# Empress Dowager Nagako of Japan

## Empress who as a girl survived a bitter court intrigue to marry Emperor Hirohito

HER IMPERIAL MAJESTY THE EMPRESS DOWAGER NAGAKO OF JAPAN, who has died aged 97, was the consort of the late Emperor Hirohito and mother of Japan's reigning sovereign Emperor Akihito.

The Empress's life was spent in the enclosed atmosphere of the Imperial court, and she never emerged into the modern world of post-war Japan. She accompanied the Emperor on visits to Europe and to America in the 1970s, but was otherwise seldom seen in public; she made her last official appearance in 1987, on her husband's 86th birthday.

At the age of 14, she had been chosen as the intended bride of the young Hirohito, then Japan's Crown Prince. A number of suitable girls had been invited to tea in the suite of his mother, the Empress, in the Concubines' Pavilion in the Imperial Palace, while the young Crown Prince cast his eye over them, concealed behind a sliding door. He chose a plain but bubbly girl he had known since childhood.

Nagako Kuni no Miya was born March 6 1903 in Tokyo. She was a student at the girls' section of the Gakushuin Academy, a school established for the children of court nobles. Her father, Prince Kunihiko, was an impoverished nobleman of a collateral clan of the Imperial family which had intermarried with Emperors for centuries.

Hirohito's choice of Princess Nagako provoked a crisis when General Yamagata Aritomo, an elderly noble of a rival clan (Choshu), sought to boost his clan's fortunes by objecting to the betrothal and seeking its annulment, on grounds that his clan had the right to provide a consort for the Emperor-to-be.

Yamagata — who was also the founder of Japan's modern army and probably the most powerful single individual in the country at that time — contrived the publication in a medical journal of an article which pointed out the trait of colour-blindness in Princess Nagako's mother's line, the Shlmazu family of the Satsuma clan.

This hereditary blot, it was argued, would impair the flawlessness of the Imperial blood — though no one ever thought to check Princess Nagako herself for this imperfection. In fact, she was not colour-blind, and was to become an accomplished painter.

She was by this time immured in a pavilion on her father's estate, being groomed for her role as Empress by instruction in the arts of painting and calligraphy, Chinese and Japanese literary classics, the intricacies of the tea ceremony and other courtly accomplishments, under the guidance of 17 tutors, with two teenage girls for company. She was guarded day and night and her food was tasted to protect her from poisoning.

Prince Kunihiko had vowed to commit suicide and to kill his daughter Nagako with a dagger if the betrothal were revoked. He finally thwarted General Yamagata by enlisting the services of a feared Tokyo gangster with strong nationalist sympathies. On a national holiday, the gangster's men raised a noisy mob which denounced the plot against Princess Nagako as disloyalty to the Emperor, who was regarded as a living god.

**Empress Nagako painting a seascape in 1973, just after her 70th birthday; she also wrote waka poems**

In response, the Emperor defended Nagako by dismissing the article on colour-blindness. "I hear," he told Yamagata who knelt before him, forehead on floor, "that even science is fallible." The engagement was announced that night.

In the seven years the intrigue lasted, Princess Nagako saw Hirohito only nine times, always briefly and never in private. He never wrote to her to reassure her of his confidence in the outcome of the crisis.

Nagako's marriage to Hirohito was set for the autumn of 1923, but was postponed due to the earthquake in September which resulted in the death of some 100,000 people and the destruction of Yokohama and more than half of Tokyo. The wedding finally took place on January 26 1924 in the Imperial family shrine, a secluded temple hidden by a screen of trees, and witnessed by only the Imperial family and a group of Shinto priests.

Hirohito, who had been Regent of Japan since 1921, became Japan's 124th Emperor on the death on December 25 1926 of his invalid father Emperor Yoshihito (whose regnal era was entitled Taisho, meaning "great righteousness").

The enthronement ceremony took place at Kyoto on November 10 1928, and the couple moved into the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. The era of Emperor Hirohito's reign, the longest in Japanese history, was given the name Showa, from the two Japanese characters signifying "enlightened peace".

As Empress, Nagako's first duty was to produce an heir. Their first child was a girl, Princess Teru no Miya, born on December 6 1925. Princesses Hisa Sachiko, who died in infancy, Taka Kazuko, and Yori Atsuko followed.

By this time, anxiety at court at the Empress's failure to produce a son was prompting open suggestions that Hirohito should ensure the succession by taking a concubine. This he refused to do, although he did agree to donate sperm which was used to inseminate a lady-in-waiting, who gave birth in 1932 to an Imperial bastard who was kept discreetly in the wings in case he was needed.

This need was obviated on December 23 1933, when Crown Prince Akihito was born. He was followed by a second son, Prince Yoshi Masahito, two years later; a fifth daughter, Princess Suga Takako, was born in 1939.

The Imperial couple led a quiet, secluded existence, under the watchful eye of chamberlains and ladies-in-waiting. While Emperor Hirohito, a trained biologist, collected poisonous fungi and marine worms, Empress Nagako tended silkworms and played the *koto*, the traditional Japanese stringed instrument.

During the Second World War, this way of life continued, albeit with some modification. While Japan suffered daily raids by Allied B-29 bombers, the Emperor and Empress continued to listen to lectures on traditional arts, though they were on one occasion addressed by an expert on "the deployment of electric wave weapons", meaning radar.

In their underground bunker, the Empress wrote letters of condolence to bereaved families until these became too numerous. "I just prayed that the war might end as soon as possible," she said later.

In 1973, at the age of 70, Empress Nagako became the longest-reigning Empress in Japanese history, an occasion commemorated by an exhibition of her painting and calligraphy. She had studied painting under the artist Seison Maeda, and was accomplished in the art of writing *waka*, 31-syllable Japanese poetry.

Emperor Hirohito died in 1989, ending the Showa era. Six years later, his widow became Japan's longest-lived empress dowager, surpassing Empress Kanshi (died 1127).

In recent years, Empress Dowager Nagako rarely left the palace, and did not attend Imperial banquets or other functions. In 1996, the palace issued the first official photographs of her for eight years, after complaints about lack of access. Until then, she had been photographed fleetingly through the windows of the bus used to transport her to and from a villa outside Tokyo. Even these rare glimpses ceased when attendants drew the curtains.

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