

Original Paper

The Personal Became Political: A Social Media Analysis of Princess Mako of Japan and Her Controversial Engagement

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Abstract

This is a netnographical study of tweets about Princess Mako of Japan, who married in 2021 without any fanfare—no official engagement, no wedding ceremony, no wedding reception, and no dowry, thus defying convention. Her parents opposed her marriage to a controversial figure, and public opinion was largely against her. Her engagement was meant to mark a personal milestone; yet, it quickly developed into a national political controversy, ultimately questioning the raison d'être of the constitutional monarchy. The personal became political. Traditional media, as well as social media relentlessly criticized her choice, pushing her deep into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This study aims to decode covert messages embedded in the negative tweets directed at her to uncover the sentiments Twitter users knowingly or unknowingly propagated.

Keywords

twitter, royalty, marriage, social media, Japanese imperial family, netnography

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Princess Mako of Akishino, a niece of the reigning Japanese Emperor Naruhito, and the eldest daughter of Crown Prince Akishino, encountered substantial adversities when her unwavering resolve to marry Kei Komuro, her longtime boyfriend, shook the very foundation of the constitutional monarchy in Japan and strained relations between the imperial family and the public. What began as a tale of her personal milestone slowly evolved into a political crisis, scrutinizing the raison d'être of the imperial family and taking on the form of a bizarre, twisted dark comedy that nobody expected it would become. In conjunction with national media outlets, social media platforms constructed an image of her “unofficial fiancé” as the quintessential villain, branding him a gold-digger unworthy of the princess.

On September 3, 2017, the Imperial Household Agency arranged a 10-minute press conference for the couple to meet with journalists for the first time since the news of their impending engagement broke in May. As the young couple beamed at each other, nobody could have foreseen that the “unofficial engagement” would remain so until just a few weeks prior to her marriage in 2021. It was equally impossible to predict that social media platforms would echo hysterical and sensational media reports and amplify the agitation. Most of all, Princess Mako (Note. 1) had likely never envisioned that the relentless attacks by the traditional media and social media platforms on her personal choice of a spouse would ultimately drive her deep into PTSD. For the subsequent four years, national media outlets would continue to extensively report on her prolonged “unofficial” engagement and its implications on preserving the constitutional monarchy in the 21st century, as well as the legitimacy of Prince Akishino’s family within the context of the imperial household.

Rumors circulated that the mother of the bride disapproved of her daughter’s choice and was in constant distress. The once-close father and daughter no longer talked to each other. Even after her delayed betrothal, Prince Akishino, at a press conference, refused to address the man his daughter married by name, opting to call him the “spouse of my daughter” (Prince Akishino’s press conference, 2021). The public fully understood its implication. Ultimately, the defiant princess emerged triumphant, succeeding in her quiet but open rebellion against the patriarchal rule, a public spectacle previously unseen among the imperial family.

Public opinion was divided, as her engagement symbolized much more than the union of two young individuals. To progressives, her public revolt symbolized the women’s empowerment as she defied the patriarchy and never surrendering to the pressure excreted by media and SNS. To traditionalists, she was perceived as a spoiled child who prioritized her personal interests over her obligations to the people and the country, without showing consideration for the criticism toward her behavior and the public’s sincere concern about her well-being. In the end, those traditionalists failed to impose on her the Japanese imperial version of Marianismo—idealizing her as a suffering, selfless princess willing to sacrifice personal happiness for her duty to the people and the nation, and in exchange, earning their love and admiration. She was cast as both a heroine and a rebel, but her true identity lies somewhere in between.

1.2 Statement of Purpose

This article utilizes a netnographical approach to gauge the social whisperings about Princess Mako on Twitter (Note. 2) in response to the traditional media coverage. The primary focus of this study is to reveal the embedded narratives in the context of negative tweets about the princess, which Twitter users may have knowingly or unknowingly transmitted. Glancing at a single tweet may not present a clear picture of the nature of these narratives, however, examining the aggregation of negative tweets may present a far better chance of revealing covert messages behind publicly shaming the princess.

What is it that the Twitter users truly wanted to convey? This study hypothesizes that by targeting Princess Mako, Twitter users knowingly or unknowingly embedded additional narratives expressing their frustration over the sociopolitical issues confronting Japan. Dissatisfaction with the dysfunctional and stagnant sociopolitical arrangements is a recurring theme in present-day Japan as lawmakers have thus far failed to effectively address the public's concerns and provide immediate relief. Such grievances may include economic stagnation, student loan debt, no growth of real income, and widening income gaps as a consequence. As long as Twitter users could find an outlet to vent their frustrations, it would not have made much difference whether the chosen target was Princess Mako, a celebrity, a world-class athlete, or even an ordinary citizen, who under some unfortunate circumstances, garnered undue attention and "went viral". In this sense, she became indeed a victim of harassment in this unregulated cyber-ecosystem, although it could have been anybody. She was exploited and used.

1.3 Significance of Study

Unlike the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, the Japanese imperial family members rarely grant interviews, which presents a significant challenge to the researchers of communication. Shielded by the secrecy often referred to as "chrysanthemum curtain", and confined in a "gilded cage", it is difficult to even speculate on their views concerning the persistent and often irresponsible media coverage they receive, as well as those from social networking sites. When they do occasionally take questions, the press is required to submit questions beforehand to the Imperial Household Agency, allowing the imperial family members enough time to examine the nature of the questions and practice their responses. By design, there are no impromptu exchanges between the media and the imperial family members. In addition, the imperial family members customarily refrain from addressing political issues as the Japanese Constitution grants them merely symbolic power, devoid of any political influence. While there are books on those female members available, most fall into the category of hagiographies, often overly sentimentalizing and idealizing their existence as model womanhood to be emulated. Meanwhile, these female members often headline women's weekly gossip magazines with a focus on their fashions, beauty, conflicts with in-laws, and children, most of which come from unnamed "reliable sources"—possibly, fictional characters. Hence, without their own branding platforms for self-producing in the age of social networking, female members of the imperial family have limited options to shape their public personas and images, resulting in a perpetual loss of autonomous power to define themselves.

Only a small number of Japanese researchers have ventured into the field of study on female imperial family members and traditional as well as social media (Hamada, 2023; Ibaragi, 2010, 2014, 2019; Kayama, 2021; Shikata, 2004; Takana, 2023), owing, in part, to the lack of sufficient first-hand information such as interviews, and the limited number of existing scholarly works to cite from. This dearth of reliable literature may create a vicious cycle, potentially discouraging scholars from pursuing

their research agendas. Therefore, studies examining the nexus between the media landscape and Princess Mako, or on any female members of the imperial family for that matter, substantially lag behind those on Markle, although the two strong-willed royals' open rebellions against the patriarchal institutions are highly visible. In light of these circumstances, it is crucial that scholars take a step forward to conduct more comprehensive studies on the female imperial family members and their relations to the media. This study aims to take such a step toward achieving the goal by examining relentless social media abuse targeted at Princess Mako and uncovering embedded narratives that netizens may have knowingly or unknowingly disseminated.

1.4 Outline

The following section of this article will recount the princess's saga and explore how Japanese traditional media outlets employed agenda setting, framing, and priming to shape the discourses on her impending engagement, thereby controlling the creation and interpretation of her public image and that of her unofficial fiancé. Additionally, this portion will examine the role of social media platforms as echo chambers, further amplifying and sensationalizing such media coverage against the couple.

2. The Saga

2.1 Frame of Analysis

Analyses of how Japanese media outlets portray the female members of the imperial family echo their portrayals of

women in a broader context: objectification, a disregard for systemic gender inequality existing in the private sphere, excessive glorification of traditional gender roles, and utilization of female members to demonstrate connections with the greater public (Matsumura, 1991 as cited in Shikata, 2004, p. 90). The media's focus on women's care ethics serves to further emphasize the patriarchal structure of the imperial household, in which men are associated with the public sphere and women are relegated to a secondary role—literally always walking steps behind their male counterparts within the imperial household. Such portrayals reflect the essence of the Imperial Household Law, which stipulates that only male descendants of a reigning emperor are eligible to assume the chrysanthemum throne and female members lose their imperial status once they marry.

In their reporting on the imperial household, Japanese media—especially women's gossip magazines—often employ the “family drama framework” (Sonoda as cited in Ibaragi, 2023, p. 96). This framework denotes a reporting style that emphasizes family relationships—such as power dynamics among them, potential discord, tension between a new bride and her mother in-law, and family tragedies—mirroring daily experiences of ordinary families all over Japan. Oftentimes, storylines in those family dramas are formulaic, with the family eventually overcoming these difficulties and tragedies, reaffirming their trust and love, and resolving conflicts in stories with

satisfactory endings. Such a formula, while predictable, may resonate well with ordinary viewers and readers precisely because of its predictability, assurance for righting wrongs, and the ultimate triumph of the protagonists, which meets their general expectation for family dramas. The framework enables viewers and readers to relate easily to the protagonists, allowing them to live vicariously through their favorite characters. Thus, taking sides with their favorites naturally becomes inevitable, or an integral part of the family drama framework.

2.2 *The Sage Began*

On May 16, 2017, the government-owned TV channel NHK announced that Princess Mako of Akishino was set to be engaged to Kei Komuro, her college sweetheart of five years. The scoop triggered a media frenzy as rival TV channels, newspapers, and tabloid papers immediately jumped on the bandwagon reporting their impending engagement. Not to be outdone by the traditional media, netizens joined the virtual national celebration, wishing them happiness and reinforcing their perceptions that this princess was different, a breath of fresh air. Unlike other members of the imperial family, she opted to go to a private Christian university, not the customary school that was established more than 170 years ago to educate children of aristocrats and members of the imperial family. The fact that she met Komuro by chance at a study abroad information session and started dating shortly thereafter resonated well with the young generation, as such a chance encounter can happen to any college student. Some even retweeted an old news story about her secret and anonymous volunteer work in an area affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. They perceived her differently from other members of the imperial household, almost as if she were one of their own. Likewise, Komuro garnered a positive impression among netizens for his daring courage to date a princess with a security detail. Despite enduring the personal tragedy of losing his father at the age of 10, he thrived by entering one of the top universities in Japan, participating in a study abroad program, and eventually finding employment as a law clerk. In this context, the announcement of Princess Mako's impending engagement guaranteed a perfect happy-ending storyline within the framework of a family drama that ends on a high note. According to Hamada (2023), who analyzed social whispering on SNS about the couple since the media scoop of their impending engagement, positive tweets stood out, which included the episode of how they met or what they talked about at the press conference (p. 26).

However, in a twist reminiscent of a typical family drama storyline, an unexpected problem arose. On December 12 of the same year, a women's weekly gossip magazine published a sensational scoop about Komuro's mother, Kayo. This revelation opened the floodgates for a series of salacious follow-up reports, exposing dark secrets within the family. The magazine alleged that she was a "deadbeat" who refused to pay back 4,000,000 yen, roughly equivalent to \$35,000, to her former fiancé. According to the article, she believed it was a cash gift and used the money to finance her son's education, including his study abroad program, a notable achievement in his life. The report

characterized the Komuro family as morally and financially irresponsible, living far beyond their means and lacking sincerity in repaying their debts (“Makosama totsugisaki”, 2017, p. 23).

On top of that, taxpayers and netizens were shocked by subsequent reports alleging that the Komuro family inquired whether Prince Akishino, the princess’s father, could repay the debt on their behalf (“Is Kei Komuro”, 2018, Kokunai section). The prince insisted that Komuro first publicly explain the debt situation before proceeding to their wedding planning, a demand that Komuro disregarded. The public quickly came to learn that Kayo’s husband committed suicide, followed by another suicide by her father-in-law, and the report insinuated that Kayo was a beneficiary of their life insurance policies both literally and metaphorically. The steady stream of such sensational stories by the traditional media, whether unknowingly or knowingly, mobilized and agitated netizens, intensifying their attacks on the princess online. Such scandalous news raised significant concerns among netizens, who began to question whether Komuro had the clean background necessary to marry a princess. According to Hamada (2023), the overly critical and insinuating media reports about Komuro’s mother were clear turning points in how Twitter users perceived the narrative of their impending engagement. These reports heavily emphasized his troubled financial situation to the extent that some Twitter users referred to him as a leech, accusing him of intending to exploit the princess as his personal ATM (p. 28).

Then ensued Act 3 of the family drama that heightened the crisis and raised tension. On February 6, 2018, the Imperial Household Agency announced that the princess’s official engagement would be postponed until 2020. Frustrated, Prince Akishino reiterated that the Komuro family must resolve the financial matter swiftly and release a public statement to clarify their stance.

Partly to escape a media frenzy, Komuro abruptly left Japan in 2018 without offering any explanation about his family’s debt or informing his future father-in-law about his plan. Instead, he enrolled in the Fordham University Law School in New York City. Rumors circulated that Komuro, unable to finance his law school education and room and board, resorted to borrowing money, this time from his former employer—casting further doubt on his financial acumen. Upon learning of the media reports, Twitter users criticized, branding and ridiculing him as an unemployed gold digger intent on using and exploiting the princess for social climbing. Twitter users, employing “either or” thinking, simply reduced him to an unemployed man with no money, which was technically correct as he was in school and not working. However, the fact that the media and Twitter users focused on jobless status could reflect the patriarchal family ideal where men are supposed to be gainfully employed and the stable breadwinners. Moreover, his departure from such a long-standing norm caused them to believe he was less than a regular man (Hamada, 2023, p. 27). Thus, this family drama framework of reporting stirred additional bashing, casting Komuro as standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from an ideal patriarchal mode of manhood, emulating a dependable, sturdy oak.

Facing mounting pressure from the media, the public, and the future father-in-law, Komuro finally commented publicly about his mother's debt in 2019, claiming that the financial dispute was already resolved. The Komuros claimed it was a cash gift, not a loan as his mother's former fiancé claimed, and thus they had no legal obligation to repay him. The case would have been closed had it happened in the United States. However, in Japan, where moral obligations come prior to legal obligations, offering an apology even when one is not at fault is an absolute necessity to foster cordial relationships with others. In the court of netizens' opinions, Twitter users rendered him a guilty verdict: he was a classless amoral deadbeat with whom the imperial family should never associate. A September 2019 survey revealed that only 38% of the people expressed that they would wish her happiness ("Makosamano gokekko", 2021). His subsequent much-anticipated release of a statement in 2021 failed to win the public's support and furnished another opportunity to attack him even further.

Citing Article 24 of the Japanese Constitution, which provides that "Marriage shall be based on the mutual consent of both sexes", Princess Mako's family eventually caved in. On October 1, 2021, the Imperial Household Agency announced the princess's engagement. Shortly after, a long-kept secret was revealed: she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. During the long, frustrating period of uncertainty, she feared being permanently stuck in this situation ("Makosama hukuzatsusei", 2021).

On October 26, 2021, the imperial princess married without fanfare: no official engagement, no wedding ceremony, no wedding reception, and no \$1.4 million dowry, a customary one-time payment to princesses to maintain dignified lives as former members of the imperial family. A public opinion survey by a TV station revealed an entirely different result this time, clearly showing a change in tide: 61% of people expressed that they wished the couple happiness (Shoji, 2021, News section). Nevertheless, a small faction, led by a YouTuber and consisting of about 100 individuals who advocated for preserving the integrity of the imperial household, protested against her marriage in Tokyo as well as in several major cities across Japan ("Komuro Keisan", 2021). The couple had a press conference on the day they registered their marriage, the first such occasion since their initial press conference following the scoop of their impending engagement in 2017. The former princess, now a commoner, declined to respond to one of the questions—the debt issue—as it reminded her of relentless media criticisms that tormented her and tarnished her husband's reputation.

The newlywed promptly repaid his mother's debt to her former fiancé, likely utilizing his wife's savings. They swiftly left Japan and settled in New York City, where they have resided ever since. The nationwide hysteria and frenzy surrounding Princess Mako and Komuro seemed to diminish somewhat after Komuro managed to pass the New York bar exam on his third try, although they still frequently grace the headlines of Japanese gossip magazines.

2.3 Explaining the Bashing

Many factors could provide insights into the intense bashing and nationwide hysteria against the couple, beyond the family drama framework and customary cyberpsychological analyses on human emotions. Three factors stand out prominently; institutional failure; embedded gender biases in institutional practices; and the new digital business model.

Institutional failure:

Unlike other royal households in the world, the Imperial Household Agency did not have a proper channel to release information about the imperial family during the crisis, since a public relations office did not exist. The agency's crisis management skills also came into question, because their default approach to false information in media reports is to maintain a dignified silence. Prince Akishino, deeply concerned about the media's relentless attacks on his daughter, shared his thoughts that correcting a single inaccuracy could result in misleading people into assuming that the rest of the story is accurate. ("Prince Akishino's", 2021). Twitter users in Japan learned a long time ago that the Imperial Household Agency would never fight back or ask for retractions, and thus, they would never be held accountable for their speech. The career bureaucrats chose dignified silence" —acting as if nothing happened—as their modus operandi to "protect" the imperial family members from harassment and abuse online. This passive stance effectively gave journalists and netizens carte blanche to target the princess.

Embedded gender bias in institutional practices:

Beyond the typical discussions on gender and media bias centering on objectification, communion, and ascribed secondary roles, it is arguable that embedded gender bias in institutional practices adversely impacted the deepening crisis surrounded the princess. It is noteworthy that the Imperial Household Agency did not conduct a vetting process on Komuro before the government-owned TV channel broke the news of the princess's imminent engagement. Although the Imperial Household Agency customarily conducts background checks on prospective brides marrying into the imperial family well in advance, in this case, they did not perform one for the princess because she was marrying out. Such deliberate differentiations based on gender reveals the embedded gender bias within the agency.

Unlike the British Act of Succession, Article I of the Imperial Household Law of 1947 clearly stipulates that only male descendants of emperors are eligible to succeed to the throne, making princesses irrelevant to succession from the day they are born. In other words, the bureaucrats refrained from vetting Komuro because the princess would not retain her imperial title after marriage. This suggests that marriages of female members entail a personal accountability on their part, and a vetting process is not for the sake of the wellbeing of those involved but rather to maintain the integrity of the imperial household. Had the agency conducted the thorough vetting of Komuro, they might have warned the Komuro family about the potential problems, enabling them to resolve the financial dispute in private prior to their engagement, or at least advising them to settle for the sake of public relations.

New Digital Business Model:

Yahoo News Japan stands out as the largest and most popular media portal in the country, offering almost all news feeds for free, ranging from leading newspapers to gossip magazines. Due to the decrease in print subscriptions, media outlets today heavily rely on page-per-view (PPV) revenues on online platforms, such as Yahoo News Japan, to supplement their dwindling profits. Thus, Hamada argued (2023) that the more sensational content becomes, the more it attracts readers, resulting in an increase in PPV revenues (pp. 37-38). Another distinctive feature of Yahoo News Japan is its layout: a comment section immediately follows each article, and comments go live immediately. Although some restrictions are in place, the platform essentially operates as an unregulated digital ecosystem without an instant fact-check function. Hamada observes that this business model not only contributed to the sensationalization of news but fostered the spread of misinformation or disinformation as well, potentially skewing readers' perspectives towards Komuro or the princess (pp. 28-29).

3. Analysis of Tweets

3.1 Methodology

Utilizing the netnographical approach, this section focuses on exploring the dominant narratives embedded in negative tweets about the princess's prolonged "unofficial" engagement that Twitter users knowingly or unknowingly disseminated. In this study, "negative tweets" refer to posts that include, but are not limited to, patronizing, discouraging, harassing, abusive, and defaming content.

Table 1. Tweets by Hashtag

Hashtags	English Translation	Number of Tweets
眞子様	Mako Sama (Her name with an honorific)	345
眞子さま	Mako Sama (Her name with an honorific)	2,900
秋篠宮眞子	Mako of Akishino (Formally styled name)	46
眞子	Mako without an honorific	603
小室眞子	Mako Komuro (Her name with her husband's family name, with no honorific)	1,958
		Total: 5,852

On October 26, 2021, the day Princess Mako and Kei Komuro announced their marriage, 5,852 tweets with hashtags in five different categories appeared on Twitter. These hashtags can be classified into two main categories, both of which refer to Princess Mako. Two hashtags include honorifics—“sama”—which are used to show respect to people of higher standing, and they can be further divided into two subcategories with “sama” (様) being more formal than “sama (さま)”. The other three hashtags are names without honorifics, including the following variations: Mako, Mako of Akishino, and her new married name, Mako Komuro.

Sample size: Among the 5,852 tweets posted on the day of their marriage, 1,965 tweets are used for this research.

The first part of the research attempts to examine whether distinctive differences in tweet content exist between groups using honorifics and those without. In Japanese culture, using honorifics when addressing someone of higher standing or even strangers is critical, serving as a sign of respect and courtesy to demonstrate no ill feelings. This distinctive practice differs greatly from the customs in the U.S., where, for example, solicitation and promotional letters often omit using formal titles such as Mr., Mrs., or Ms. when addressing potential clients and customers. Taking into account this cultural context, this research presents the first hypothesis.

3.2 Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1: The proportion of negative tweets is higher in tweets without honorifics than in those with honorifics.

Applying a real-life situation in Japan—where it is uncommon to use honorifics when insulting others—this research predicts that such an embedded cultural norm also reflects on users' behavioral patterns online.

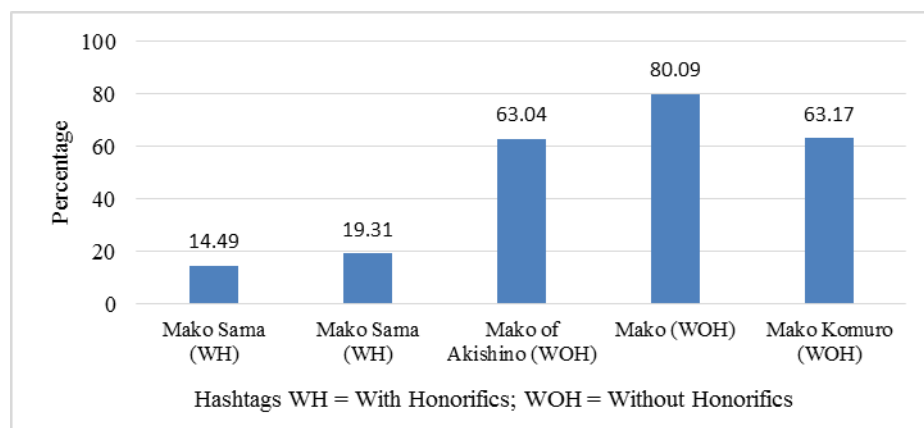


Figure 1. Negative Tweets

As predicted, significant differences exist between the group that used honorifics and the one that did not. An overwhelming majority of the tweets in the honorifics group are expressing support for the princess and her husband, wishing them happiness, praising their determination, and encouraging the couple to ignore nosy, patronizing naysayers. On the other hand, the three hashtags without honorifics presented a drastically different picture, averaging 68.76% negative tweets. Among the three subcategories in this group, the hashtag with her first name only stood out with 80.09% negative, with tweets questioning her judgment, belittling her, predicting their marriage would fall apart soon, wondering about how her individualistic and selfish conduct would impact the constitutional monarchy in the future, and lamenting about the damages to the Japanese traditions symbolized by the imperial family.

3.2 Hypothesis 2

To determine the specific subjects that the users who tweeted about the princess focused on in their negative messages, this research categorized the sampled tweets into the following 10 categories.

Table 2. Coding

Code 1	Mental health
Code 2	Tax, spending
Code 3	System and structure (Constitutional Monarchy; future of the imperial family; future of Japan)
Code 4	Prediction (future life; possibility of divorce)
Code 5	Relations with the general public
Code 6	Komuro (the princess's husband; his mother
Code 7	Princess Mako (personality, conducts; sexualization; objectification)
Code 8	The joint press conference on the day of their marriage
Code 9	General, unclassified negative comments
Code 10	Any combinations of Codes 1-9

Most codes are self-explanatory, such as mental health (code 1) and comments about her husband and mother-in-law (code 6). However, some terms require further explanation. In Japanese colloquial parlance, the term “tax thief” refers to the imperial family members, politicians, bureaucrats, law enforcement officers and public servants considered incompetent and not worthy of their tax-funded salaries and expenses. Some people wrongly assume that the imperial family members “do not work”, and thus, they may find it problematic that the princess does not do their bidding. The term “press

conference (code 8)” was included because all the tweet samples were collected on the day of the joint press conference held for the former princess and her husband. Lastly, code 7, labeled Princess Mako, also includes gender-related issues such as sexually suggestive messages and objectification of her body.

Hypothesis 2: The largest number of subjects is expected to be found in code 2 (Tax) and code 3 (System and Structure).

The Twitter users from the sampled tweets may have used Princess Mako as a venue for venting their frustrations about their private lives. General dissatisfaction in life has emerged as a recurring theme in Japanese politics. The public opinion survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of the Japanese government (2023) reveals that 47% of people are dissatisfied with their life, and 39% report a lack of fulfillment in 2022. In terms of income, 40.4% expressed dissatisfaction, while only 7.7% believed that their life would improve (pp. 4-12). The data from the OECD (2023) indicate that average wages have stagnated for the past 22 years, with an increase of a mere \$81 since 2020, representing the smallest wage increase among countries that showed growth. Such a dismal record may be attributed to the Japanese government’s inability to implement effective public policies that could generate immediate or even short-term wage growth. Although Japan prided itself on being the world’s second largest economic unit since 1968, China grabbed the title in 2011. Once known for providing the world market with sophisticated and reliable high technology, Korean brands, such as Samsung, now dominate the world market with cutting-edge consumer goods. The situation is a far cry from the days when SONY’s Walkman was the sought-after item in the 1990s. Customary business practices, coupled with offshore production and outsourcing, have resulted in the decrease in the number of well-paid factory jobs for high school graduates. This study predicts that negative tweets about Princess Mako contain covert or embedded messages reflecting users’ dissatisfaction with Japanese sociopolitical stagnation and lawmakers’ inability to bring about significant changes. Thus, she was used as a scapegoat.

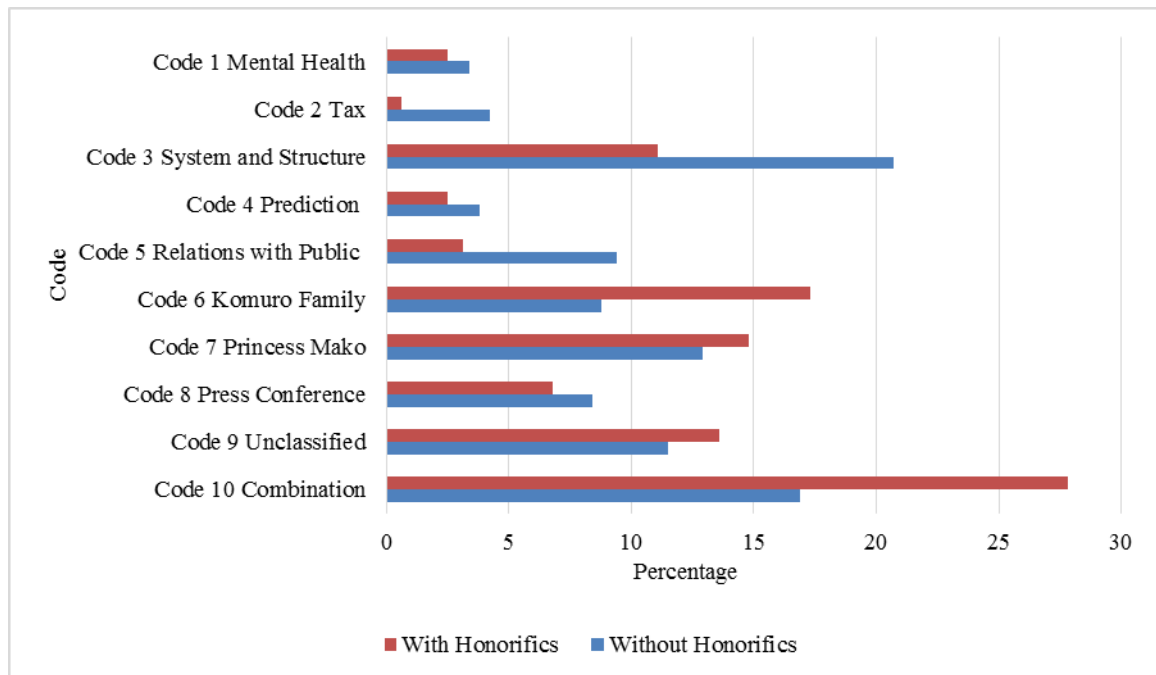


Figure 2. Classifications

Excluding the “combinations” (code 10) and general unclassified negative comments (code 9) such as “disgusted”, the most frequently used code in the “with honorifics group” is code 6, which targets Princess Mako’s husband and her mother-in-law. This is followed by code 7, which is against the princess herself, and then by code 3, against the system and structure. On the other hand, in the “no honorifics group”, the aforementioned codes 3 and 7, along with code 5, “Relations with the public” comprised the top 3.

As for the combination (code 9), in the “without honorifics” groups, 20.9% included code 3 (System and structure), followed by code 7 (Princess Mako) at 19.75%, and code 5 (Relations with the public) at 15.80%. In the “honorifics group”, code 7 (Princess Mako) ranked first at 20.78%, followed by code 8 (Press conference) at 19.80%, and code 5 (Relations with the public) at 16.83%.

The research findings for the “with honorifics” group did not fully support Hypothesis 2, although “system and structure (code 3)” did rank among the top 3 categories. In the “without honorifics” group, code 3 (system and structure), topped the ranking, thereby partially validating the hypothesis. The comparison between the two groups suggests that the choice to use or not to use honorifics may have influenced, perhaps unknowingly, their choice of specific targets of harassment. The “honorifics group” seems to focus more on the parties directly involved (the princess and Komuro) whereas the “without honorifics” group appears to focus on broader issues related to the system and structure. Their

negative tweets address topics such as the imperial family, and the future of the constitutional monarchy in Japan, as well as the once cordial relations between the imperial family and the public.

It is interesting to note that tweets about the sexual objectification of the princess or sexually suggestive messages comprised only an insignificant number, unlike many netnographical studies on tweets about female celebrities or female athletes (Guerin, 2017; Litchfield et al., 2015, 2018, 2021). Several factors may have contributed to the lack of sexually suggestive messages:

- 1) The intervention by Twitter Japan, which applied the newly revised Japanese defamation law, significantly more stringent than that of the US, to review potential violations of user agreements;
- 2) The tweets were collected on the day of their wedding, providing a very narrow time frame and topic for discussion;
- 3) It can be argued that a culturally embedded reverence for the imperial family may have acted as a barrier against the sexual objectification of the princess, whether or not a user is consciously aware of this.

3.3 Frequently Used Terms

After coding, the subjects that drew the attention of the Twitter users became clear. However, it remains unclear as to what specific issues within those subjects that they focused on. In order to investigate the content in great detail, this study analyzed the 45 most frequently used keywords in the sampled tweets, listing the top 10 with the highest frequency first and the least frequent, last.

Table 3. Top 10 Keywords

With Honorifics	Ranking	Without Honorifics
会見(Press conference)	1	会見(Press conference)
国民(Citizens)	2	秋篠宮 (Prince Akishino)
皇室(Imperial family)	3	国民(Citizens)
秋篠宮(Prince Akishino)	4	皇室(Imperial family)
親 (Parents)	5	日本(Japan)
私 (Private)	6	私(Private)
悪い(Bad)	7	税金(Tax)
PTDS	8	悪い(Bad)
反対 (Oppose) tie		
祝福 (Blessing) tie		
	9	天皇/天皇制 (Emperor/Imperial system)
	10	誹謗中傷 (Defamation)

After excluding those obvious terms such as “the princess”, “[her] husband” and “marriage”, the terms “press conference”, “citizens”, “imperial family”, “Prince Akishino”, “parent”, and “private” stood out in the “with honorifics group”. On the other hand, in the “without honorifics” group, the top five terms were identical to those in the “with honorifics” group for the first four entries: “press conference”, “Prince Akishino”, “citizens”, and “imperial family”. However, a new term, “Japan” emerged to round out the top five. It is also noteworthy that “freedom” and “victory” ranked significantly higher in the “honorifics group”, whereas “exit” had a higher ranking in the “without honorifics group”.

The most striking similarity between the two groups is the extent of criticism directed at Prince Akishino, the father of the bride. Netizens relentlessly denounced him for his presumed inability to control his daughter, questioning why he could not cancel the unofficial engagement. Such a mindset may seem puzzling to people unfamiliar with Japanese cultural norms, as netizens were convinced that the father—who is the head of the family—ought to be held accountable for the conduct of his 30-year-old daughter, as if she were a little girl incapable of making her own decisions and in need of paternal guidance.

This perspective reflects the family-drama framework of media reporting that was previously mentioned in this article. When reporting on the imperial family, viewers are led to believe that the head of the family is the ultimate decision-maker of all issues concerning the family and in charge of conflict resolution. Moreover, the crown prince’s alleged inability to handle his personal affairs and tame public opinion has raised grave concerns about the future direction of both the imperial family and the imperial system. Currently, Prince Akishino is first in the line of succession and will, at some point, symbolically represent patriarchy both within the nation and within his own household. The social whisperings on Twitter gave the impression that netizens still held onto age-old beliefs in the patriarchal system, in which the man of the house is the head of the family and reigns as the ultimate decision-maker, capable of enforcing his will and setting the moral standard for the family. To these netizens, the imperial family symbolizes the ideal form of Japanese family life, and as such, it ought to demonstrate exemplary conduct.

Another noteworthy finding is that “conference” appeared first in both rankings. The term was not simply used as a reference to the event or an occasion but was primarily used to express the Twitter users’ disappointment and anger toward how the Imperial Household Agency organized it: no improvised questions, no live Q&A. They were let down by Princess Mako’s refusal to respond to one of the pre-submitted questions concerning her in-law’s debt problem, as relentless media fixation on it had partly contributed to her PTSD. Twitter users interpreted her attitude, whether accurately or inaccurately, as implying that “suggestions and concerns” about the financial issue and her personal affairs from the general public and the media were nothing more than harassment.

It is important to reiterate that members of the imperial family rarely conduct press conferences. Nevertheless, some felt frustrated that the couple did not seize the opportunity to reconnect with the public and sway public sentiments in their favor. Some Twitter users believed the young couple could have presented themselves more reconciliatory to ease public concerns or at least offer apologies for stirring controversy and causing concern. None of this happened, which immensely dismayed them. In this sense, the young couple arguably missed the greatest opportunity to produce favorable self-images and rebranding, perhaps due to the lack of public relations office in the Imperial Household Agency or perhaps due to the absence of someone akin to a spin doctor. Their Machiavellian moment was forever lost.

The most frequently used terms in both the “honorifics” and the “without the honorifics” groups appear to be similar, if not identical. However, the content analysis reveals that the aggregated tweets collected from the two distinct groups evolved with two distinctive focuses: the “honorific group” shares more personal feelings and judgments toward Princess Mako’s decision to marry a controversial man, expressing disappointment and an inability to wish her good luck. On the other hand, the “without honorifics” group delves into broader issues, discussing the future of Japan, and the imperial system as well. This is evident in the gap in ranking of the most frequent terms between the two groups. Terms such as “tax thief”, “exit”, and “abolish [constitutional monarchy]” are ranked much higher in the “without honorifics” group, while terms, “freedom [over duty]”, “[unable to give] blessing”, and “disappointed” emerge higher in the other group. This is also consistent with the previous finding that the “with honorifics” groups pour their personal emotions toward the saga, while the “without honorifics” group looks at Japan from a macro perspective, expressing their grave concern for the constitutional monarchy.

3.4 Decoding Narratives

By connecting the dots—or, more specifically, connecting the most frequently used keywords—this research uncovered distinct narratives embedded in social whispering about Princess Mako. Since reproducing tweets can involve copyright infringement, Twitter prohibits such reproduction without the author’s consent. Therefore, the following sections incorporated not the entire wording from each tweet but only partial wording in order to convey the nuance while abiding by Twitter’s user agreements (Note. 3). By assembling the most frequently used terms, two distinctive narratives emerged from the sampled tweets.

“With Honorific” Group

“Princess Mako is a spoiled child who refused to sacrifice her private life for the good of the nation and the public, although it was expected of her. We are very disappointed by her conduct and cannot give her our blessing. Why is it impossible for Prince Akishino, her father, to persuade her to break off her relationship with an unworthy man and prioritize her duty to her people and responsibility as a

member of the imperial family? His parenting skills are quite questionable. The princess revealed at the press conference that she suffered from PTSD although she did not appear to have it. She accused the public of defaming her and her husband in the media and on the SNS. However, it was actually the princess who defamed the citizens by expressing their legitimate concern about her involvement in the affairs of the private citizens (Komuro's debt). The press conference appeared as her triumphant victory disregarding the public sentiments, and she was hostile, defiant, and selfish. She is obligated to respect the public opinion—our voice—because we pay her living expenses through our taxes, and she should have given up her love. Do not ever come back to Japan! Do not ever use taxpayers' money again. We are not paying for your rent in New York City. We are not buying flight tickets for you. No more first class. Since Princess Mako refused to do our bidding, she is a tax thief".

Several inaccuracies concerning her financing are prominent in this narrative. The netizens seem to be under the impression that the imperial family members "do not work" or do not have their own assets, and thus live off taxpayer money to maintain their privileged lifestyle. In a sense, the netizens are tacitly applying a business model to their relationship with the imperial family, where the employer (they) pays a salary (a tax) to the employee (Princess Mako) and expects the employee to work as the employer dictates. Alternatively, it is comparable to the Japanese business-client relations, where clients (they) believe that "Customers are like gods" (or in English, "Customers are always right"). Consequently, the netizens unknowingly or knowingly transformed into paying customers and asserted their rights to receive what they believed they paid for.

In this sense, their negative tweets take on more on a personal tone, imploring her disappointing conduct throughout the saga and expressing their concerns about her new life.

In addition to such personal expressions, the "without honorifics" group presents another dominant narrative.

"Without Honorific" Group

"We were disappointed that Princess Mako destroyed the trust we held in the imperial family and damaged the relationship between the imperial family and the citizens. The imperial family members ought to be more attentive to public sentiment and sacrifice their private lives for the good of the nation because they were destined to live a life of service. If the imperial family cannot listen to the public, what is the point of financially supporting them? They just took advantage of their privilege, exercising power over the public without caring about us. As she refused to perform her duty, the princess should have voluntarily exited the imperial family long ago. Her selfish conduct affected the favorable relationship that the imperial family had established with the public, which may, in turn, affect the future of the constitutional monarchy in Japan. Crown Prince Akishino also exhibited his inability to manage his own household; how is it possible to believe that he will represent the imperial family and the nation with dignity and integrity when the time comes to succeed to the role of emperor? His family

should have exited from the imperial household altogether. It is high time that we seriously considered abolishing the imperial system and reexamining the sociopolitical system that is not working anymore”.

The second narrative is similar to the one examined in the “with the honorific group” up to a point. From their perspective of this second group, Princess Mako’s saga highlighted not only her questionable conduct but also the future of the institutional arrangements of Japan at the macro level. By decoding the negative tweets in this group, it became evident, however, that the twitter users were not necessarily exasperated with Princess Mako. Their criticism went far beyond her personal conduct. Although this research initially hypothesized that Twitter users were venting their frustrations about sociopolitical stagnation in Japan, the findings suggest that their frustrations stem from other issues. It is not about stagnant Japan, where many feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled in their lives, but it seems that witnessing a changing Japan frustrates them. They wanted to hold on to something that symbolizes stability in a rapidly changing world—something that never changes. The imperial system fits into this category, with its history of 126 emperors from the same lineage, setting it apart from other royal families around the world. Article I of the Japanese Constitution clearly stipulates that “The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People”. However, Princess Mako’s conduct shook the foundation of their belief and the unity that the imperial family should facilitate. Their faith in stability was crumbling.

Their exasperation reflects current debates in Japan about tradition versus progress, exemplified by issues of diversity and an uncertain future direction. For example, in 2021, the Japan Olympic Committee and the Tokyo Organizing Committee selected Naomi Osaka, a Black Haitian-Japanese Grand Slam champion in tennis, as the final torch bearer to light the Olympic cauldron, and this decision ignited intense debates on who counted as Japanese and what Japanese citizenship ought to entail: Can a Black woman who lives in the United States and speaks only broken Japanese represent Japan just because she has a Japanese mother and possesses a Japanese passport?

Another controversial issue that reflects changing attitudes in Japan is the recent trend in restroom design, which features “men’s” and “gender-free” sections while eliminating women-only restrooms. This trend, intended to accommodate transgender individuals, has raised significant safety concerns among women and for young girls. Tokyu Kabukicho Tower, a multipurpose facility, opened its door in April featuring “gender-free” restrooms in an effort to acknowledge diversity and to align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals—especially, the goal of leaving no one behind (“Jendaresu”, 2023). However, this novel initiative was short-lived; just four months after its opening, the management company was compelled to redesign the restrooms into “men’s”, “women’s” and “multipurpose” facilities. This change was due to mounting concerns about crimes and harsh criticisms for relegating women to secondary-citizen status by denying them access to their own restrooms. In

Japan, it appeared that efforts by both the public and private sectors to promote diversity and multiculturalism are inadvertently coming at the expense of women, making them even more inclined to adhere to gendered traditions. Yet, at the same time, these women resent the gendered traditions that exclude them from decision-making about their own restrooms.

Considering all these controversies about promoting diversity, it is challenging to argue that Japanese women today enjoy relative gender equality. Currently, Japan ranks 125th in the Global Gender Gap Report compiled by the World Economic Forum (2023), dropping 9 places compared to last year. It is immediately followed in the ranking by Jordan, India, Tunisia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia—all developing nations (p. 11). Yet, Japan ranks 5th in UNDP's Gender Social Norm Index (2023), which draws its data from a series of public opinion surveys about gender equality (p. 24). This suggests that, contrary to other statistical indicators, many in Japan believe that women enjoy relative equality. In essence, many seem to believe in a level of gender equality that might not actually exist. Traditionalists respond both to real changes occurring in Japan and to “perceived” or hypothetical threats that may exist only in their minds. Relying on personal anecdotes, they view the dramatic advancement in women's status with fear, concerned that it signals a collapse of traditional gender hierarchies. For them, the sight of a self-determined princess serves as a reminder of the perceived shifting status of women in Japan, and the corresponding perceived degradation of men's status.

For those who feel left behind by these changes, the Japan they once knew is fading away. This was a Japan with distinctively established gender roles, where men earned respect from their families as dependable breadwinners. They may now feel emasculated in a new economy where real wages have stagnated over the last 20 years, and a man's paycheck is no longer sufficient to support his family, pay bills, fund his children's college education, and secure a comfortable retirement. That Japan, characterized by a traditional division of labor where women could, if they chose, stay at home without entering the labor market or having to handle double shifts, is now a thing of the past. Princess Mako has become a symbol of this changing Japan: a place where a defiant imperial princess can choose personal happiness and freedom, abandoning her duty, thereby challenging patriarchal norms. They were forced to realize that they cannot control the princess, even though she has been provided for by taxpayer funds. It may be frustrating for them to see her act as though she owes nothing to anyone, not even the taxpayers, fueling their resentment. The stable Japan they once knew has been replaced by a new, unsettling landscape that threatens their interests and makes them feel like foreigners in their own country.

Thus, in the second dominant narrative, Princess Mako just happened to be the individual whom they selected and harass online. They could have chosen someone else, but she happened to exhibit the traits that symbolize gender equality in Japan that traditionalists are reluctant to acknowledge and accept. Consequently, she became a convenient scapegoat.

4. After the Saga

4.1 Public Relations

In April 2023, approximately two and a half years after the revelation of Princess Mako's mental health issues, the Imperial Household Agency established a public relations office. It is quite surprising and unthinkable to many that it took so long to establish a PR office. For now, the office is responsible for updating the Imperial Household Agency's website, which features information about the imperial family, as well as for crafting a plan to incorporate SNS into their public relations strategy. They are likely about a decade behind in the media revolution, especially considering that the British royal household actively uses social networking services to promote favorable images of its members.

4.2 Concerns

The agency made quite an intriguing decision in appointing a chief of PR. Maiko Fujiwara used to be a career bureaucrat who previously served for the National Police Agency, a part of the National Public Safety Commission of the Cabinet Office, and was in charge of surveillance and investigation of foreign espionage, corporate espionage, radical ideological groups, and terrorist groups. It is still premature to predict what the newly-established PR office actually intends to do, but the choice of Fujiwara may be concerning. In addition to disseminating favorable images of the imperial family, this office may invest more energy, time and money in cracking down on the press. Such effort in itself is not a problem, as the agency was not serious about addressing defamatory and unfounded content before. But where to draw the line? What levels of criticism toward the imperial family will be allowed if that happens? Japanese people, in general, have a broader definition of slander nowadays. Even if a statement is accurate with supportive evidence, one can be held accountable for "hurting feelings". Today, such a subjective hypersensitive act is synonymous with the concept of slander.

Instead of disseminating favorable images of the imperial family, this new PR office may be more interested in cracking down on the press regardless of the level of its criticism toward the imperial family. If that is the case, it may further antagonize the public, who felt betrayed by Prince Akishino and Princess Mako and lost their respect for the imperial family. As the highest-ranking officer in the PR office, Fujiwara confronts a difficult task to balance the two different needs—utilizing the media to create favorable images of the imperial family, and at the same time restraining the powers of a free press to protect them from real or perceived criticism. In the next few months or even longer, the press must test the waters to determine the extent to which Fujiwara will invest her time and energy in cracking down on undesirable media coverage or uncooperative journalists.

Regardless, establishing the PR office was the right decision. The enforced dignified silence is a dangerous approach that undermines the mental wellbeing of the female members of the imperial family. It would also affect the heir presumptive and his marriage in the future. What woman would want to marry a prince knowing that she would be on her own and nobody would protect her from

hysterical media? What the agency has done in the past may come back to haunt it. Its bureaucratic modus operandi has been to postpone addressing problems until change becomes absolutely necessary. It could become even more difficult for a future emperor to look for a suitable spouse who can maintain a stiff upper lip and smile for the media and the public, as if to suggest that relentless criticism does not concern her.

5. Conclusion

Princess Mako and Kei Komuro's engagement and marriage were supposed to be milestones in their personal history. However, it soon transformed into a bizarre, twisted political drama that ultimately questioned the *raison d'être* of the imperial family and the constitutional monarchy in Japan. The personal became political. It exposed the dialectic struggle between the proponents of traditions and progress, as well as the resentment among those who feel left behind by a changing Japan. She was used to express the public's dissatisfaction; she was used by the traditional media trying to impose an ideal imperial womanhood on her; she was used as a catchy headline by the media to earn more page views and generate more profits in the new digital economy. The public and the media failed to impose on her the Japanese imperial version of Marianismo, which is a life dedicated to public service despite sacrificing her private life. She will not be the last person to be used as long as the media continues to rely on the traditional family drama framework, where age-old patriarchy still thrives, to report on the imperial family.

However, maybe she was not an isolated, vulnerable, and tragic victim trapped in the rigid institution. Maybe she was more calculating than she appeared to be in public, as many negative tweets claimed, but with positive intentions. We saw a glimpse of a strong, self-determined princess at the joint press conference on the day of her marriage. She confessed that it was her idea to live abroad rather than in Japan, and she was the one who asked Komuro to go to the United States for his law school education and create a base for their future. It was she who told Komuro not to return the money his mother "had borrowed" from her former fiancé, as there was no legal obligation to do so. Although her tactical decision backfired and led the media to create an image of her fiancé as a deadbeat, shameless social climber, she proved to be a decision-maker, or at least a co-decision-maker, in her relationship with Komuro. It could be argued that her resistance to her parents, the public, and the media may not be a form of self-defense; the self-determined princess may have been on the offensive throughout the saga, inching closer to her goal every day by using any means possible behind the scenes and almost severing her relationships with members of her family. Nevertheless, the experience of Princess Mako behind the chrysanthemum curtain since 2017 remains an enigma to the public.

The path she took to liberate herself may seem ironic to some: to flee from the patriarchal institution of monarchy in which women are required to keep silent to abusive media and SNS; she ended up

entering into, arguably, another patriarchal institution—a marriage. Some may assume that she used her marriage as a means to escape from the closed imperial household to be free, and her husband may be merely an accessory to her plan. No one in the public knows her authentic self as she has not granted any interviews or written essays detailing her thoughts during her prolonged “unofficial” engagement. On some occasions, when dealing with the media and SNS, dignified silence may work better than disseminating more information than needed. Princess Mako and her husband would never appear on Japanese TV and discuss how painful it was for them to see abusive SNS posts or how frustrating it was for them to realize that the imperial family did not seem to embrace Komuro, her husband. Providing interviews on TV as a celebrity is undoubtedly a profitable business as Meghan Markle demonstrated, and perhaps the couple would be able to woo sympathy from the public. But at what cost? They may choose to go back to Japan once their self-imposed semi-exile to the United States is no longer needed. They will probably maintain a low profile in the United States, no matter how financially desperate they may become. Nevertheless, one hopes that she is now able to firmly establish her new identity in a new country and is able to appreciate the fact that she is now a decision-maker along with her husband, far away from the Japanese imperial system that enforced her silence. She may not be a tragic figure, after all.

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Notes

Note 1. As it is culturally uncommon in Japan to address members of the imperial family by their first names alone, she is referred to as either “the princess” or “Princess Mako” in all instances in this article.

Note 2. On July 24, 2023, CEO Elon Musk officially rebranded Twitter as “X”. However, for the sake of lexicographical clarity, the original name “Twitter” will be used throughout this article.

Note 3. Translations from Japanese to English were carried out by the author of this work.