

The Imperial Style, 16 Years On

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

PEOPLE around the nation visit the Imperial Palace in the center of Tokyo to do voluntary labor. They devote themselves silently to the tasks of weeding and cleaning the grounds. They receive no pay for what they do, but whenever the Emperor and Empress are in the palace, they greet the people, asking what is happening in the various regions the people come from and express their appreciation. Over 10,000 people annually participate in this labor, indicating a deeply rooted support of the Imperial Family among the Japanese.

During 16 years on the throne, the Emperor and Empress have established a new style for the Imperial Household. I once heard a story from a former aide regarding the preparations for a tea party with foreign guests. The Imperial Couple began to move the tables and chairs, hoping to make the arrangement more comfortable. Those close by were quite surprised, but according to the former aide, "It was an episode that symbolizes an active Imperial Family determined not to be stiff and formal."

As representatives of the Emperor Showa, who traveled abroad only twice during his reign, the current Emperor and Empress have visited various nations. They are of approximately the same generation as the kings and queens of Spain, Holland, Belgium and Sweden, and have sustained relationships with these other royal families.

Whenever the Emperor is to meet honored guests from overseas, he makes extensive preparations by reading volumes of materials. Grand Chamberlain Watanabe Makoto, who accompanied the official visit to four nations in Central Europe, has written, "The Emperor and Empress were pleased by the warm reception they received, and their humble attempt to understand those countries was evident to the people and that promoted a feeling of esteem."

Along with this diplomacy, what is distinctive is the Emperor's concern for democracy and the Constitution. Even in press conferences, he stresses the importance of freedom of speech. In response to an impromptu question of whether it should be extended to cover the war responsibility of the Emperor and the appropriateness of the Imperial system, he gave a definite response: "That is included."

In the past, there was the so-called "chrysanthemum curtain" which concealed information about the Imperial Household. But the Emperor is quite keen on making such information available to the public. Last year he underwent surgery for prostate cancer. He asked his doctors to tell him everything about his disease and gave

instructions that the same information should be made available to the public. Showing compassion for those in trying circumstances is a major distinguishing characteristic of the present Imperial Family. While he was still Crown Prince, after serving as honorary president of the Paralympics following the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, he suggested that Japan hold a similar event on a domestic scale. It is said that this was the impetus for the annual nation-wide sports tournament for the physically challenged.

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



The Emperor and Empress

After the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the Emperor immediately flew into the disaster area by helicopter, joined the evacuees assembled in a local gymnasium, sat down with the victims and comforted them. He has visited over 400 social welfare facilities around the nation. In one heartwarming episode at a facility for senior citizens in Tokyo, the Emperor, joining in a game with some of the senior citizens, lost and massaged the shoulders of an elder woman as a reward for her win.

The Imperial Family perform traditional rites inside the palace grounds as part of their responsibilities. In the *Sanden* (three buildings for the rites), far back in the woods inside the Imperial Palace, where previous emperors and various gods of the land are venerated, there are over 20 major (and a large number of minor), ceremonies per year.

The most important of these is the *Ninamesai*, Festival of the Harvest, in November. The Emperor makes an offering of the harvest of the year to the gods and expresses gratitude to them. This exotic ritual is carried out in darkness under the light of a watch fire. During the ritual, the Empress prays for fertility and in her room she writes with brush on *washi* paper the names of all the varieties of rice that are cultivated in the country.

Everyone is aware of the affection shared by the Emperor and Empress. It is customary, when in public, for the Emperor to go first, followed a few steps behind by the Empress, but whenever there is a step, he turns back slightly to let the Empress know.

Perhaps what supports the 70-year-old Emperor in his exceedingly busy round of duties – which in 2003 included 180 events such as ceremonies, Imperial audiences, official tea parties and receptions for 53 foreign dignitaries – is this gentle bond of mutual receptivity between the Empress and the Emperor. **J.S.**

Matsunaga Tsutomu is an editor in the Social Division of Jiji Press Co., Ltd.