



Keynote Speech

Romance Revisited

The Royal Wedding of 1959 Viewed Sixty Years Later

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Abstract: April 10, 2019 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the former Shōda Michiko’s marriage to Crown Prince Akihito. April also ushered in the end of the Heisei era and the retirement of the royal couple. A retrospective on Showa romance, this presentation examines media attention to the royal marriage in 1959 and the hopes pinned on commoner Michiko as the “People’s Princess.” Coverage of the wedding in Japanese women’s magazines applauded the royal marriage as proof of the success of the new constitution, a more open monarchy, and the power of romantic love in postwar Japan. Committed to each other and their children, and responsible in their public duties, Michiko and Akihito embodied the new ideology of the nuclear family known as *mai-hōmushugi* (my home-ism) that became the model, if not the reality, for families across postwar Japan. Turning to the press coverage sixty years later in 2019, we see how the media looks back in nostalgia at the royal wedding, praising the enduring marriage of the couple. But nostalgia always tells us more about the present than the past. What is it about Michiko’s princess life of the 1950s and 1960s that we seek to recapture?

Introduction: Looking Back at “The Wedding of the Century”

The inspiration for today’s symposium is Julia Bullock’s new work on the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. I was excited when Julia agreed to come to Tokyo this spring to share her research with us. As a well-published expert in Japanese women’s literature, feminisms, and, most recently, the inception of co-education in postwar Japan, Julia views Beauvoir’s legacy in Japan from diverse perspectives.

To set the stage for Julia’s talk, and her major question—*what did Japanese see in Beauvoir*—I would like to offer a counterpoint by taking us back to the royal wedding of 1959.

Sixty years ago, on April 10, 1959, amid great fanfare and media frenzy, commoner Shōda Michiko married Crown Prince Akihito. It was called the “wedding of the century.” Over the next decade, the couple and their three children came to represent an ideal family life. The

Crown Princess became a model homemaker.

Understanding the emotional power of Michiko as princess homemaker helps us see *why* Simone de Beauvoir struck such a chord in postwar Japan and how her views offered welcome alternatives.

Following Michiko's story from Beauvoir's perspective, we might say that, "One is not born a princess, but rather, becomes one." But what did it mean to become Japan's commoner princess? How did the Crown Princess come to model the homemaker's role for the middle-class housewife? How did her marriage come to represent the power of romantic love, democracy, and economic prosperity in early Cold War Japan? What did Japanese see in Princess Michiko?

This past April, as you know, when the Heisei era came to an end, the Emperor abdicated, and he and the Empress retired from public life, media attention once again turned to their marriage and their work as symbolic leaders of Japan. Several books and magazine issues celebrated Michiko's character and accomplishments.¹ Many of these publications record individuals' personal accounts of what the Emperor and Empress had meant to them. Lots of beautiful photos captured happy moments, inspiring admiration and nostalgia.

To revisit the royal romance today and think about how one becomes a princess, we follow these publications to go back to the story of the couple's meeting, the excitement over their "love marriage," and then look at Michiko's transformation as the ideal homemaker. We conclude with more recent scenes of the imperial couple, and finally consider where the royal family itself may be headed.

The Early Cold War as the Era of the Princess

Let's consider the broader context of Cold War global royalty. The 1950s might be called the "Era of the Princess." After the devastation of world war, tales of princesses—real and imagined—captivated audiences around the world. Apparently, people everywhere were fascinated with how "one becomes a princess."

There were England's famous royal sisters, Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret; Hollywood star Grace Kelly's 1956 elevation to Princess of Monaco, Disney's 1950 animated *Cinderella*, and Audrey Hepburn's role as Princess Ann in the 1953 movie *Roman Holiday*. Beauty queens like Miss Japan 1953 Itō Kinuko also took their turn as swimsuit royals.² In Japan, ever more popular women's magazines made all these star princesses—their fabulous

¹ Many of the books published recently offer quotes from Michiko that readers can use as life lessons. Photo books capture elegant moments in her life, serving to inspire fashion nostalgia. A small sampling: Asahi Shimbun Shuppan, ed., *Michiko-sama no jidai* [The Era of Michiko-Sama] (2018); Shufutoseikatsu-sha, ed., *Michiko-Sama 60 nen no utsukushii kiseki* [Beautiful Traces of Michiko-Sama's 60 Years] (2019); and Yamashita Shinji, *Michiko-Sama: Suteki na okotoba 61 nen no kiseki* [Michiko-Sama: Lovely words, Traces of 61 Years] (Takarajima-sha, 2019).

² Jan Bardsley, "Miss Japan on the Global Stage: The Journey of Itō Kinuko," in *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan*, eds., Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller, and Christine R. Yano (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 169-192.

lives, romances, and fashion choices—familiar to readers, inviting readers to identify and sympathize with them.³

Looking at this array of princess, we can see their similarities—their youth, beauty, and fashion—and think about the political role that they played in the cultural landscape of the early Cold War. The princess was certainly not a communist. In her ball gowns and tiara, she defied communist rejections of gender difference, private property, and monarchy. But the princess stood somewhat apart from democracy as well by evoking class hierarchy and tradition, and this, too, many found comforting. Today, we see more clearly how she naturalized heteronormativity, fertility, and race privilege. But in the 1950s, above all, the princess symbolized the power of romantic love—she was the beauty waiting in the wings for Prince Charming to sweep her away and take her to a luxurious castle where they would live “happily ever after.” As many feminist critics have pointed out, what it meant to live “happily ever after” remained the big unknown in these princess fairy tales.⁴

Returning to 1950s Japan, we find the nation’s most eligible bachelor, Crown Prince Akihito prepared to find his own princess bride. He represents the future of the postwar symbolic monarchy. The press followed Akihito’s bride quest closely, fanning curiosity about possible candidates. But all were surprised when he chose Shōda Michiko, for even though she was one of the wealthiest girls in Japan, she was a commoner all the same.⁵

The Tennis Court Romance

As the story goes, Akihito and Michiko happened to meet on a Karuizawa tennis court. And while now we realize how many formal negotiations behind the scene preceded this meeting, it was the “love at first sight” encounter that captivated many women in Japan.

Indeed, in the spring of 1959, no story absorbed more attention in Japanese women’s magazines than did this engagement. It was *the* cover story. Article after article concentrated on Michiko’s Cinderella-like transformation. Readers learned all about Michiko’s life from her privileged girlhood and Catholic education to the magical tennis court moment and Akihito’s determined pursuit of her. Magazine stories let readers peek at behind-the-scenes negotiations over the engagement, anxieties and excitement over preparations for the royal wedding, and designs for the couple’s new home. Readers learned where they could buy

³ I discuss Cold War formations of the princess, the beauty queen, and the homemaker, and media attention to the 1959 wedding of Shōda Michiko in *Women and Democracy in Cold War Japan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). This presentation draws from that research.

⁴ Taking a creatively subversive approach, feminists have produced children’s books with a new twist on princess tales. Sociologist Ueno Chizuko, for example, translated into Japanese Babette Cole’s picture books *Prince Cinders* (Sandcastle, 1987) and *Princess Smarty Pants* (Putnam Juvenile, 1987) respectively as *Shindere-ōji no monogatari* (Kyoto: Shoukadoh, 1995) and *Tondera-hime monogatari* (Kyoto: Shoukadoh 1995). Feminist Japanese Studies scholar Setsu Shigematsu, with illustrator A. Das, published *Princess Ten Ten and the Dark Skies* (Guardian Princess Alliance, 2014), which teaches young readers to care for the planet and to overcome bullying.

⁵ Michiko’s father, Shōda Hidesaburō was president of the Nisshin Flour Milling Co., the largest flour-milling corporation in Asia in 1959.

tennis sweaters, too.⁶

Visual images played a crucial role in the magazines' telling of this fairy tale. The most frequently used photographs captured Michiko and Akihito on the tennis court. Here, we may pause to ask, "What kind of sport is tennis?" For one point, it is a sport played by equals on either side of a net. Tennis is also a sport associated with modernity, aristocracy, and global glamour.

Consider this photograph of the couple. [1958 color photograph shown at the presentation displays the couple in tennis clothes seated together].

Their smiles easy and their posture relaxed in these photographs, the couple project the vitality of youth, an effortless self-assurance, and true companionship. They lean in, close, comfortable with each other. They have *chosen* to be with each other. Everything about this scene looks so whole, so natural, and yet the snapshot's glamour enfolds a fundamental contradiction: the promise of postwar democracy and gender equality conjoined with the enduring patriarchal privilege of the imperial throne. The photograph captures another contradiction as well: the private moment made public. Fans adore monarchy for its regal distance, but yearn to see the private lives behind the formality.

Much attention has turned recently to Akihito's proposal to Michiko. Reportedly, he told her that duty came first, his private life second, and that he may not be able to protect her. By agreeing to marry him, she, too, pledged commitment to duty. In 1959, Japanese women's magazines saw Michiko as *rescuing* this lonely prince charming for she would bring the warmth of a commoner's love and give him a chance to create an "ordinary" family. Created by the media as the "People's Princess" (*minkan kara no okisaki*) Michiko would also bring the monarchy closer to the people. This rhetoric romanticized the Japanese nation as one "people" united in their support for romantic love.⁷

For all the excitement over the royal "love marriage" in 1959, it took about twenty years after the war for love marriages to become as common as arranged ones in Japan. As Barbara Sato explains, young people still needed to work out how to meet potential partners. Dating was not a custom, and many parents did not approve of their adult children seeking mates on their own.⁸ Still, the marriage of the Prince and Princess gave young people romantic hope, and as we shall see, many continued to look to them to create a new kind of family.

⁶ For discussion of specific magazine titles and articles on the royal wedding, see Chapter 5, "Fashioning the People's Princess" in Bardsley, *Women and Democracy*, 2014.

⁷ Shōda Michiko was not the only modern princess with charismatic powers. The unexpected death of Princess Diana, also famously known as the "People's Princess," inspired grief in the UK and around the world in 1997. Scholars analyzing this expression of global mourning questioned the cultural and political ramifications of the title, "People's Princess." Mandy Merck, ed., *After Diana: Irreverent Elegies* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁸ Here, I refer to Table 3 "Marriage Configurations in Postwar Japan" and discussion in Barbara Hamill Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 161.

Royal Women in the U.S. Media: The View in *Time*

In a special issue on the royal wedding, *Time* magazine also took interest in how “one becomes a princess” in 1950s Japan.⁹ The magazine gave the United States all the credit for creating this commoner princess. According to *Time*, young Japanese women in 1959 were eagerly embracing the freedoms afforded by the new Constitution, which Julia Bullock will explain in her presentation. *Time* ran photos of women in different occupations, celebrating their active public lives. They were seen as proving the success of the American-led occupation. The only drawback, according to *Time* magazine, were Japanese men who refused to catch up with the times. The magazine also points to right-wing disapproval of the commoner and the royal love marriage as the unfortunate residue of feudalistic Japan.

Later that year, *Time* magazine features Queen Elizabeth on its cover.¹⁰ Here, the focus is the status of the Commonwealth and there is no reference to gender politics in the U.K. Rather *Time* compliments the British royals on modeling an ideal family life.

This difference in reporting on Japan and the U.K. reflects a common assumption one still finds in American media—when the focus is on Japanese society, the “problem of gender” inevitably arises. In 1993, when the American press reported on Owada Masako’s royal wedding, the focus again extended to the status of women in Japan.¹¹ American reportage on royal weddings in Europe tends to focus much less on the issue of gender. Megan Markle’s entry into the British royal family last year and the birth of her son recently did spur conversations about race in the UK.¹²

Another People’s Princess: The “Maiden Martyr” Kamba Michiko

We should pause here to consider how the Japanese media, particularly the popular weekly magazine *Shūkan Asahi*, created another kind of democratic princess around this time, too, and recall the story of another Michiko.

As sociologist Hiroko Hirakawa has discussed, *Shūkan Asahi* wrote about Tokyo University student Kamba Michiko as the “maiden martyr for a new Japan” after she was killed in the Ampo protests of 1960 over renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.¹³ Although Kamba had been Vice-President of Zengakuren, the student activist association, *Shūkan Asahi* characterized her as an innocent, apolitical girl who sacrificed her life so that Japanese, nearly crushed by the corrupt government of the times, would revive their hopes for

⁹ “Japanese Women: New Freedoms Amid Old Customs.” *Time* (23 March 1959): 24-36.

¹⁰ “Crown & Commonwealth: Canada’s Queen on Tour.” *Time* (29 June 1959): 15-19.

¹¹ For analysis of media attention to the 1993 wedding, see Jan Bardsley, “Japanese Feminism, Nationalism and The Royal Wedding of 1993.” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 31 (1998): 189-205 and Amanda C. Seaman, “Modeling Masako: Commodities and the Construction of a Modern Princess,” *Chicago Anthropology Exchange*, no. 21 (Spring 1995): 35-72.

¹² After Megan Markle gave birth to a son on May 6, 2019, media attention turned to his “bi-racial heritage” and curiosity over the color of his skin.

¹³ Hiroko Hirakawa, “Maiden Martyr for ‘New Japan’: The 1960 Ampo and the Rhetoric of the Other Michiko.” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, 51 (2017): 12-27.

democracy. Like commoner princess Michiko, Kamba Michiko, too, by virtue of her sexual and political purity had the maidenly charisma necessary to unify opposing groups into the harmonious whole of “The People.” As Hirakawa argues, *Shūkan Asahi* depicted Kamba’s loss of life as her missed opportunity to enjoy motherhood, framing child-bearing and child-rearing as women’s mission.

Hirakawa explains how a group of feminists reflecting on Ampo thirty years later in 1990 surveyed 450 women who were 15 years or older in 1960, asking them what they most remembered about the time. By far the most common response was a simple notation of the two famous women named Michiko. The surveys did not reveal how the women interpreted the two women or the differences between them. We do know that reporting in both cases emphasized the maiden’s purity, her freedom from the dirtiness of politics, and her ability to inspire the “people” to unify for the common good. We see her sexuality contained in marriage and leading to her ultimate goal, motherhood.

Michiko as Princess Homemaker and Fashion Icon

In Princess Michiko’s case, of course, she did become a mother. Her maternal status shifted her narrative in important ways, making her more firmly the model of love-marriage and the postwar family in the 1960s, the era of high-speed growth.

She gave birth to her first son, Naruhito, the current emperor of Japan, in February 1960. She famously departed from royal tradition by choosing to raise her son herself, including breast feeding him. Her notes to the nurses taking care of him when she was on royal trips with her husband were later collected, published, and known as “The Naruhito Constitution.” Author Ben Hills surmises that Japanese were intrigued with “the idea of a royal for the first time actually grappling with the same child-raising issues that they had to cope with...”¹⁴

In her fascinating new study of Japanese women’s magazines, Ochanomizu University sociologist Sakamoto Kazue analyzes the extensive coverage of Michiko and the royal family in women’s magazines in the 1960s.¹⁵ She observes how the focus shifts when Michiko becomes a mother. Rather than describing her intelligence or suitability for royal life, as was the case in 1959, magazines like *Shufu no Tomo* turned to praising her skill as a mother. Pictures of the royal family frame Michiko, as the mother, at the center of her family. She is rarely photographed alone.

Descriptions of the royal family emphasize a gendered-division of responsibilities. Akihito works at his public duties, happy that he can entrust parenting to his wife; Michiko is discussed completely in terms of her domestic duties—childrearing and even housekeeping. The royal couple—the husband who concentrates on work and his “professional housewife”

¹⁴ Ben Hills, *Princess Masako: Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006).

¹⁵ Sakamoto Kazue, *Josei zasshi to fashon no rekishi shakaigaku: bijuaru fashon-shi no seiritsu* [A Historical Sociological Approach to Women’s Magazines and Fashion: The Formation of Visual Fashion History] (Tokyo: Shin’yōsha, 2019). See chapter five on representations of Michiko in postwar magazines.

who devotes herself to their children—epitomize the “My Home” ideology of the affluent sixties. Details of Michiko’s homelife made the princess seem like an ordinary housewife, and at the same time, could make the ordinary housewife feel more glamorous and important herself. After all, she was engaged in much the same domestic duties as the princess.

Reports of Michiko enjoying cooking for her family and devoted to raising her children make the royal family look like the perfect middle-class family. Sakamoto finds that there is almost no reporting of Michiko’s troubles in the royal family during this period, though we have since learned about her experience of bullying. Nor are there reports of her work outside of childrearing.

Sakamoto does notice attention to Prince Michiko’s fashion sense, which departs somewhat from reporting on royal beauty in the past. Photo captions describe what she wears in detail. Michiko shows that one also becomes a princess by wearing fashionable clothing. Several current books look back nostalgically at Michiko’s wardrobe.¹⁶ As a role model, Princess Michiko makes the professional housewife an elegant figure.

Who does Michiko, as pictured here, remind you of? [Here, I show a color photograph of Crown Princess Michiko in formal daywear holding the hand of her young son, Prince Naruhito; it is taken around 1964. Next, I show a 1961 photograph of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in similar attire on her June trip to Paris. The slide also shows the famous photo of John Kennedy, Jr. as a boy saluting his slain father at the state funeral, 1963.]

When I show this photo of Michiko and her son in the U.S., people often respond that, “She looks like Jackie.”¹⁷ Perhaps here the photographer intends to frame Michiko and her son in ways that recall Jackie Kennedy and her boy. I don’t have an exact date for this Michiko photo, but I assume it is taken around 1964, which means after the assassination of President Kennedy. Wearing a similar style to Jackie’s and being photographed holding hands with her own little boy connects Michiko to a global story imbued with admiration and affection. In a sense, the elegant princess here stands for an affluent Japan thriving in the economic-growth era of the “Golden Sixties” and on par with the U.S.

The Heisei Emperor and Empress in Public Roles

Moving up to the recent years of the Heisei era, we find numerous photos of the emperor and empress as partners. Akihito and Michiko are depicted as literally getting close to their people, especially in photos that document their sensitive response to survivors of natural

¹⁶ For two examples of publications that celebrate Michiko’s style, see Futaba-sha, ed., *Michiko-sama go-yōsō no kagayaki* [The Radiance of Michiko-sama’s Western-Style Attire] (2017) and Bessatsu Takarajima, ed., *Michiko-sama no 60 nen kōshitsu sutairu zenshi: Suteki na yosooi kenzenban* [The Complete History of Michiko-sama’s 60 Years of Imperial Family Style: Lovely Attire, the Full Version] (2018).

¹⁷ Stella Bruzzi analyzes the former First Lady’s iconic clothing, in particular the suit that she wore on the day of the assassination, as a “nostalgic trigger to memories of trauma and collective loss.” See “The Pink Suit,” Chapter 17 in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, eds., *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

disasters. News reports in the wake of the March 2011 tragedies, for example, depicted the elderly couple kneeling on the floor in a disaster shelter to talk on an equal level with survivors.

Since my princess research concentrated on the 1950s, I am not very familiar with Michiko's life in recent decades. But I have been struck when watching news footage of the couple this spring by how closely Akihito and Michiko walk together, as though holding fast to their private bond.

Michiko also appears to be a silent partner in her husband's attempts to atone for Japan's wartime aggression. We see this in photos of the couple taken, for example, on their visit to Okinawa in 2018.¹⁸

Abdication and the Future of the Imperial Institution

As the couple prepared to retire from public life, many celebrated their long marriage. I saw tables set up in bookstores with lots of books featuring the couple or Michiko alone on their covers. I also saw ads on the trains for weekly magazines featuring gossip about the royal family, especially its younger members. Some guess where Michiko may stand on one intrigue or another. But Michiko and Akihito present an air of calm determination and enduring companionship.

What lies ahead for Japan's royal institution?

The succession ceremony on May 1 turned attention once again to the issue of gender inequity. Only adult men in the royal family were allowed to attend a key succession rite at the imperial palace.¹⁹ And of course, there remains the question about female succession to the throne. Such restrictions are widely reported in the foreign and domestic press. These gender inequities in the royal institution recall Japan's poor ranking in the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report—"a miserable 110 out of 149," as sociologist Kazuo Yamaguchi describes the ranking.²⁰ Year after year, Japan ranks at the bottom of the most developed nations. So, when we talk about princesses and the royal family in Japan, we inevitably come back to Japan's strong association in the global imagination with "the problem of gender inequity." It is like we are still back in the *Time* magazine world of 1960.

¹⁸ "Emperor, empress visit Okinawa to commemorate war victims." Kyodo News. 27 March 2018. Accessed 27 May 2019. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/03/77f2f79f748d-emperor-empress-visit-okinawa-to-commemorate-war-victims.html>

¹⁹ "Female Imperial family members to be barred from key succession rite in line with Japanese law." *The Japan Times*. 17 January 2019. Accessed 30 May 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/01/17/national/female-imperial-family-members-barred-key-succession-rite-line-japanese-law/#.XO8liogzYuU>

²⁰ Yamaguchi points to the "large gender wage gap" wrought by the large number of women laboring as "non-regular workers" as one of the primary reasons for this problem. Kazuo Yamaguchi, "Japan's Gender Gap." *Finance & Development* Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2019). Accessed 27 May 2019. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/gender-equality-in-japan-yamaguchi.htm>

The 2018 Global Gender Gap Report is published on the World Economic Forum website. Accessed 20 April 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>

Thinking of the long-term future of the royal family, we might ask how useful gender equity in the imperial institution might be. Monarchies are, after all, anachronisms—a relic of another era. They embody inequality, race privilege, and compulsory heterosexuality, and it's hard to imagine a romantic story that could really change that.²¹

Nevertheless, princess tales continue to enthrall because they always put women at the center, and they make it seem as if change is within an individual's power—a woman of good character can always win the day in a princess tale. This may explain the wave of nostalgia for the Heisei couple.

Nostalgia for the Tennis Court Romance

The nostalgia for their princess story—their tennis court romance— points to the hope their love-marriage embodied in 1959. They made people believe in the future, hope that things *could* change for the better, and that romantic love and marriage could go together. A princess could make a difference. What symbolizes the future now and what kind of emotional bond will make change happen?

Michiko was not born a princess, but she became one. Reportage in the 1960s on her transformation into the elegant “professional housewife princess” deflected attention away from the forces shaping her, and the countless housewives who took her as their role model. Rather, reportage praised her skill as a wife and mother as the embrace of a feminine mission that would strengthen the home and Japan's democracy. Feminist philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir, however, brought critical attention back to the social construction of gender norms, making us ask how one becomes a woman. We turn to Julia Bullock to learn how Japanese have interpreted this famous French philosopher.

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²¹ Arguing that a woman on the throne does not guarantee greater opportunities for women, Takashi Fujitani notes how “Queen Victoria reigned without apparent contradiction over an expansive empire that denied women the vote” and saw the rise of the “cult of domesticity.” “Imperial Succession Panic: The Politics of Gender, Blood and Race in Contemporary Japan” in Amy McCreedy Thernstrom, ed., *Japanese Women: Lineage and Legacies* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), p. 32.