



A new era has dawned in the East with the ascension of Emperor Akihito. His controversial wife, Michiko, was born a commoner and educated a Catholic. Few people know the price she has paid to be empress.

EDWARD KLEIN reports from Tokyo on the stresses that beset the new royal family and their role in the new Japan



THE NEW
Akihito
greeted
the
America

EMPIRE OF THE SON



hen, at last, Hirohito's long fencing match with death was drawing to a close, the old emperor wanted his family at his side. The weather in Tokyo was cool and bright as the black limousines made a slow progress through the clogged streets and

then onto the Imperial Palace grounds, a vast green oasis girded by medieval battlements and wide moats in the center of the modern metropolis. One after another, royal figures rarely seen in public entered the small, makeshift hospital room. A window had been left open. They could hear birds singing in the trees.

A favorite daughter, known as Princess Suga until she married a commoner and became plain Mrs. Shimazu, stood by Hirohito's bed. "Even lying there," she told me, "he was still thinking of others, not of himself. He asked me about my husband's new job. But I had come to talk to *him*, not make him talk to *me*. So I mentioned the birds. And then my father began identifying them by their distinctive songs. That was a sparrow . . . that a finch . . . this one a jay . . ."

One of the next to come to Hirohito was Prince Hitachi, his second son, short and dark and round-faced. Then the Princesses Chichibu and Takamatsu, his two widowed sisters-in-law, both now entering their dotage. Then his only surviving brother, Prince Mikasa, once a famous rake in the geisha houses, today a tired old man.

There was not a duke or marquess or earl among them; all such hereditary peerages had been abolished after World War II. Of the small band of nineteen royals who still retained their princely titles, the last to arrive were the two who really counted, Crown Prince Akihito and his wife, Michiko.

Outside the imperial death chamber, doctors and attendants huddled discreetly behind a screen and watched the crown princess enter the room. Even in grief, Michiko was gorgeous, a frail woman of fifty-four with exquisite bone structure and slightly swollen eyelids that made her look like a masked beauty in a Noh drama. For years she had been the object of royal ridicule and scorn because she was born a commoner, and jealous ladies of the court still dismissed her as "the Robot Princess." Michiko tucked in her skirt, knelt on the hard wood floor in a corner, and observed her husband.

The emperor-to-be, Akihito, was a boyish-looking man, so stiff and uninspiring in public that there used to be talk that he would be passed over for the succession, and the throne given to his eldest son. But it was far too late for that: Akihito had already taken over the ailing emperor's duties, the fourth such dress rehearsal in the past couple of years.

Akihito was prepared. Yet, as he looked down at his father, a man whom many Japanese had considered to be divine until 1945, he realized that nothing had prepared him for this pathetic human dénouement.

The eighty-seven-year-old emperor looked as if he were starving to death. He hadn't been able to eat anything for months. He had hemorrhaged repeatedly from the complica-

tions of cancer of the duodenum. And his sticklike arms were tracked with red needle punctures from massive blood transfusions and intravenous feedings.

Still, he lingered on, drawing out this final act, a puzzlement to all. With one dramatic exception—his decision to announce Japan's surrender at the end of World War II—Hirohito had reigned in the classic mold of Japanese emperors for the past millennium, as a ceremonial figurehead doing the public bidding of others. His true behind-the-scenes role in the Pacific war—had he opposed it or encouraged it?—was still a historical mystery to all. But now, long after everyone had given him up for dead, Hirohito seemed to be taking over one last time, keeping himself alive by an act of sheer personal willpower.

Akihito probably wondered about all this as he and Michiko left the palace. They drove across an arched bridge and past a phalanx of reporters and television cameramen. It was said that two journalists working around the clock on the story had died from exhaustion, and another had been hospitalized. The reporters wouldn't dare say so, out of deference to the imperial family, but they wondered too: *What kept this frail old man alive?*

The question became a national obsession. For months, the people of Japan had existed in a kind of limbo. All their calendars and official documents are dated according to the current imperial era—this was Showa 63, the sixty-third year of Hirohito's reign of "Enlightened Peace"—so each morning 122 million people woke up literally not knowing what year they were living in.

They postponed weddings, festivals, company meetings. A reluctant few left their island and ventured to New York, to bid with inflated yen at the big art auctions, but they kept their return tickets close at hand. Dentsu, the largest advertising agency in the world, was reportedly losing millions a month in revenues. Even trading in stocks and bonds slowed down, because the market feared that Hirohito's death would plunge the country into a state of mournful suspension.

Anticipation on this scale offered a revealing insight into the psychology of Japan, where an individual's role, and every aspect of his behavior, is defined not by his personal desire, as in the West, but by what the group expects of him. And many believed that after more than six decades on the Chrysanthemum Throne, the longest rule in a dynasty that stretched back 1,500 years, it was Hirohito's proper role to pass gently away and allow his country to get on with its business.

The imperial Prince limousine carrying Akihito and Michiko drove for about a half-mile, then passed inside the gate of their own residence, the Togu Palace, a large compound studded with stands of silver birch. Japanese palaces are surrounded by walls and hidden from view, as are the lives of their occupants, but one of Michiko's closest friends provided me with the details of the rest of this day's story.

As the prince and princess changed their clothes, they noticed the formal funeral attire hung within easy reach in their closets. Elsewhere, reportedly, a document containing secret arrangements for the state funeral already bore the mark of the *gyoji*, the imperial seal.

Alone now with his wife, Akihito confessed that all the waiting and unbearable uncertainty had left him deeply shaken.

And Michiko, who is by far the stronger personality of the two, sat her husband down for a heart-to-heart talk.

"The crown princess," Michiko's friend said, "had recently lost her own mother, and she was struck by the mystery of death. She turned to her husband and told him, 'The emperor will choose the time to go. When it is time for his spirit to leave his body, it will. Your father will pick the right moment, when everything is settled and everyone has had time to reach agreement.'"

That moment came on January 7. The Showa era was over, and Japan went into six days of mourning. Akihito's era, called Heisei, or "Achieving Peace," had begun.

I returned to Japan last fall, my fourth trip over the past twenty-seven years, on the very day it became known that Hirohito had inoperable cancer. It had been a long time since I thought of Japan as an exotic Oriental land where an old man's spirit chooses the mystic moment to leave his body. I thought, rather, of a country that to many Americans has become a frightening rival, an economic giant methodically gobbling up the rest of the world.

But it soon became apparent to me that Hirohito's lingering departure was in fact a question of the right timing. As strange as it may sound, the intensely tribal Japanese needed to go through this experience before they could put aside the haunting memories of a war that had been carried out in Hirohito's name. Slowly freed from their guilty inhibitions, they began to discuss for the first time how they should use their immense economic power. They talked about the twenty-first century, which more and more Japanese confidently expect will be *their* century. They came to the realization that the succession from Hirohito to Akihito was the most important event in their postwar history.

At first glance, Akihito and Michiko appear to be acciden-



CROWN IMPERIAL: Groomed, sashed, and tiaraed like the British royal family, Akihito and Michiko, flanked by Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako, on their wedding day, April 10, 1959.

Michiko was the object of royal scorn because she was born a commoner.

tal tourists on this passage into the future. They are like no emperor and empress of Japan before them. She is the first commoner to marry a descendant of the sun-goddess Amaterasu-omikami; he is the first emperor to be tutored in his youth in the ways of democracy by an American Quaker woman. In Japanese eyes, I have been told, Akihito and Michiko are not quite authentic. They are like wildflowers trying to be the real imperial chrysanthemum. They are, in a sense, wild chrysanthemums.

They are also the first couple to ascend to the throne without the aura of divinity. Like the royals of Europe, they are confined by a constitution to largely powerless duties, such as rubber-stamping legislation, cutting ribbons, and greeting foreign dignitaries. But *unlike* the British royal family, for example, which Akihito admires and tries to emulate down to his own double-breasted suits with wide lapels, they have no significant landholdings and absolutely no money of their own. The Imperial Household Agency controls the \$90-million-a-year royal budget down to the last yen. "If they have to look to the state for everything, they become nothing more than puppets and prisoners in their own countries," Prince Charles once remarked of such royalty. "That's what happened to the Japanese royal family. They can't even go on holiday without asking parliament."

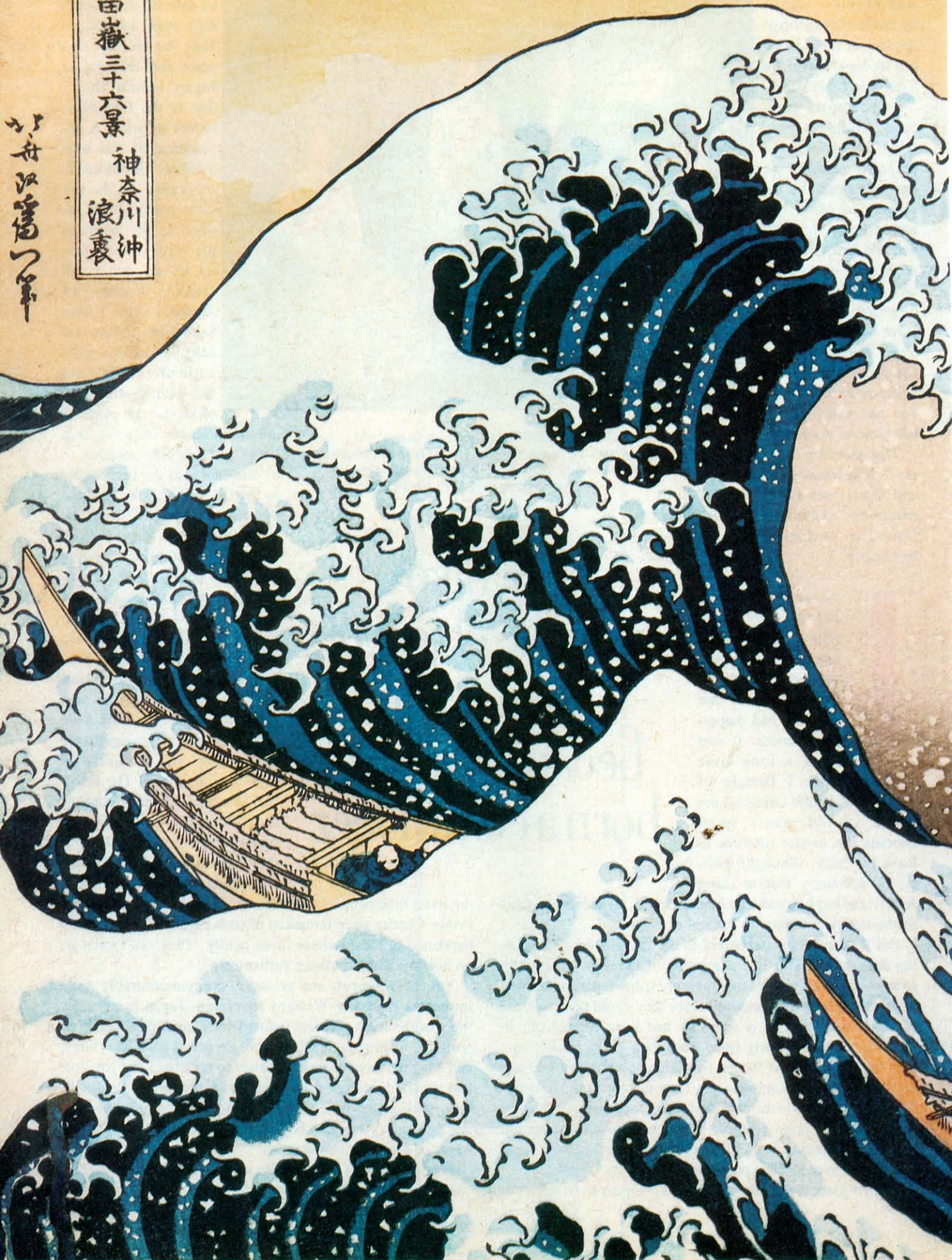
Yet these puppets and prisoners are immeasurably more important than any Western sovereign. Japan is not only the world's most efficient industrialized country but also the world's most hierarchical, symbol-drenched society. Akihito and Michiko have enormous power to set a tone and example and standard through their behavior. A seemingly small gesture, such as the time Akihito dropped his imperial reserve and patted an American boy on the head, can make the front pages of Japanese newspapers.

We in the West may not be able to decipher the significance of these actions, but have no doubt about it, the Japa-

富嶽三十六景

神奈川
浪裏

舟が波に揺る



The emperor is,
at bottom, Japan's priest-king,
its chief shaman.

THE OLD WAVE: Japan's traditional image
exemplified by the imperial couple's Shinto wedding robes,
and by Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.



**WILD
CHRYSANTHEMUMS**
Portrait of a Marriage



Akihito and Michiko vacationing with their son Hiro at the Karuizawa mountain resort, 1964.

Michiko at Karuizawa, 1964.



Court dress: The honeymooners in a doubles match, May 1959.



The bride arrives to change for the wedding, April 1959.

Akihito at the races, England, 1953.



Michiko in former ambassador Reischauer's Massachusetts home, 1987.

nese can, and they conduct themselves at home and abroad according to these imperial cues. "Japan has become a more fragmented society with fewer and fewer unifying forces," said George Packard, the dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, "and the new emperor, who will be a strong symbol, can play a great role. He could become a great emperor."

In person, the new emperor and empress make a sharp contrast. Michiko is a graceful figure, willowy and exceedingly thin. She is elegant in her favorite wide-shouldered suits, black stockings, and matching clutch bag and hat. These ensembles, created for her by Japanese designers at from \$7,000 to \$10,000 for onetime appearances, have the fit and finish of sophisticated armor, and there is something about her that strikes the Japanese as a bit too studied, even artificial.

When you see her up close, it is a shock. Her face is gaunt, with wrinkles across the forehead and around the eyes, the face of someone who has suffered decades of persecution at the hands of the snobbish Japanese royals who consider her an upstart commoner. The overall impression she conveys is one of contradictions: she is both poised and uptight, both intellectually curious and submissively lady-like, both ethereal and earthy. "She's a great actress, that's what she is," said a wellborn Japanese intellectual who sees Michiko as a kind of Asian Wallis Simpson.

Others are more charitable. "She is one of the most interesting women of the twentieth century," said Barbara Ruch, a professor of Japanese literature and culture at Columbia University and one of Michiko's foreign friends. "I'm rather cynical when it comes to people, but my admiration for her as a human being lies in the incredible strength she found in herself that allowed her to survive."

Everyone agrees that Michiko is a power behind the throne. "I am the one," she now says confidently in private conversations, "whose duty it is to protect His Imperial Highness." Her popularity with the masses—even with young people who have shown an indifference to the imperial family—has made her a media celebrity. "She's terrific in public," said a friend who has met her frequently. "She may actually be the source of a kind of new popular adulation for the imperial family. And that can translate into real power."

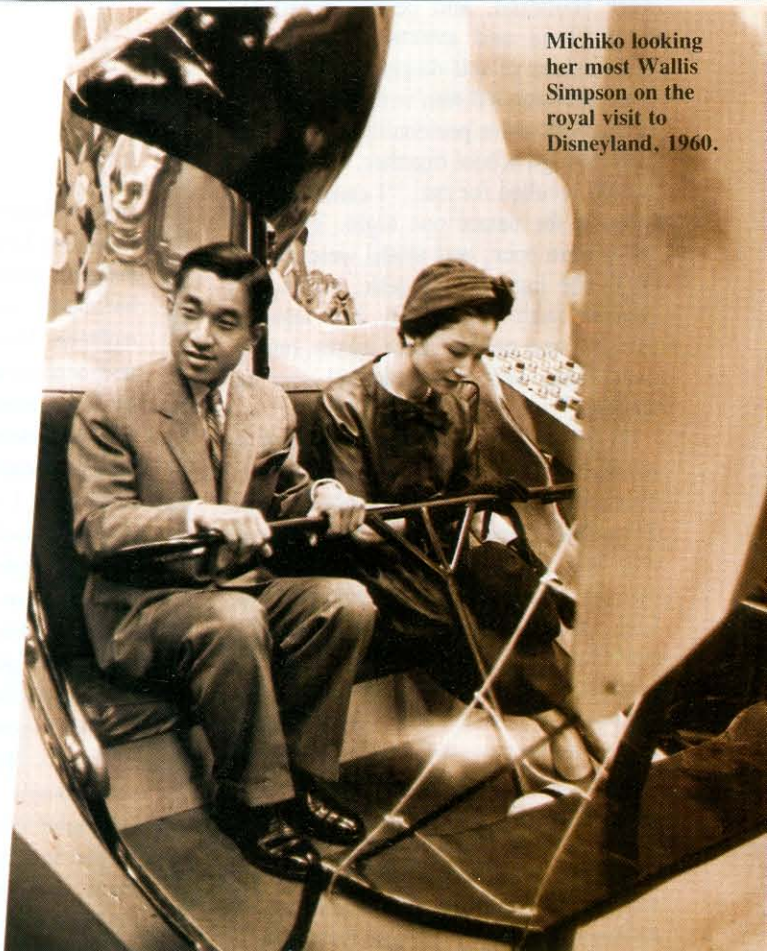
For his part, the nervous, retiring, fifty-five-year-old Akihito has been viewed until now as a public nonentity. But there is much evidence that he may have been underestimated. Not long ago, Yasuhiro Nakasone, who was then prime minister, asked Akihito and Michiko to make a state visit to South Korea, a trip designed to advance Nakasone's political agenda. To everyone's surprise, the "weak-willed" Akihito flatly refused.

His stubborn streak upsets punctilious Japanese. "Akihito has his shortcomings," said a senior Japanese diplomat of the old school. "He has a tendency to correct his speech texts, which his father never did. He'll say, 'I don't know anything about this, I haven't personally experienced this, so I won't say it.' He has an unfortunate preference for saying things on his own."

This un-Japanese tendency to deviate from the script was



Michiko leaves the hospital with her son Hiro under the scrutiny of Mrs. Makino, March 1960.



Michiko looking her most Wallis Simpson on the royal visit to Disneyland, 1960.



In Dublin, on their 1985 European tour.

displayed a little over a year ago when Akihito visited the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies during a tour of America. "He plunged right into the crowd of students who were watching him from the lawn," said someone who witnessed the scene. "He shook every hand he could. This delayed his schedule by a couple of minutes, and it threw his entourage into a tizzy."

What Akihito's critics seem to have overlooked is the essence of his nature. Until he was eleven years old, he was treated as a sacred being. When he went out in public, all traffic stopped, houses were shuttered, and people prostrated themselves and averted their gaze. Those years of self-discipline, isolation, and repression left him with something of an anal-obsessive personality. "When we were in high school together," one of his friends recalled for me, "I came into his room at the palace one night. The windows were open, and moths were attracted to the light on his desk, which was covered with leather. He had taken a compass and stabbed these moths, one by one. There were little holes all over the leather."

In private, Akihito still gives vent to his bad temper. More than one piece of royal china has ended up smashed on the Togu Palace floor. But it is apparent to all who see Akihito and Michiko together that they are a close and devoted couple. Like many Japanese women, Michiko can be a strong mother figure to her dependent husband, and this psychological relationship sometimes makes Akihito look—mistakenly—henpecked.

There is no doubt, however, that Akihito eagerly turns to Michiko for guidance. On their recent trip to the United States, they stayed for two nights in the suburbs of Cambridge at the home of former ambassador Edwin Reischauer, the dean of America's Japan scholars. After a lobster dinner, Akihito asked his host to look over one of his prepared speeches, and when Reischauer suggested a minor change, the soon-to-be emperor of Japan did something that few Japanese men would ever permit themselves to do in public. He asked his wife's opinion.

"What do you think of that?" he asked Michiko.

"I think it is a good idea," she said.

The speech was promptly changed.

But when (*Continued on page 204*)

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(Continued from page 154) he sets his mind to it, Akihito can be implacable. "I've played tennis with Akihito many times, and it always turns out the same," said a friend. "He's appallingly steady, and you start off feeling sorry for him. Then you realize that he's getting all the balls back over the net. And before you know it, you've lost."

Akihito was eleven years old in 1945 when his father, defying assassination threats from die-hard militarists, made his famous radio broadcast offering Japan's unconditional surrender. For the next three and a half decades, the Japanese were content to remain in an essentially inferior posture, embracing an American-dictated constitution, the renunciation of their emperor's divinity, and Washington's nuclear umbrella. The succession from Hirohito to Akihito has made them question all that. It roused the Japanese from their long slumber with a pent-up yearning for respect and for a larger place in the sun. Today, Japan's per capita gross national product roughly equals America's. The Japanese are the world's fifth-largest military spender, and despite their no-war constitution they are

rapidly acquiring a formidable military establishment. Naturally enough, they are wondering what they are going to do with all of this.

"Japan is moving to center stage with enormous economic power," said James Abegglen, a professor at Sophia University in Tokyo. "The crucial question for them and for us is how are they going to exercise that power. They are trying to find a new ground to stand on."

Akihito and Michiko are at the core of this debate. They share deeply held democratic values, but if Akihito follows his own inclination and tries to imitate the more open, British style of monarchy, he risks running into opposition from the palace Old Guard and right-wing politicians, whose influence is on the rise in Japan. These nationalists are in no mood to allow what they consider the further "cheapening" of the imperial institution by the "corrupting" influence of the West.

"Do you remember that famous photo of Hirohito in his black tails standing pathetically next to General MacArthur?" asked Hideaki Kase, a journalist who reflects the nationalist mood. "MacArthur didn't even have the courtesy to greet the

emperor with a necktie on. Well, Hirohito was the symbol of our subservience, and as long as he lived we were incapable of revising the constitution with its no-war clause, which was really a disguised Treaty of Versailles. Believe me, everyone in the current government Cabinet agrees that we Japanese had every just cause to fight World War II."

Not only the Cabinet. Many of the brightest young members of the conservative governing party would like to see Japan assert itself diplomatically and, if necessary, even militarily. But Japanese liberals think this is a prescription for disaster. They point out that their nation was forced open 135 years ago by Commodore Perry and that, now that Japan is economically secure, it is time for a "second opening"—a voluntary and wholehearted embrace of the West and its values.

"Some people say that we have nothing more to learn from the West," said Masao Kunihiro, a cultural anthropologist who also runs his own liberal think tank. "But that is arrogant and haughty. It will earn us the enmity of the rest of the world and deprive us of the very reason for our success."

With so much at stake, the two sides are playing a rough game of capture the flag, except that in the Japanese context the name of the game is capture the emperor. The instrument to control is the secretive, mist-shrouded monolith known as the Imperial Household Agency, whose 1,130 stewards, chamberlains, and masters of ceremonies handle the schedule of the emperor and empress down to such details as whom they can see and for exactly how long. Asked once by a reporter if she had seen a particular newspaper article, Michiko replied, "I only read what *they* give me to read."

From time to time, Akihito has made an effort to break the grasp of the Imperial Household Agency. Not long ago, he instructed his handlers to cut out the blaring sirens and flashing lights as his imperial entourage sped through Tokyo. They did. But Akihito's desire to bring a more common touch to the imperial family does not always meet with success. He once managed to take his wife and children to an amusement park on a regular commuter train, but only after his official keepers had emptied all the cars of other passengers.

These may seem like minor examples, but in the present heated debates about post-Hirohito Japan, how and where the imperial family lives have become burning issues. Some nationalists would go so far as to remove Akihito and Michiko from Tokyo altogether and send them back to the ancient castle in Kyoto—and to total, mythological seclusion.

The whole debate over the role of Akihito and Michiko reminds me of the royal duck hunts in Japan. Everybody is given a large net with a long handle, and you stand behind a bamboo thicket on the bank of a canal. Then the huntsman calls the ducks with a wooden clapper, and everyone rushes forward and tries to snare the wild ducks in his net. It's a blood sport disguised as a ritual, and it's the same game the politicians play with Akihito and Michiko, trying to snare them in their nets.

For those unfamiliar with Japan, it is almost impossible to grasp the special place occupied by the emperor and empress in the Japanese imagination. "It is not at all like in England," said a Western diplomat, "where everyone is endlessly fascinated by the social glamour and shenanigans of the royals." Not a scintilla of scandal has ever been attached to Akihito or Michiko, whose formal, highly patterned behavior leaves little room for the kind of public "spontaneity"

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displayed by a Princess Di or a Fergie.

Why this is so can be explained by the fact that the title emperor is really a misnomer. The emperor is, at bottom, Japan's priest-king, its chief shaman, who is supposed to intercede with Shinto's eight million gods and conduct more than twenty secret rites each year to safeguard his nation's prosperity. Shinto has no clear philosophy or ethics; it is an occult religion that seeks to merge the living with all of nature. "It would be hard to imagine Japan without Shinto," former ambassador Reischauer has written, "or Shinto anywhere but in Japan."

On the death of his father, Akihito received the symbolic treasures of imperial office—the sword and the jewels—but in the minds of traditional Japanese, he will not be fit to rule until he undergoes a Shinto ceremony called the *daijosai*, which will take place in less than two years. Here is how an expert described the ceremony to me: "A divine sphere is set up inside screens. Akihito seats himself facing east—the sacred direction—and awaits the gods. During this time, he is transformed into a woman, becomes a

temple maiden, has sexual intercourse with the spirits, and becomes pregnant. Then Akihito will be reborn from his own loins as a god."

Putting aside what we Westerners might think of all that, the Japanese themselves have a number of problems with the *daijosai* ceremony. First, some of them, particularly the young, think it is a lot of embarrassing mumbo jumbo. Then, Shinto was disestablished as Japan's state religion by the American Occupation, and the \$740 million cost of the *daijosai* could set off a serious constitutional crisis if the money is appropriated by parliament. Finally, and perhaps most important, Akihito himself is known to be lukewarm, at best, about Shinto. "The new emperor," said a Japanese who has heard Akihito speak in private about this matter, "does not want to revive the mythological cult of the emperor."

Like it or not, Akihito may not have much choice. He was once asked in his youth whether he would rather be an ordinary boy. To which he replied, "I don't know. I've never been an ordinary boy." In his own mind, his destiny was never in doubt. But just what kind of emperor he would turn out to be has been a

matter of serious dispute ever since the end of World War II.

General Douglas MacArthur believed he had pointed Akihito in the right direction when the American Occupation revised the Japanese constitution and transformed the emperor from a god into "the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people." And pro-Western, democratically minded Japanese thought they had settled the question once and for all when they engineered the crown prince's marriage to Michiko, a woman without a drop of imperial blood, thereby making Akihito a future emperor-of-the-people.

The story of Akihito's marriage to Michiko speaks volumes about the imperial system and the unique character of the Japanese people. The search for the perfect bride was carried out in the 1950s by the Imperial Household Agency and the crown prince's chief adviser, Shinzo Koizumi, a brilliant educator whose face had been hideously scarred in an American incendiary-bomb raid.

For seven years, they amassed a file on thousands of wealthy families with marriageable daughters. They interviewed the girls' teachers and friends. They eliminated those who were too fat or too tall, too shy or too pushy, unable to speak

a foreign language, no longer virgins.

Then, one day in 1957, when Akihito was twenty-four, Koizumi presented the prince with the most promising candidate. She was almost too good to be true. She had bright dark eyes and curly hair—her family nickname was Shirley Temple—chan—and she was as smart as she was pretty.

Michiko Shoda was the valedictorian of her graduating class at the University of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic school attended by Koizumi's own two daughters. The nuns had done their job: Michiko obeyed the rules, spoke up in class, and favored demure dark colors and spotless white gloves. Her millionaire father, the owner of the biggest flour-milling company in Japan, was well connected in banking circles. Her cosmopolitan mother taught flower arrangement to American ladies and played Chopin and Beethoven at home.

Koizumi, who displayed an unsurpassed talent for public relations, arranged for Akihito and Michiko to meet on the tennis courts at Karuizawa, an exclusive summer resort in the mountains eighty miles northwest of Tokyo. Michiko and a twelve-year-old American boy named Bobby Doyle trounced the prince and his partner, 6-1, and soon the story was leaked to the press, along with a juicy quote. Prince to Michiko: "You have overwhelmed me!"

At first, the principals in this "love story" were two actors reciting their lines. But offstage Michiko's parents did not react to these great expectations as we Westerners might imagine. They sent their daughter on a fifty-four-day cooling-off trip to Europe and America. "I don't believe commoners should be united with the imperial family," she wrote from abroad. "I doubt if such a step would have good results." And to the prince himself, she wrote, "I hope you will let me be a close friend of yours for a long, long time."

Michiko hadn't counted on Akihito's stubborn nature. When she returned from her trip, she discovered that her not-to-be-denied prince had installed matching purple telephones directly linking his room in the palace with her home. He had fallen in love, and every night at exactly 9:30 he picked up the purple phone and pleaded with Michiko to marry him. Finally she could resist no longer.

The Japanese public went wild, and shopgirls bought kimonos with prints of tennis rackets and "Michi dresses" with flared skirts. Michiko's picture was splashed over the papers, and there were

stories about her hats (made by the French milliner Claude Saint Cyr), her gowns (Christian Dior), her wedding costume (a twelve-layer *juni-hitoe* with a pleated magenta skirt, a kimono jacket of embroidered purple silk that reached the hips, and a train of pale green). Shinzo Koizumi was pleased to note that, just fourteen years after the end of World War II, *Time* magazine put Michiko on its cover.

A new imperial image was in the making, and millions of Japanese bought television sets to watch the wedding. But the actual Shinto ceremony was conducted—as it had been for more than a millennium—behind a thin white brocade curtain in the holy of holies, the shrine of the sun-goddess. As the prince knelt in a cloak of deep orange, the color of the rising sun, the chief ritualist called upon Akihito's ancestors for 125 generations to bless the marriage.

Unknown to the public, there was an incident that marred the festivities and foreshadowed Michiko's bitter future relations with her mother-in-law. In a letter to her husband that has never been published in Japan, Michiko wrote that after the religious ceremony she had difficulty rinsing out the stiff camellia oil from her elaborate hairdo. Empress Nagako, she complained, spitefully ordered the servants to pour on an excessive amount of benzene, and Michiko fainted.

The empress had deeply resented Michiko even before she laid eyes on her. Nagako was the honorary chairperson of Tokiwakai, the alumnae organization of the former peers' school, and her attitude reflected the animosity these aristocratic women felt about having one of their own daughters passed over in favor of a commoner. So the empress was influential in arranging for a member of the Tokiwakai alumnae group to be Michiko's chief lady-in-waiting. It was all classically Japanese: a powerful group had lost face, and it would seek its revenge by placing a spy in the enemy camp.

This was a plump, hard-faced Tokiwakai lady named Sumiko Makino, the daughter of a baron and a former countess herself. "Mrs. Makino and the servants under her control watched Michiko like a hawk," said a man who was a frequent visitor to the court in those days. "Her every act became a target of criticism. Michiko's way of walking was not gracious enough. Her way of talking was not formal enough. Her gloves were not long enough to cover her elbows!"

This persecution was kept from the Japanese people, who idolized Michiko. On the emperor's birthday, he and Empress

Nagako would come out on the balcony of the palace to be greeted by calls of *Banzai!* But then the beaming crown princess would appear, and the normally sedate crowds would send up a chant that grew louder and louder: "Michiko-sama! Michiko-sama!"

Michiko delivered a male heir to the throne before the first anniversary of her wedding, but the Tokiwakai ladies still were unassuaged. In fact, they were horrified that Michiko, contrary to royal custom, insisted on the vulgar practice of breast-feeding little Prince Hiro, personally carried her infant into the new Togu Palace, which had been built in Tokyo for her and Akihito, and posed for pictures in her kitchen, cooking with a frying pan. A crisis finally erupted in 1962. As the story was told to me by an intimate friend of Akihito's, the emperor called in his second son, Yoshi, and told him it was time for him, too, to think about getting married.

"What type of woman do you have in mind?" the emperor asked.

"A lady who is similar to Princess Michiko," Yoshi replied.

"And what type is that?" the emperor asked, pressing gently.

"A girl with whom I can read the Bible."

Since the emperor is of course the archpriest of Shinto, Hirohito was shocked, and upon inquiring further he discovered that Yoshi and Michiko had been secretly exchanging copies of a Christian magazine right there in the palace.

Confronted with these facts, Michiko undoubtedly blamed herself for causing her husband painful humiliation. She took to her bed. Her weight dropped to ninety-three pounds. Finally, she broke under the strain, and in April 1963 she was secretly evacuated like an invalid to the imperial villa at Hayama, on the shores of Sagami Bay.

For Akihito, who had grown deeply dependent on Michiko, his wife's nervous breakdown was a catastrophe. He dispatched friends, food, even Nobel Prize-winning novelist Yasunari Kawabata to read stories to her. When she returned after three months of convalescence, the prince personally tried to nurse her back to health. But the once robust Michiko had permanently changed. Servants would find her alone in her room, the windows open, staring at a television set with the volume turned down low, drinking sake.

"My friend, a court chamberlain, was called by Michiko shortly after she returned from Hayama," a friend of the imperial family told me. "He said he had

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never seen such a beautiful Michiko—pale, white, gentle. She turned to him and said, 'Here, take this note of thanks to Professor So-and-so for the translation he sent me.' She was quiet for a moment, then she added, 'I regret that I was never brave enough to be baptized.' The chamberlain interrupted her. 'Please do not talk like that anymore.' "

The story of her nervous breakdown finally broke in the press, and although the Imperial Household Agency issued a vehement denial, something had to be done. Akihito managed a shake-up of the palace Old Guard. The chief chamberlain, a crusty old party named Yamada, was made director of the dusty archives. The redoubtable Mrs. Makino packed up and retired. Meanwhile, Michiko delivered a second son, Aya, then a daughter, Nori, and by the 1970s she was beginning, ever so gradually, to consolidate her position and power.

Yet, Japanese feuds, once begun, go on for life. On one of my return trips to Japan, I heard about the departure ceremonies of Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako as they prepared to fly off on a 1975 state visit to America. Nagako bowed farewell to all the royals lined up on the airport tarmac, but passed frigidly in front of Michiko without so much as a nod. And on my most recent visit to Japan, I learned that Princess Mikasa and her husband, Hirohito's brother, had been boycotting the Imperial New Year's Poetry Reading since 1978 because, they maintained, they had no intention of participating in any event attended by Michiko, whom they called "that person."

Her children know their mother's whole tragic story, and they have sympathy for her," said Tomoko Inukai, a writer and social critic. It was a rainy day near the end of my stay in Tokyo, and Inukai was explaining Michiko's source of influence: her position in her family. "As long as her mother-in-law was healthy and active, which she is no longer, Michiko was still considered the *yome*—the bride—but now Michiko's become the most important figure in the family.

"Japanese women," Inukai continued, "may seem weak to you Westerners, but actually it is Japanese men who are really dependent. They are eternal mama's boys. Many Japanese men call their wives mama after their first child is born. Men

may earn the money and walk in front of their wives, but it is the women who manage the household, and in Japan the family comes first."

So while Akihito is busy exercising his constitutional functions—receiving Cabinet briefings, signing bills into law, greeting ambassadors and heads of state—Michiko is free to run the family. Hers are the first imperial children in history to be brought up by their own mother, not by palace officials, and it is hardly surprising that Hiro, twenty-nine, Aya, twenty-three, and Nori, nineteen, reflect Michiko's values and personality.

"When I go to the palace with a seamstress to give Michiko a fitting," said Atsuko Yasuda, a fashion designer, "it's not unusual for one of her kids to run in and say, 'I need this or that.' Michiko says, 'Not now! Can't you see I'm busy?' It's all very unimperial."

Michiko was instrumental in the decision to send her two sons to England for postgraduate education. Though Prince Hiro, who became Crown Prince Naruhito on the death of Hirohito, is constantly shadowed by his own personal chamberlain, he has managed to raise a glass or two of beer with his pals—again, an event that warranted media attention—and to visit with Brooke Shields.

Japanese reporters spend a lot of time covering the nationwide search for a bride for Hiro. It turns out that even the most ambitious Japanese mothers are reluctant to have their daughters marry into the hidebound imperial family and end up suffering the same fate as Michiko. In any case, Hiro's marriage plans have had to be put on hold until after a twelve-month mourning period for Emperor Hirohito. And it was significant that it was Michiko—not Akihito—who publicly explained how the matter would eventually be handled. "It will be like this," she said. "He will choose the bride by himself and introduce her to us."

If true, that's a long way from the days of Shinzo Koizumi.

Today, Akihito and Michiko spend much more time together than the average Japanese couple, who tend to live very separate lives. "They are constantly together," said a person who has visited them frequently at the palace. "They make a point of meeting a steady stream of people who come through and talk to them on a wide variety of subjects. You're received by a private secretary and taken into an anteroom where there are cigarettes with little chrysanthemum seals on them. Then you go through a music

room with all kinds of traditional Japanese instruments.

"There are people standing around everywhere," he continued. "They wear white gloves. I think Akihito and Michiko try for a kind of informality, but it's all very stiff, and you're very much aware of the cloistered nature of the nearly empty rooms. They have briefing books that describe their visitors and what conversations to make."

They have to watch their every word. The royal family is prohibited by the constitution from getting involved in partisan politics. But given Akihito and Michiko's deeply shared values, there seems little chance that they will escape the emerging debate over Japan's proper role in the post-Hirohito era.

"I am a member of an unofficial group of academics and journalists who discuss world issues with Their Imperial Highnesses from time to time," said Masao Kunihiro, the head of the liberal think tank. "We meet in the palace at about seven o'clock at night. Whiskey is served, although Akihito himself is a teetotaler."

Kunihiro then proceeded to describe to me these private, freewheeling meetings, the details of which have never been made public in Japan.

"You know," he said, "while he was young, Akihito sat at the feet of his American tutor, Elizabeth Gray Vining, who was a devout Quaker, and so it shouldn't be surprising that her pacifist orientation made a profound impression on his formative mind. I remember one time we were discussing America's pressure on Japan to increase the rate of its military spending, and Akihito said, 'What's the matter with those people? Don't they understand the no-war clause in our constitution?' Another time I gave him a copy of a paper I had written about Japan's growing arrogance toward the West. He said he was in general agreement with my theses, that the increasing arrogance of the Japanese is disturbing."

In low-profile Japan, Akihito's monochromatic personality may be his biggest advantage. "If Akihito steps forward," said a friend of the emperor's, "he would precipitate a struggle between the left and the right."

There are those who believe the Japanese will avoid a divisive political struggle and march with their usual lockstep brilliance into the more assertive Akihito era. "Despite all the shattering change in Japan since the end of the war," said Sophia University's James Abegglen, "the symptoms of social disease—divorce, crime, drugs—are not apparent here. The

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society has held together remarkably well. Why should we assume that they're going to revert to the old nationalism and lose everything?"

But there are others who aren't so sure. "There have been a number of authoritative articles in the past few years that Akihito is a closet pacifist," said Gregory Clark, an Australian expert on Japanese

culture. "The conservatives around him were so concerned that there was talk of bypassing Akihito and handing the throne over to his son. This is a tribal society that works by mood and consensus. And Akihito's pacifism could wreak emotional fracas in this society."

Under most circumstances, the Japanese are masters of compromise, and perhaps the new emperor and empress will find the right balance. Akihito knows that his reign could prove to be traumatic, and

if he has to go through all those Shinto ceremonies to satisfy the nationalists, he may choose to do so as quietly as possible, even in secret. He also knows that people in America and Europe haven't forgotten World War II, and that they still have vivid mental images of young Japanese pilots swearing their Shinto loyalty to the emperor before taking off on suicidal kamikaze missions. The last thing Akihito and Michiko want is another collision with the West. □