

Book that sparked a battle royale

Biography on Japanese princess invites death threats, gov't pressure

DAVID CHEW

david.chew@mediacorp.com.sg

AUSTRALIAN journalist Ben Hills is proof of the maxim that one man's meat is another man's poison.

The author of the popular unauthorised biography of Japan's Crown Princess Masako sparked a vicious debate in both Japan and Australia, as well as a diplomatic row between the two countries, over his book, *Princess Masako: Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne*.

Hills' book, which is out now in Singapore but has yet to be published in Japan, makes claims about the princess' physical and mental health, and alleges that she has been bullied behind the palace gates by the Imperial Household Agency (also known as the Kunaicho).

The veteran investigative reporter had been hoping his book would promote greater awareness of the stresses facing the members of Japan's royal family.

In a recent telephone interview with TODAY from his home in Sydney, Hills recalled wondering 11 years ago at the time



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— Author Ben Hills about his book on Japan's Crown Princess (left), *Princess Masako: Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne* (right)



of her wedding why Masako would even want to enter such a repressive place.

"I remember writing at that time a number of articles about why such a bright, articulate, multilingual career woman would want to bury herself in this medieval monastery household. And, at that time, I was rather pessimistic about how it would turn out," he said.

In 2005, an Australian publisher interested in Masako's story asked Hills if he would like to revisit the story and find out how it went.

Two years later, with the book on store shelves — and, in some places, back-ordered due to its ongoing popularity — Hills

has received death threats over its content and been pressed by Japan's Foreign Ministry to issue a public apology.

"I knew it would be controversial because no one in Japan has written about this so honestly or frankly before," he said. "But I didn't believe the government would be so stupid as to attempt to ban the book, too. That I didn't anticipate.

"But it's had the opposite effect — they've made it into a bestseller. I looked at the Japan Amazon bestseller list and my book was No 1. No 2 was the new *Harry Potter*, No 3 was the new *Sports Illustrated Swim-suit Calendar*, so they've made me more

popular than girls in bikinis!"

The book took a year to write and research, during which time quite a few people refused to be interviewed, most notably Masako's family.

Hills was particularly disappointed that the Imperial Household Agency did not facilitate his requests to speak to the Crown Prince and Princess.

"I'm a professional journalist and I've been doing this for more than 40 years now. I regard it as absolutely essential, when you're writing about someone, to approach them and give them the opportunity to present their side of the story," he said.

"So I'm very conscious that this is a deficiency in the book. Even today, after all the kerfuffle, if the Kunaicho would like to put me and Masako and Naruhito together for an interview I would be more than happy to do that and perhaps publish a new book to include their comments," he added.

The author is currently negotiating with a left-leaning Japanese publisher with a history of issuing controversial works to put out the book in Japan.

"It's not important if the Japanese people love or hate the book, but that they have the right to read it and make up their own minds," he said. "And this is what their government is preventing them from doing."