21st century with trying to protect the ‘purity of the imperial bloodline’ (*koshitsu no junsuina ketto ni kodawatteiru*). Hadn’t the current emperor himself admitted on his 68th birthday that there was Korean blood in the imperial line?

The camera was abruptly switched off and my interviewer—a handsome but uptight character—put on a constipated expression. ‘That’s not good,’ he said. Mobile phones came out and calls were made back to the director in the Tokyo studio, confirming that such a line of thought was verboten. We started again, with the instruction that I avoid controversy, so I talked about Britain. If the British could admit that the occupants of Buckingham Palace are the descendents of a mongrel tribe of European royal families, couldn’t Japan also consider exploring its own myth of an unbroken imperial line stretching across 125 generations?

That didn’t work either, so we tried again, this time with a very specific instruction from my interviewer: just say that the British people are intrigued and happy by the imperial pregnancy and will be watching it closely. As the crew was leaving, I asked the interviewer what the problem was. Aren’t you afraid of the ultra right, he said? The interview was never broadcast.

The Media and Kiko’s Pregnancy

Sure, there is a genuine albeit relatively small threat of extreme-right violence in Japan. It is

clear, however, that this threat is also used by journalists and the media they serve to avoid tackling controversial issues such as the implications of the imperial pregnancy. Japan is not China or Iraq: press freedoms are well protected here, reporters are well paid and seldom in real danger. The succession issue has once again showed that this country is very badly served by its establishment media.

This is not to say that Japanese reporters, some of whom I am lucky to count as friends, are not intelligent, hard-working people. Just that they are hemmed in by a system that doesn't encourage free inquiry on this hugely important institution, and indeed actively discourages it.

The debate about Kiko's pregnancy among Japan specialists outside the country, by contrast, is lively and addresses issue critical to Japan's future. Informed international opinion recognizes that a much-needed debate on the origins and future of the imperial family has now been postponed, perhaps indefinitely. Many point out that the birth of a girl would have been better for the Japanese people because it would have forced an examination of the relationship between the imperial system and gender equality. The newborn's gender aside, though, this is an institution in deep crisis.

Ken Ruoff, author of the bestselling *The People's Emperor*, for example, says it is 'ridiculous' that Japan still prevents a woman from sitting on the Chrysanthemum Throne. "I think a girl would be better for the imperial family. It would be very important if the national symbol could be a woman." He believes a boy would be a 'shame,' setting the country back and reinforcing the power of the 'chauvinistic far-right.'

Ruoff has in mind men like Hiranuma Takeo. Days before my late-night interview with the wide-show, the former trade minister told a

rally of protestors against Koizumi's succession bill that allowing a female emperor could dilute the imperial bloodline.

"If Aiko becomes the reigning empress, and gets involved with a blue-eyed foreigner while studying abroad and marries him, their child may be the emperor," warned Hiranuma. "We should never let that happen." Like many foreign correspondents, I thought that was an extraordinary statement that belonged more at a Nazi rally than in a modern, secular democracy. The fact that it appeared to be supported by 40 lawmakers is deeply worrying.

Ivan Hall, author of *Cartels of the Mind* and *Bamboozled*, and a former professor at the law faculty of Gakushuin University, believes these lawmakers hoped that a boy prince would not only save the patriarchal line, but also sideline the 'liberal' couple of Prince Naruhito and Princess Masako. "They are among the more open-minded, liberal people in the country today because of their education and the time they came to intellectual maturity. They represent a monarchy that the whole world can be comfortable with." Hall says that if four-year-old Princess Aiko became empress, she would "symbolize women's rights and more broadly citizens' rights" and raise the profile of the beleaguered Masako and her husband, who Hall believes would follow in the footsteps of his liberal father.

Like Ruoff, Hall questions why conservatives are being allowed to smother change. As Ruoff reminds us, this is probably the last monarchy in the world to forbid female rulers. "This is a monarchy that has modeled itself on the European, especially the British monarchy, and compared to those monarchies it is behind. For a country concerned about its image, you wonder what sort of message people are getting abroad—that there is this faction that is completely against change and that they're going to get away with this."

Indeed, some European countries prioritize female heirs, as Britain's Buckingham Palace points out: "We've had queens for years and that speaks for itself: Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, and now Queen Elizabeth II," said a spokeswoman, speaking anonymously. "Of course there is no problem with females. In Belgium and Norway, if a female is the oldest child, she will accede to the throne; in Britain male heirs come first. But Japan seems to be unique in that it doesn't allow females at all."

Most interested foreign observers agree with the vast majority of the Japanese people—84 percent according to a poll by *Tokyo Shimbun* last year before the conservative backlash—that Princess Aiko should one day sit at the head of the family. Surveys like this reflect the enormous changes in the status of Japanese women in the 60 years since the Imperial Household Law was written: eight out of ten patients at fertility clinics here, for example, nowadays prefer baby girls.

Compare this reality to the rhetoric of politicians like Hiranuma and the symbolism that poured out of the media after the birth. When the baby uttered its first wail on September 6, TV programs were interrupted and the major newspapers distributed millions of special four-page supplements (they would have been two pages if the baby were a girl). The government then permanently shelved the succession debate, showing, in Ruoff's words from before the birth, "that the attempt to change the law had nothing to do with principle, and was entirely for political expedience."

Such are the sexual politics of Japan's first male imperial birth since 1965. Officially, the government, as chief cabinet spokesman (now Prime Minister) Abe Shinzo said at the time, hoped Princess Kiko would give birth to a healthy baby of either sex; unofficially it prayed that the baby would have XY chromosomes and rescue the imperial family from a succession

crisis that could make it extinct within a couple of generations.

Even though a boy was born, the imperial family continues to face the same problems under Japan's strict patriarchal system. Said Japan historian William Wetherall before the birth, "If (the baby is) a girl, then the ball goes back to the Diet to revise court laws—with the same list of divisive issues. If (the baby is) a boy, then three decades down the line there will be a replay of the 'who will marry him' scenario we saw when Hironomiya declared his candidacy for marriage—and promised to protect Masako if she changed her mind and accepted his proposal."

Wetherall predicted that by the time Kiko's son reaches maturity, all of his cousins, including Aiko, will probably have left the imperial Household, married and disappeared into commoner life. Most of the elders in the family will have died, leaving just the boy and whomever he promises to protect as a condition for marrying him -- and their kids. "That's one nuclear family to bear the entire weight of the Chrysanthemum Throne -- still surrounded by a legal moat called the Imperial Household Law, and a bureaucratic one called the Imperial Household Agency."

It would make far more sense, say most commentators, to grasp the succession nettle now, change the law and expand the imperial pool. And while Japan is at it, explore the foundation myths of this unique institution, including its roots, by opening up Imperial tombs to media scrutiny and allowing greater access to family members. That would improve Japan's relations with its Asian neighbors, and says Hall, might conversely bring the monarchy closer to the people and save it from extinction.

"The British [monarchs] have a certain moral influence and charisma [among the people]" he says. "Other monarchs have their own lives to live and you can see it on their faces. But look

at the Japanese monarchs, Michiko and Masako, and how they have been ground down by the secrecy and rules.”

Everyone knows that this is a soufflé that cannot rise twice. At almost 40, and after a complicated pregnancy, Princess Kiko, like her sister-in-law Masako, will almost certainly never have another child. The once sprawling imperial family tree, with its system of concubines as hired wombs, has been pruned by postwar reforms to a tiny nub. This, in other words, is a dynasty fighting for survival.

The central problem, says Mark Selden of Cornell University’s East Asia Program, is government paralysis. “Conservatives, for whom the issues of imperial tradition loom large, are the bulwark of LDP power. This ties the government’s hands and makes it difficult to pursue an approach responsive to the values of the contemporary era such as the recognition of women’s rights.”

Conservatives of course believe they are saving the monarchy, an institution that in some way

still embodies ‘core’ values of the nation. Ironically, however, they may well be pushing it to extinction by suppressing debate and squashing a referendum on an empress. And of course they send a silent but unmistakable message to women in Japan and around the world: you are still second-class citizens.

“Some people will tell you that the monarchy is irrelevant but I believe anything connected with this institution matters,” says Herbert Bix, author of the Pulitzer-prize winning book *Hirohito*. “This is the bellwether institution that gives us a window into the mood in Japan. The monarchy is a break on any hopes of deepening Japanese democracy and making it real. As long as it exists, democracy has quotes around it.”

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See McNeill’s ["What Role Japan's Imperial Family?"](#)