

Hurdles for a Female Successor to the Throne

By *Matsunaga Tsutomu*

WITHIN the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range, a World Heritage site in central Japan, is a mountain sacred to the Shugendo sect, a mixture of mountain worship and Buddhism. This particular Mt. Omine is closed to women. The national sport of Grand Sumo has a similar prohibition. When official tournaments are held in Osaka, the Governor of Osaka – who happens to be a woman – is not allowed to enter the ring even to present an award to the tournament champion.

The Imperial family, the world's longest dynasty, have a history of 125 generations, and there have been eight reigning Empresses. However, it has been more than 240 years since the last Empress took the throne in the Edo period. In the Meiji era, the Imperial House Law stipulated that only males could rise to the throne and was upheld even after World War II, despite the fact that equality of males and females was guaranteed by the new Constitution.

These earlier Empresses were either unmarried or widows, and they avoided passing on the throne in matrilineal succession. They were exceptions and until recently, the male monopoly of the throne was taken so much for granted that there was no debate at all on the issue.

However, it is now facing a major turning point. The prime minister has established a private advisory panel which will present conclusions regarding the propriety of allowing a female to take the throne by autumn. The succession by a woman or along matrilineal lines would be acknowledged.

The fact that at present no male child has been born in the Imperial household for 39 years and the possibility of a succession crisis has had a major impact on considerations of the tradition of male succession. The inhuman pressure on the female members of the Imperial family to give birth to male children has also been recently brought forward as a related issue.

Prior to WWII, the Emperor was commander of the military and a bearded, uniformed image may have been necessary to present a dignified appearance. However, under the present Constitution, the Emperor is held to be a symbol of the unity of the Japanese people and his appearance in a suit wearing a benign smile is familiar to the public. Every survey shows that around 80% of the public support changes that would allow a female to take the throne, and there is little opposition from the politicians of either the government or the opposition parties.

However, in the actual enactment of such a change, there is room for debate over the details. The most easily understandable option is to institute a system of complete equality by giving priority to the first-born child regardless of whether it is a boy or girl. This system of succession is currently carried out in the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium. In Japanese households, however, it is customary in

cases where the first child is a girl for a subsequent brother to succeed to the family line. Hence one can assume that while an Empress might be accepted, some will call for a male to take the role "if possible."

It is possible to give priority to males over females and establish an order of succession among the direct descendants of the current Emperor. However, this makes it difficult to foresee exactly who will eventually rise to the throne, and to carry out the education of the future Emperor or Empress from an early age.

It will also be difficult to determine the position of the husband of the Empress. There is no historical precedent for how to deal with a "spouse" of an Empress. In contrast with the United Kingdom, where the monarch can find a marriage partner within the nobility which surrounds the royal family, Japan has only the Imperial family and ordinary citizens. It is improbable that an Empress would take a husband from a foreign nation's royal house or a foreign noble family. It seems it would not be easy to find an appropriate spouse for either an Empress or a female member of the Imperial household who might one day succeed to that position in Japan.

Under the current Imperial House Law, when a female member marries, she is required to withdraw from her status as a member of the Imperial household and become an ordinary citizen. When Princess Nori, who recently became engaged to a man who works in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, marries, she will at the same moment move out of the expansive Imperial Palace. If females are admitted to the throne, this regulation will have to be reexamined.

However, if this occurs, it will mean that not only the female members of the Imperial family but also their husbands and any subsequent offspring would swell the ranks of the Imperial family, and it would be necessary to coordinate that increase.

The public is highly interested in the issue of a female being allowed to take the throne, and magazines and newspapers are frequently taking up the subject. This open unfolding of opinions would appear to be emblematic of a more open discussion of the formerly taboo subject of the Emperor system in general. **JS**

Matsunaga Tsutomu is an Assistant Deputy Director of the President's office of Jiji Press Co., Ltd.

