

From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation

Women and Government in the Heian Period

The Heian age stands out for the contributions made by noblewomen in the production of literary works and as sponsors of the arts and religious ceremonies. Their participation in political decisions at the center, however, has traditionally been seen as limited, especially when compared to the two hundred years between Empress Suiko's accession (592) and Empress Shōtoku's death (770), when men and women reigned in equal numbers and shared similar spans of rule. This context seems to be unique to ancient Japan as one is unlikely to find this many female rulers during such an extended period in other premodern societies. Still, scholars have until now understood female sovereigns primarily as interim rulers, who came to reign when confusion surrounded the succession of a male to the throne or when the heir was still a child. According to this view, female sovereigns wielded little actual power as rulers because they owed their position to male sponsors. However, recent research now suggests that empresses matched emperors in demonstrating real authority, though their accession may have been considered provisional.¹ Still, a momentous change occurred at the end of the eighth century, when female sovereigns came to yield less power in the government and all but disappeared from the throne. But they continued to exert considerable influence through other means, as mothers of emperors, and were often granted titles such as *kōtaibunin* (imperial mother) or *kōtaigō* (grand imperial dowager). Commenting on these new positions, Satō Nagato recently observed,

We should not exaggerate the influence of the temporary courts of the grand imperial dowagers (*kōtaigō*) during this period. Although one might expect that her opinion be solicited for political matters because of her daily contact with the emperor, we must not automatically conclude that she was actively participating in matters of the state. And, when the emperor was an adult, other than in minor matters, she was not directly or publicly participating in governmental affairs, even if she maintained a strong relationship with the emperor.²

Satō accordingly refutes the notion that imperial consorts were involved politically. It is true that the imperial government structured itself around male sovereigns, especially after the reign of Emperor Kanmu (r. 781–806). From that time on, women were excluded not just from rule, but also from the bureaucracy,

and were driven from the center of politics to the peripheries. However, Satō's interpretation raises several important questions. Did empresses, who until the eighth century stood on nearly equal terms with their male counterparts, really relinquish their political rank? Did this marginalization of official duties within the imperial court mean a complete loss of influence? In short, did female participation in government truly disappear? In this chapter, I will explore the place of women within the Heian court government from the ninth through the eleventh centuries, a period usually seen as one dominated by rule of regents and known as the royal court state (*ōchō kokka*). I will examine the sociopolitical relationship between men and women at the core of the Heian state. To understand these developments, an overview of the status of female rulers in the preceding era will be helpful.

Women and Government in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries: The Era of Female Sovereigns

In recent years, research on female sovereigns has flourished along with scholarly interest in imperial rule in the seventh and eighth centuries. This has allowed us to reevaluate the role of women as rulers during this early period. The first verifiable female sovereign was Empress Suiko (r. 592–628), who ascended the throne in 592.³ Her road to rulership was complicated, but she began her career at court as the principal consort of Emperor Bidatsu (r. 572–585), who died in 585. After his death, his half brother Yōmei ruled, but he died after only two years on the throne. Another brother, Sushun, then ascended the throne in 587, but power struggles between the Mononobe and Soga clans led to his assassination five years later. It was in the midst of such tumultuous dispute over the imperial succession that influential court aristocrats selected the previous consort as their ruler, thus making Suiko empress.

The influential historian Inoue Mitsusada asserted that it became customary for consorts to assume leadership as female sovereigns during such succession disputes. Inoue's ideas came to be known and accepted as the "provisional female sovereign theory" (*jotei chūkei setsu*).⁴ Although Empress Suiko did in fact become sovereign during such circumstances, this theory has as its backdrop a gender-biased presumption that women could not exercise political authority. Not only were female sovereigns provisional in this line of thinking; they were also merely puppets for their male sponsors.

The provisional female sovereign theory has recently been subject to reexamination. Newer research shows that while the circumstances may have dictated their accession, and their role may have been considered provisional, female sovereigns actively possessed and exercised political power equal to that of their male counterparts.⁵ For example, the consort of Emperor Tenmu (673–686) is believed to have fought alongside her husband during the Jinshin War of 671–672, when they battled Tenmu's nephew for the throne. After the death of their son, Prince Kusakabe (662–689), she became Empress Jitō (645–702; r.

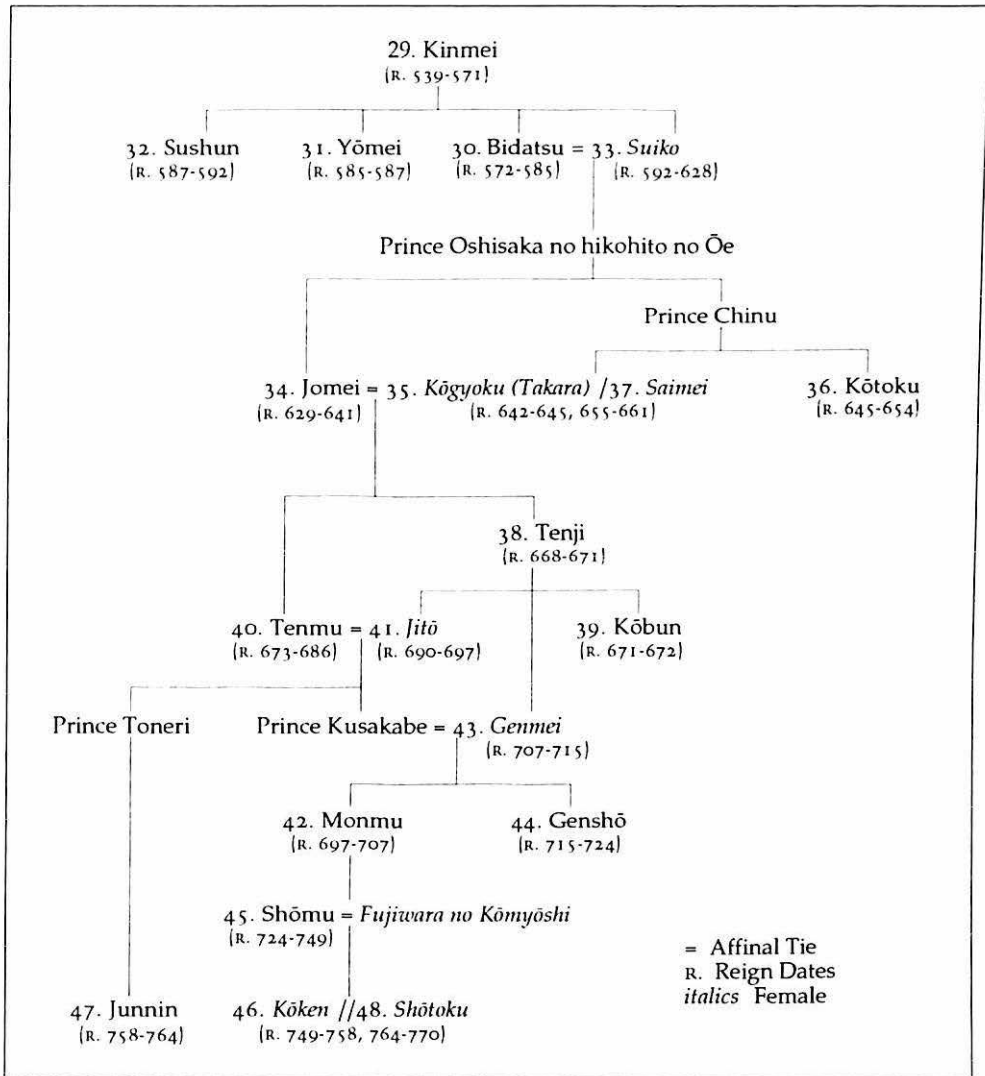


Figure 2.1. Imperial genealogy of the seventh and eighth centuries

690–697), until her grandson, Prince Karu, who would rule as Emperor Monmu (r. 697–707), reached adulthood (figure 2.1).

During her reign, Empress Jitō promulgated the Asuka Kiyomihara Law Codes and transferred the capital to Fujiwara, in effect establishing the foundation of the bureaucratic *ritsuryō* (penal and administrative codes) state. These accomplishments are commonly accepted, and would seem to contradict Inoue's interpretation.⁶ Moreover, recent scholarship indicates that Empress Jitō not only ascended the throne without the customary selection process headed by the nobles, but also removed competitors, such as Tenmu's sons by other consorts, and forcefully took control by herself.⁷ In the following century, political condi-

tions changed as nobles close to the throne gained more influence, but empresses continued to exercise authority in the same fashion. For example, both Empress Genmei (r. 707–715), who ascended the throne without any experience in governing, and Empress Kōken (r. 749–758), who was a forceful sovereign groomed to rule, ascended the throne without having ruled alongside a male emperor as principal consort.

Of the female sovereigns who ascended the throne in the seventh century, many were imperial dowagers (*ōkisasi*). Women were esteemed within the imperial family, and as the mother of the emperor, the *ōkisasi* was involved in determining the succession. In the imperial bureaucratic state of the seventh century, the principal imperial consort (*kōgō*) assumed the role of imperial dowager. As suggested by the phrase “rule from behind” (*shirie no matsurigoto*),⁸ the principal consort stood equal in importance to the sovereign in state affairs and inherited all the authority of the throne after the death of the emperor. This provides an interesting contrast with China, where only the *kōtai*gō retained an official rank, and presided over a special court to support the child emperor. Even if she were not the birth mother, she had to hold that title to effectively rule in his place while helping the young emperor maintain his position. In Japan, the Taihō Law Codes of 701 stipulated that even if the birth mother of the emperor did not become the principal imperial consort, she could become either senior imperial consort (*kōtaihi*) or imperial mother. These titles made it possible for nonprincipal consorts to wield the same authority and power as the empress dowagers to support the emperor. In other words, it allowed the imperial consort to exercise power in her own name by prolonging the emperor’s reign after his death.⁹

The eighth century saw new developments that further augmented the role of imperial consorts. The principal consort of Emperor Shōmu (701–756; r. 724–749), Fujiwara no Kōmyōshi (701–760), established the Office of the Imperial Consort (*Kōgō gūshiki*) outside the inner Imperial Palace, which was independent of the emperor’s bureaucracy and maintained its own assets.¹⁰ Kōmyōshi became Grand Imperial Dowager Kōmyō when her and Shōmu’s daughter ascended the throne as Empress Kōken in 749. After Shōmu’s death in 756, Kōmyō came to support her daughter’s rule as mother of the empress, and it was her nephew, Fujiwara no Nakamaro (706–764), who took command of court affairs by becoming chief of the Office of the Imperial Consort.

Women who participated in politics did not consist only of imperial consorts. In the seventh century, female officials (*miyabito*) served at the center of the palace, and they were organized into twelve bureaus of the rear palace, in accordance with the *ritsuryō* codes. Their main responsibility was to serve as channels of communication between the court council and the emperor or empress. The *miyabito* continued to act as the emperor’s liaison to the bureaucracy into the eighth century.¹¹ In this way, male and female officials both worked as one to run the government; and on ritual occasions, men and women took on comparable work, though they were segregated.¹²

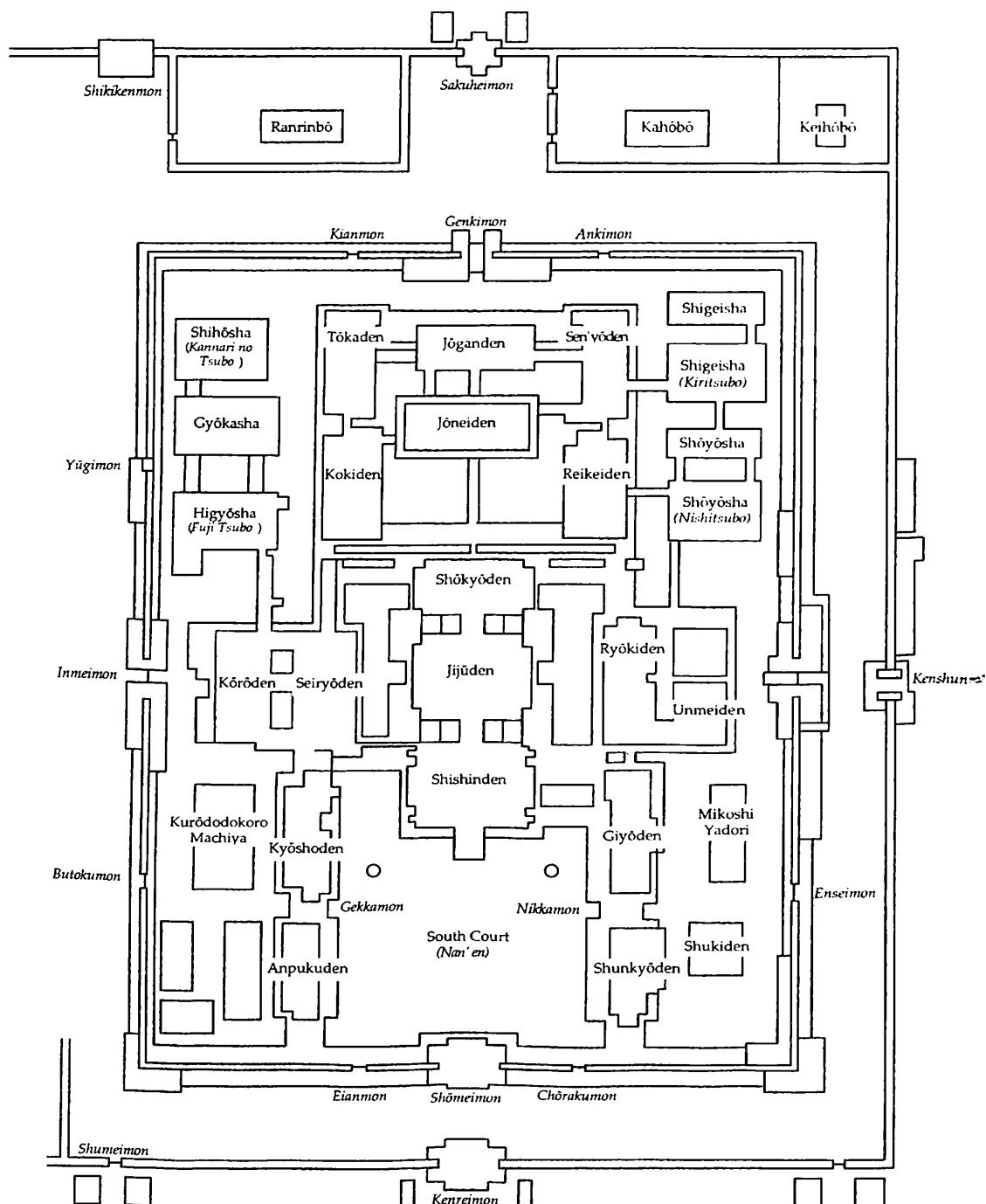
Empress Kōken retired in 756 in favor of Junnin, but she reascended the throne in 764 as Empress Shōtoku, reflecting the uncertain and competitive conditions

at the imperial court at the time as she asserted her own control at the expense of her Fujiwara opponents. In either case, her second reign marks an important boundary, since the position of women in the court would change drastically after her death in the tenth month of 770, followed by the ousting of her main ally, the monk Dōkyō. First, we find no more female sovereigns following Shōtoku until they appear as puppet empresses in the Edo period, but as we shall see, this is only part of the story.¹³ Without a doubt, the loss of imperial power signaled a fall in the political standing of women. Second, the office of the principal consort, which had been located outside the inner palace and functioned independently, was moved inside the main palace area, beginning with the principal consort of Emperor Kōnin (r. 770–781), Princess Inoue.¹⁴ The principal consort, who used to stand alongside the emperor as a ruler and who used to have a right to succeed after her husband's death, now stood below her spouse. From this time, the prerogatives of the throne rested solely with the male emperor. Third, the governmental responsibilities of female officials gradually lessened. Conversely, and in part to replace the roles of these female officials, an increasing number of consorts and relatives of the imperial family began serving at the court. In short, while the status and role of female officials began to erode in the public domain, the participation of noblewomen in the private sphere continued to be prominent, if not increased.

Women and Government in the Ninth Century: The Power of the *Kokumo*

From the age of Emperor Kanmu to that of Emperor Saga (r. 809–823), the political role of women and their standing changed greatly. Female sovereigns no longer appear from the late eighth century, and the role of principal consorts changed as well. The introduction of the imperial consort's palace inside the inner Imperial Palace at the very end of the Nara period under Princess Inoue continued and was institutionalized in the new capital of Nagaoka (784–794) and in Heian-kyō. A hall named the Jōneiden was designated as an office for the public affairs of the imperial consort in the center of the rear palace within the palace compounds of Kyoto (map 2.1). On occasion, this hall also came to be used by the imperial consort for various ceremonies.¹⁵ Thus, although the Office of the Imperial Consort was incorporated into the inner Imperial Palace, indicating a diminished formal function, the public rituals held at the Jōneiden reflect a continued official function still played by the imperial consort. On the other hand, Tachibana no Kachiko (786–850), the imperial consort of Emperor Saga, had the emperor's officials running her office. When one considers how Grand Imperial Dowager Kōmyō had her own freestanding office, the loss of independence for the imperial consorts and mothers seems clear.¹⁶

The change of the imperial consort's administrative office also meant a change in her role. Fujiwara no Otomuro (760–790) was appointed *kōgō* of Emperor Kanmu on the fourteenth day of the fourth month of 783 because of her status as the mother of Kanmu's eldest son, later Emperor Heizei (figure 2.1). Emperor



Map 2.1. The Imperial Palace compound (*dairi*)

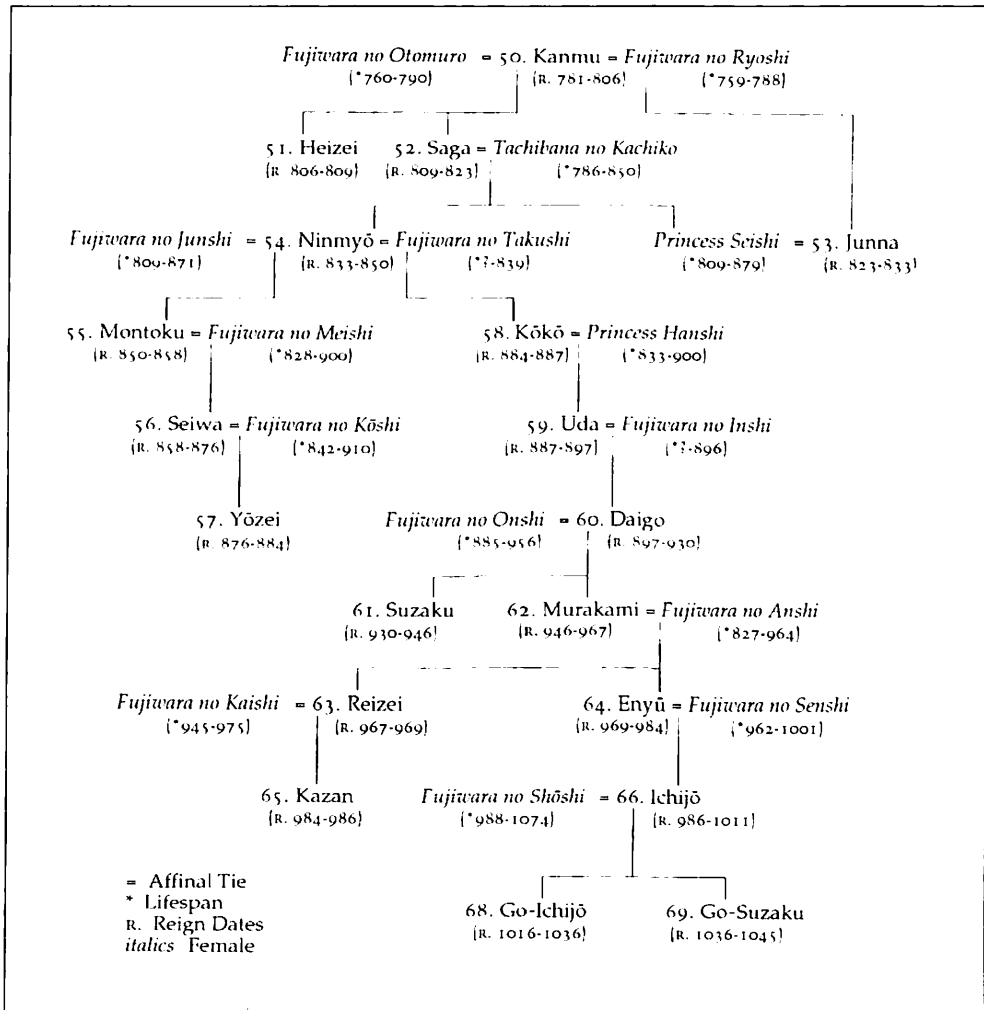


Figure 2.2. Imperial genealogy of the early and mid-Heian period

Saga, whose imperial consort was Tachibana no Kachiko, instituted a number of Chinese-inspired reforms with an emphasis on virtue, and there was a renewed emphasis on the spouse of the emperor in accordance with Chinese notions of how each gender had its respective roles.¹⁷ Until that point, Japan had developed its own tradition by having the imperial consorts, along with the emperor, receive white robes for sacred ceremonies (*haku no kinu*), in stark contrast to the habits of Tang China. However, in the second month of 820, it was stipulated that the imperial consorts' robes be "auxiliary" (*josaifuku*). It is thus beyond any doubt that the position of the imperial consort became secondary to the emperor's from Emperor Saga.¹⁸

From the time of Tachibana no Kachiko onward, the phrase "within the palace" (*konchū*) was added to edicts appointing imperial consorts: "I hereby declare

[Tachibana no Kachiko] imperial consort and the ruler within the palace.”¹⁹ In other words, the imperial consort’s authority was defined as being within the compound of the rear palace, reflecting a major change in her function and status.²⁰ Until then, the imperial consort stood next to the emperor in the Audience Hall (Daigokuden) to hear the New Year’s greetings on the morning of the first day of the year. However, from the time of Kachiko, the imperial consort withdrew and no longer participated in the audience on New Year’s Day. Instead, a new ceremony was initiated on the second day, when she received New Year’s greetings from the crown prince, retainers, and female officials, a format that followed the Chinese model for the imperial consort and empress dowagers.²¹ In China, however, the imperial consort received greeting only from higher-ranking female attendants, whereas in Japan, all female attendants participated, symbolizing her position at the apex of all ranking women at the imperial court.²²

A political transformation among female officials also occurred within the imperial court. From the New Year’s Day greetings to many other ceremonies and banquets, the participation of women, who at first stood side by side with men, lessened between the time of Emperor Kanmu and the early Heian period.²³ The promotions ceremony (*joi no girei*) used to occur with women and men gathered together in rows at the court. However, from 813, the ceremonies were divided, with the men holding their ceremony on the seventh and the women on the eighth, although in reality the women’s ceremony became an all but empty shell as the actual lining up of the women to be promoted was eliminated.²⁴ Rather, the female officials (*naishi*), who formerly held responsibilities in the administrative apparatus of the state, came to be replaced by male secretaries known as *kurōdo* in the aftermath of the Kusuko Incident of 810, which pitted Retired Emperor Heizei against Emperor Saga.²⁵ From then on, as female officials came to serve the emperor mainly in minor matters, their political role declined.²⁶ The responsibilities at the court, which had formerly been executed by both men and women, were now divided: the political authority rested with men, while the private, including the sexual, rested with women.

New Developments in the Latter Half of the Ninth Century

As noted, in the early Heian period, especially at the court of Emperor Saga, the roles of men and women underwent a radical transformation. In the latter half of the ninth century, there would be further change. First, the power of the mother of the reigning emperor, as *kōtaigō* or *kōtaibunin*, became more pronounced. The change is first apparent on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of 842, two days after Retired Emperor Saga died. In what came to be known as the Jōwa Disturbance, Crown Prince Tsunesada was deposed under pressure from the Fujiwara. However, the imperial decree following the incident also notes that the decision was made in accordance with “the words of the senior grand imperial dowager [*taikōtaigō*].”²⁷ To further complicate matters, Kachiko was the grandmother of Tsunesada, and the prince’s mother, Princess Seishi, was naturally upset with her own mother. Seishi is said to have “shaken in anger, cried out in grief, and re-

sented her mother."²⁸ The involvement of Kachiko in this incident indicates that, after Saga's death, she assumed actual control of the imperial house.²⁹

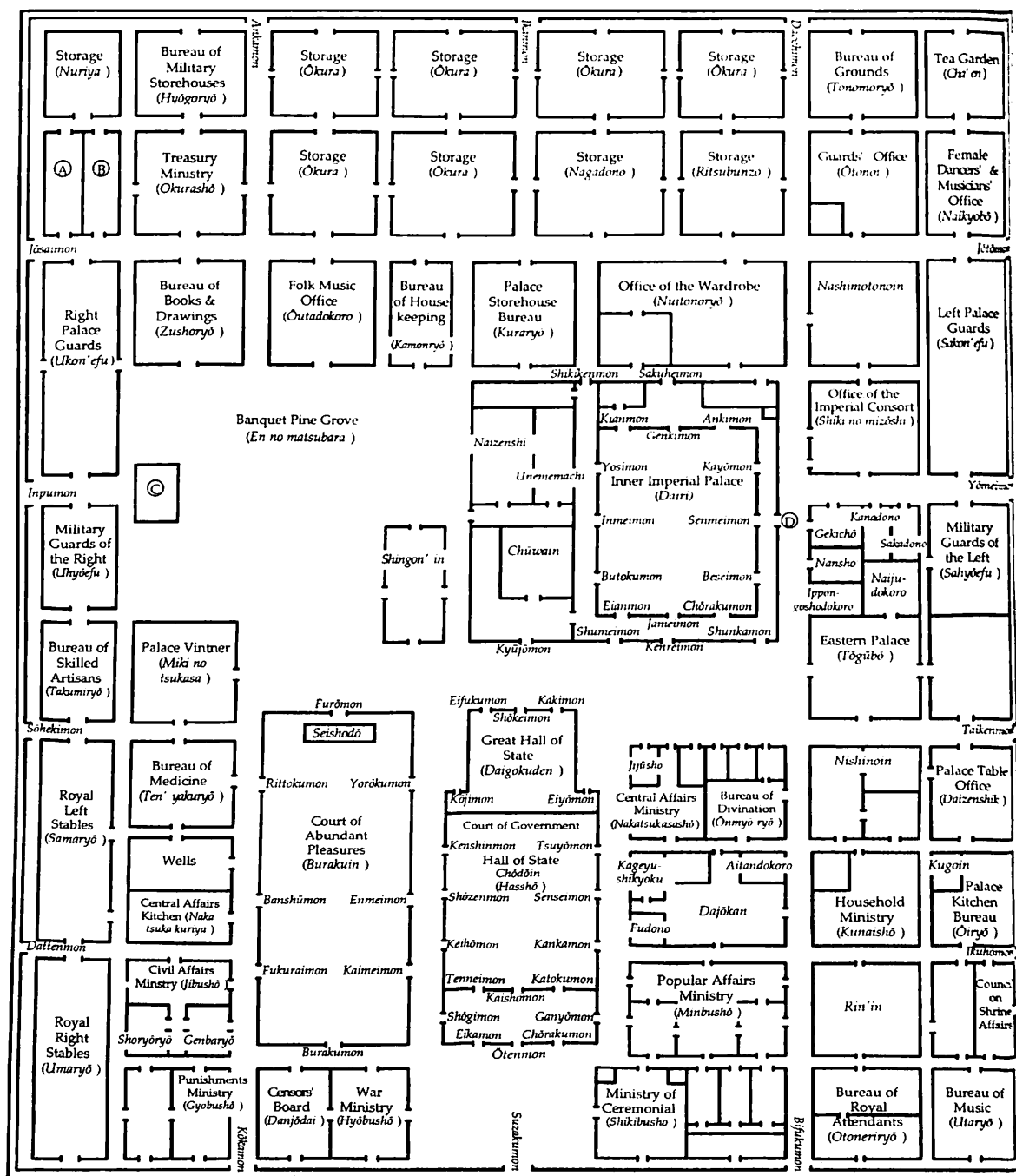
The new crown prince following the Jōwa Disturbance was Michiyasu, the son of Fujiwara no Yoshifusa's sister Junshi and Emperor Ninmyō, reflecting also the increased influence of the Northern Fujiwara (see figure 2.2). Since "the ranking nobles repeatedly submitted [that Michiyasu be appointed],"³⁰ it is clear that the twelve ranking courtiers supported and accepted Kachiko's decision. Emperor Ninmyō and Princess Seishi were twins, but in choosing Prince Michiyasu, Kachiko favored the paternal line, a stance apparently shared by the courtiers and obviously strongly promoted by the influential Yoshifusa.

Prince Michiyasu ascended the throne as Emperor Montoku (r. 850–858). Extant documents do not reveal exactly how his birth mother, Fujiwara no Junshi, supported Montoku, but the imperial edict four years later promoting her to *kōtaigō* offers a glimpse. On the twenty-first day of the third month of 850, Emperor Ninmyō died in his imperial palace. Crown Prince Michiyasu then moved into the Eastern Palace (Tōgū), where he received the imperial regalia (map 2.2). On the seventeenth day of the fourth month, Junshi was promoted from consort (*nyōgo*) to imperial mother. The imperial proclamation of four years later explains how this came about:

The senior grand imperial dowager of Saga [Tachibana no Kachiko] and the grand consort of Junna [Princess Seishi] were both present at the imperial court at the same time. Although it is clear from ancient customs that I [Emperor Montoku] revere my mother [Fujiwara no Junshi], I can only lament that merit in life and death are different. Thus, I could only grant my Fujiwara mother the title *kōtaibunin*. I hope that this modesty will invite happiness in the next world.³¹

This statement reveals that Emperor Montoku had actually wanted to give his mother the honorific title of *kōtaigō* from the beginning, but he could not, since two senior consorts were already present. Having no choice, he thus made her *kōtaibunin*.

On the fourth day of the fifth month of 850, however, Senior Grand Imperial Dowager Tachibana no Kachiko died. Four years later, on the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month of 854, Emperor Montoku was finally able to elevate Junna's consort Seishi to senior grand imperial dowager and Junshi to grand imperial dowager. To modern readers, such squabbling may appear pedantic, especially since both titles in question referred to the imperial dowager. However, in the world of the Heian court, such titles not only reflected status and hierarchy, but also provided important precedents for future successors to the throne and thus had a tremendous impact on the fate of individual noble families. It is therefore not surprising that Princess Seishi disagreed with attempts to promote Junshi. In fact, when Seishi herself was promoted to *taikōtaigō*, she declined the honor because she did not want to vacate her current *kōtaigō* title, which would then have been granted to Junshi.³² There was naturally some tension between Seishi and Junshi, since the latter's son had become crown prince at the expense of



- Ⓐ Royal Family's Office (Ōkimi no tsukasa) Ⓑ Palace Women's Office (Uneme no tsukasa) Ⓒ Hall of Military Virtue (Butokuden) Ⓓ Keshunna

Map 2.2. The Greater Imperial Palace precincts (*daidairi*)

Seishi's own son in the Jōwa Disturbance. In any event, one can tell that, at this time, the *kōtaigō* was considered higher in rank than the *kōtaibunin* even though they occupied the same rank according to the Taihō Codes.³³ The elevation of the *kōtaigō* in the latter half of the ninth century above that of the *kōtaibunin* is probably derived from the Chinese classics, which mention grand empress dowagers running the imperial court.

Following the death of Emperor Montoku in the eighth month of 858, Junshi is recorded as doing the following:

On the twenty-seventh day, the *kōtaibunin*³⁴ [Junshi] went to the Eastern Gojō Palace [where the crown prince resided]. Two days later, the crown prince and the *kōtaibunin* returned to the crown prince's eastern palace, riding in the same palanquin. The procedure was the same as for imperial progressions, except that no announcement was made for the cart. She did this to support the accession of the young prince.³⁵

Nishino Yukiko believes that this is a strong indication of Junshi's support in making her young grandson emperor.³⁶ In particular, the words "to support the accession of the young prince" unmistakably point to the sovereign's grandmother, Junshi, as the head of the imperial house, supporting the first documented accession of a child emperor. She accordingly played a role similar to that played by Tachibana no Kachiko, dominating matters at court as the head of the imperial house. This notion is further reinforced by her placement behind the elevated throne during the enthronement ceremony held at the enthronement hall, an expression of her central role in the accession of the child emperor.³⁷

The following year, Junshi moved to the Eastern Gojō Palace, after which Fujiwara no Meishi (also read Akiko), the mother of Seiwa (r. 858–876), came to live with and support the young sovereign. Meishi became imperial mother on the seventh day of the eleventh month of 858, less than three months after her son's accession to the throne.³⁸ Emperor Seiwa's coming-of-age ceremony was held on the first day of 864, a few days after which Meishi was promptly promoted to grand imperial dowager. Following Emperor Seiwa's move from the Eastern Palace to the Jijūden, centrally located within the Imperial Palace compound, on 865/11/4, Meishi moved to the Jōneiden soon afterward (see map 2.1).³⁹ As already noted, the Jōneiden was the official administrative hall of the principal imperial consort from the late eighth century, but it was now taken over by the mother of the emperor, who became known as "mother of the nation" (*kokumō*), a new title that reflected the position of imperial mothers from the time of Princess Seishi. In fact, the *kokumō* subsequently became the main supporter of the emperor's rule.⁴⁰ Thus, while Emperor Saga promoted the sinified ideal of an empress dowager controlling the court, it was the mother of the nation that came to assume that role.

Meishi moved to the Shiki no Mizōshi (located just east of the imperial compound; see map 2.2), in the northeastern part of the palace compound, where the office of the grand imperial dowager was located, on the seventeenth day of the second month of 874. The Shiki no mizōshi was also where the influential

Chancellor Fujiwara no Mototsune (836 – 891), Meishi's brother, had his imperial palace office. An entry in *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* from 881 states,

After being appointed chancellor, [Fujiwara no Mototsune] declined the honor four times.⁴¹ During that time, the Council of State was deadlocked in many matters. The noble council therefore held meetings, and sent a secretary to report governmental matters to Mototsune at his office within the palace (he used the Shiki no Mizōshi for his office). After Mototsune, this became customary.⁴²

The quarters of sisters or daughters serving at the palace often became the offices of noblemen, and so Mototsune, the most powerful courtier of his time, made his office in his sister's Shiki no mizōshi. By sharing space with Meishi, who was the mother of Emperor Seiwa as well as the grandmother of Emperor Yōzei (r. 876 – 884), Mototsune could use the authority of the mother and grandmother of the emperor to solidify his own power, acting as the *kokumo*'s deputy.⁴³ Therefore, the Northern Fujiwara chieftains' successful rise to power as regents, and by extension the regency age (858 – 1086) itself, occurred against the backdrop of the authority of the "mother of the nation."

The origins of the regent's power have in fact not received enough attention by scholars. It is important to note, for example, that the regent could control the imperial court from the Shiki no Mizōshi, which he shared with the *kokumo* — usually the mother or grandmother of the sovereign — precisely because of the *kokumo*'s history of supporting the emperor. At the beginning of the ninth century, consorts and women were no longer allowed to ascend the imperial throne themselves: women had been pushed from the center toward the periphery of the government. Instead, the emperor's mother assumed a new status as mother of the nation and came to take power behind the throne, a position that became even more powerful in the case of child emperors. It was against the backdrop of such parental authority and informal influence on reigning emperors that Fujiwara fathers and brothers were also able to exercise power.

The Mother of the Nation in the Tenth Century: Princess Hanshi and Fujiwara no Onshi

From the latter half of the ninth century, the imperial mother thus assumed the role of the caretaker of the child emperor. Her role gradually became institutionalized, a trend that was further reinforced when the imperial mother's office also came to serve as the living quarters of the *kokumo*. This trend continued in the tenth century.⁴⁴

The mother of Emperor Uda (r. 887 – 897), Princess Hanshi (853 – 900), exerted great influence over the selection of a consort for her grandson, Emperor Daigo (r. 897 – 930). It is well-known that she made her daughter, Princess Ishi, the consort of Emperor Daigo.⁴⁵ A later source explains: "Retired Emperor [Uda] received a command from his mother [Hanshi], and stopped the imperial consort [Onshi] from entering the palace."⁴⁶ From this statement, we can see that

Retired Emperor Uda followed his mother's orders regarding the selection of a consort for his son, Emperor Daigo. If an imperial consort gave birth to a prince, the child would naturally become a candidate for the throne. The selection of a consort was consequently of great importance for the imperial succession and the lineage, and the imperial mother's ability to influence such decisions reflects her powerful position in the mid-Heian age.

Emperor Daigo greeted his grandmother, Princess Hanshi, and Retired Emperor Uda on the third day of the seventh month of 897, when he entered adulthood and ascended the throne. When the new emperor moved to the imperial residence at the Seiryōden, the previous emperor moved to the Kokiden, a palace just north of the imperial residence.⁴⁷ Just after that, on the ninth day of the eighth month, Princess Hanshi and Retired Emperor Uda both moved to a palace at Higashi Sanjō where they lived together until the second month of the following year, when Uda moved to the Suzaku Palace, located south of the Greater Imperial Palace area.⁴⁸ From their choice of residences, we can deduce that Hanshi, as the mother of the nation, lived with her son not only while he ruled, but after his reign as well, continuing to exert her influence. The mother of Emperor Daigo, Fujiwara no Inshi, had died by the time of Emperor Daigo's accession, so the daughter of Mototsune, Fujiwara no Onshi (882–907), became his adopted mother. She was promoted to imperial mother "and her office was established the same day,"⁴⁹ when Onshi moved from the Imperial Palace to the Horikawa Palace in the Higashi Sanjō area. The following year, she "moved from the Gojō Palace to the Suzaku Palace," an indication that she was not active in political matters.⁵⁰ She did not, in other words, assume the role of mother of the nation.

It was another Fujiwara no Onshi (885–954), the birth mother of Emperor Suzaku (r. 930–946), who proceeded to strengthen the power of the *kokumo*. After the untimely deaths of the crown princes Yasuaki and Yoshiyori, widely believed to have been caused by the angry spirit of the unfortunate Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), the crown prince who was to become Emperor Suzaku was raised with much care and caution.⁵¹ In 930, Suzaku became emperor at the mere age of nine. Seven days after the enthronement ceremony, Retired Emperor Daigo died; the following year, Retired Emperor Uda died as well, leaving Onshi as the head of the imperial house to look after Suzaku. Onshi continued to reside with her son not only after his adult initiation ceremony, but also after his accession, as well as after the designation of imperial consorts.⁵²

Onshi's influence over imperial succession matters aptly reflects her high status. According to the *Ōkagami*, a chronicle describing the rise to prominence of the Northern Fujiwara, Onshi appealed to Emperor Suzaku about the selection of his younger brother, Prince Nariaki (926–967). Nariaki ascended the throne as Emperor Murakami (r. 946–967), and Onshi continued to exert great influence on succession matters after his enthronement as well. For example, when Murakami wished to make his son by Fujiwara no Anshi, Prince Norihira (950–1011), heir to the throne, Onshi mediated between Retired Emperor Suzaku and Murakami, ensuring the stability of the imperial lineage. According to Satō Nagato, Onshi "privately discussed the matter with Morosuke [the Fujiwara

chieftain], and demanded cooperation from Suzaku" in order to make Norihira crown prince.⁵³

Emperor Reizei's maternal grandfather, Minister of the Right Fujiwara no Morosuke (908 – 960), describes in his journal *Kyūreki* how his daughter's words carried great weight in the selection of Prince Norihira as the heir.⁵⁴ In fact, Prince Norihira was born at Morosuke's residence on the twenty-fourth day of the fifth month of 950. Upon receiving the news, Emperor Murakami was delighted to have an heir from a ranking consort, although a lower-ranking consort, Fujiwara no Yūhime, had already given birth to another prince (Hirohira). Murakami immediately ordered prayers for the newborn prince's protection and, in his response to the news of the birth, expressed a strong desire to make him the crown prince.⁵⁵ Onshi's response was said to be the same as the emperor's.

The gifts brought to the third-night banquet celebrating the birth also reveal Murakami's intention to name Norihira the crown prince. Morosuke noted with a mix of joy and concern that the gifts Onshi had received upon giving birth to Emperor Daigo's heir, Crown Prince Yasuaki, were the same, confirming in Morosuke's view the likelihood of Norihira's becoming emperor. By the same token, however, it also reminded him that Yasuaki had died before it was time for him to ascend the throne.⁵⁶

According to Morosuke's diary entry for the tenth day of the sixth month of 950, Murakami was already pushing hard to name Norihira crown prince, while Morosuke suggested that the following year would be more suitable. The details of this negotiation are complicated, but suffice it to say that a direct meeting between the emperor and Morosuke occurred on the fifteenth day of the sixth month. At that meeting, Murakami ordered that the investiture of the crown prince be held the following month, and that Onshi be notified. Ten days later, Murakami noted to Morosuke that he had sent a letter to Onshi and received her reply stating that the ceremony should be carried out with care, since Onshi was concerned about a possible falling out between Murakami and his brother, the former Emperor Suzaku. On the twenty-seventh, when she and Morosuke met face to face, Onshi expressed her doubts, saying, "Recently, I have heard rumors of an investiture of a crown prince of Emperor Murakami. I stated that Retired Emperor Suzaku should be informed if this ceremony is to take place soon, yet the emperor says he will only report it after it has taken place. I don't know what he is thinking."⁵⁷ Satō claims that Onshi "met secretly with Fujiwara no Morosuke and sought Suzaku's cooperation regarding Prince Norihira's investiture."⁵⁸ However, the reason for her asking Murakami to inform Suzaku about Prince Norihira was not to seek his assistance. Until then, Retired Emperor Suzaku did not have a child, but that year, his imperial consort, Kishi, gave birth to a princess.⁵⁹ Therefore, there was still a strong possibility for the young Retired Emperor Suzaku to father imperial offspring. Onshi, the birth mother of Suzaku, must have considered that a son who would be eligible to become crown prince might be born as well. For this reason, Onshi considered Suzaku's approval for Prince Norihira's investiture a necessary step to avoid a rift within the imperial

family. In the end, Emperor Murakami did not follow Onshi's advice, and secretly made his son crown prince without obtaining his elder brother's consent.

From this sequence of events, one may argue that the mother of the nation did not have much say in the selection of the crown prince. However, I would like to emphasize that Murakami did speak with the *kokumo* about the investiture of the crown prince, and sought her approval. On the other hand, he kept the matter a secret from Retired Emperor Suzaku. I concur with the interpretation of Fujiki Kunihiro, who stated that Onshi's "opinion as the most senior member and actual head of the imperial family was sincerely respected."⁶⁰ It should also be noted that Onshi's influence over the selection of consorts (*kisaki*) is another salient manifestation of her powers as *kokumo*.⁶¹ Such influence was not as publicly visible as in issues of imperial succession, yet it was tremendously important in shaping the imperial lineage.

Fujiwara no Senshi (961–1001)

In the *Eiga monogatari*, a tale glorifying the rule of the Northern Fujiwara, we find a famous story of how *kokumo* Higashi Sanjō'in (Fujiwara no Senshi) forced her way into the bedchamber of her son, Emperor Ichijō (r. 986–1011), and coerced him into granting her brother Michinaga (966–1027) private inspection powers (*nairan*), a move tantamount to naming him a regent.⁶² From this story, we see how Senshi was able to intervene in important personnel appointments at the imperial court. Her influence over appointments can be seen in other records as well. On the fifth day of the seventh month of 997, Fujiwara no Michitsuna (955–1020) was promoted to the post of grand councilor (*dainagon*), even though he had just become middle councilor (*chūnagon*) in the fourth month of the previous year. Fujiwara no Sanesuke (957–1046) had served longer and was senior to Michitsuna as middle councilor, and would thus be ranked higher, since he had been named supernumerary middle councilor (*gon no chūnagon*) in the eighth month of 997. Sanesuke became upset and resentfully complained about Michitsuna: "He has written his name for yet a little while, and knows neither one nor two [about matters at the imperial court]." He then added, "The emperor's officials control matters of the state, as the imperial mother (*bokō*) makes affairs of the court solely her own."⁶³ From Sanesuke's critical remarks, it is clear that ranking courtiers were well aware of the *kokumo*'s influence over appointments.

In fact, many more documents exist demonstrating Senshi's intervention in court personnel appointments. The aforementioned Sanesuke was on the receiving end of her grace in 990, when he was promoted to junior third rank for his work in supervising the constructing of gates in the palace area. In the previous year, Regent Fujiwara no Kaneie (929–990) noted to Sanesuke, "I have added you to the project of building gates, since Senshi has recommended you. Therefore, you were appointed."⁶⁴ Other more senior courtiers, such as Fujiwara no Yasuchika and Fujiwara no Kinsue, had also hoped for this appointment. Kinsue even

had the recommendation of his elder brother, Minister of the Right Fujiwara no Tamemitsu, but the decision was made in accordance with Senshi's wishes. Having achieved junior third rank, Sanesuke promptly went to Senshi's palace to express his gratitude. Experiences such as these must have prompted him to write, only a few years later, that "the imperial mother makes affairs of the court solely her own," regarding Michitsuna's rapid rise in the court hierarchy, which at that point, ironically enough, worked against Sanesuke himself.⁶⁵ In either case, such interventions were commonplace during Senshi's time.

As with many of her predecessors, Senshi exercised tremendous authority in the selection of consorts. When Fujiwara no Shōshi (988–1074; later known as Jōtōmon'in) was appointed principal imperial consort on the twenty-fifth day of the second month of the year 1000, it was Senshi who made the formal appointment. The decision was made late in the previous year, when the head chamberlain (*kurōdo no tō*) of Emperor Ichijō, Fujiwara no Yukinari (972–1027), served as an emissary, delivering messages between the emperor, Senshi, and Fujiwara no Michinaga, Shōshi's father. It was also decided that her investiture as consort should be made even though Ichijō already had a principal imperial consort.⁶⁶ On this occasion, Yukinari forcefully argued that having two principal consorts for one emperor was acceptable, especially since the Fujiwara-born consorts had all taken the tonsure and were thus dedicated to Buddhism. They would therefore not be able to worship the Fujiwara ancestral gods as required. In other words, he claimed that although there was already a current principal consort, it would be appropriate to appoint another one, who could be devoted to the Fujiwara *kami*. This argument came to serve as the foundation for the principle of two principal consorts for every emperor henceforth, and it is well-known that Michinaga was greatly impressed with Yukinari's argument. It made it possible to initiate an unprecedented arrangement, which beyond any doubt must have had the consent of the mother of the nation, Higashi Sanjō'in Fujiwara no Senshi.⁶⁷

Finally, it should also be noted that Fujiwara no Senshi was the first mother of the nation to become a "retired lady" (*nyōin*), by taking the tonsure, yet remaining active in palace politics. In part, this took place because the three positions of *taikōtaigō*, *kōtaigō*, and *kōgō* were becoming less effective. By leaving the three posts to her junior consorts, she not only secured their future positions,⁶⁸ but she also began to demonstrate the authority she could exercise as a *nyōin*, as the matriarch of the imperial family.⁶⁹

Jōtōmon'in Fujiwara no Shōshi: Bridging the Regency Government and Rule by Retired Emperors

Acting as the head of the imperial house, Jōtōmon'in Shōshi was the mother of the nation who exercised the most authority by looking after her grandsons and great-grandsons. Shōshi was born the daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga and Minamoto no Rinshi in 988. In 999, at age eleven (twelve according to contemporary Japanese custom), she entered the palace of Emperor Ichijō as his consort. The following year, on the twenty-fifth day of the second month, she

was named a principal imperial consort. Another principal consort, Fujiwara no Teishi (977–1000), was eleven years her senior and a rival. However, Teishi died while giving birth on the sixteenth day of the twelfth month of 1000, and Shōshi then adopted Teishi's son Prince Atsuyasu. In 1008, Shōshi gave birth to Prince Atsuhira (later Emperor Go-Ichijō), and the following year, Prince Atsunaga (Emperor Go-Suzaku) was born. From Emperor Ichijō's death in 1011 until her own death at the age of eighty-seven in 1074, she oversaw, for a span of more than sixty years, the rule of her sons Go-Ichijō (r. 1016–1036) and Emperor Go-Suzaku (r. 1036–1045), her grandsons Emperor Go-Reizei (r. 1045–1068) and Emperor Go-Sanjō (r. 1068–1072), and the first years of the reign of her great-grandson Emperor Shirakawa (r. 1072–1086). During this period, her younger brother Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992–1074) acted as regent, and the path toward rule by retired emperors (*insei*), which came about after Shirakawa's retirement in 1086, was initiated. Many studies have been devoted to this late period of the regency, but little attention has been paid to the important role of Fujiwara no Shōshi in this transition. For instance, the shift in balance in favor of the imperial family can be seen in Shōshi's support of reigning emperors over her own brother Yorimichi. Below, I will point to a few characteristics of Shōshi's authority as the head of the imperial house.

First, Shōshi had great influence over court appointments. The following quotation from the diary of Fujiwara no Sukefusa speaks for itself: "The emperor, the regent [Yorimichi], and the principal imperial consort [Jōtōmon'in] fill positions with people with whom they have strong connections. Such behavior can only be a sign of an age of decline."⁷⁰ Moreover, I have shown elsewhere how records in the *Kojidan*, a thirteenth-century tale, report that Yorimichi tried to have his son Morozane succeed him as regent, but when he went to announce this to Shōshi, the lady, who was already in bed at the time of the visit, abruptly arose and stated that her father's will prescribed that the office should be passed to Yorimichi's younger brother Norimichi.⁷¹ Fujiwara no Sanesuke's frequent visits to Shōshi, his adopted son Sanehira's success in climbing the court hierarchy, and his use of the well-connected court lady and writer Murasaki Shikibu as his intermediary to send messages further reflect the private nature that a control of the imperial court entailed, as well as Shōshi's authority over personnel appointments.⁷²

Second, Shōshi had the right to determine consorts. As already noted, the selection of a consort was the first step in the continuation of the imperial line, and the ramifications of such decisions could be far-reaching, as all nobles in Kyoto knew. Fujiwara no Yoshinobu, Shōshi's younger brother by a different mother, sought to have his adopted daughter become consort of Crown Prince Takahito, and he clearly felt compelled to gain the approval of Shōshi: "The other day, I received the blessing of the regent [Yorimichi], and when I went to the retired lady [Shōshi] in the same matter, I received her permission as well."⁷³ The experience must have been similar for other ranking nobles hoping to have their female relatives climb the ladder at the court in this fashion. However, from Emperor Go-Ichijō to Emperor Go-Sanjō, all consorts were descendants of Michinaga on either the maternal or the paternal side. Using her powerful position, Shōshi

forged enduring connections between the imperial house and Michinaga's descendants. Her success came to set Michinaga's lineage apart from the rest of the aristocratic class, especially when it came to matters of the imperial succession, which in turn enabled the imperial house to reassert its control over imperial succession.

Conclusion

Until the latter half of the eighth century, the status of men and women at the court did not differ significantly. In the ninth century, the roles and physical spaces of men and women began to be segregated, and the political standing of women diminished from an official perspective, as women were pushed to the periphery of the political sphere. Yet to place all the emphasis on this trend would be to ignore the foundations of power in the regency age. The power of the *kokumo* allowed her male relatives to use the political space in the rear palace, where the senior consorts and empress dowagers lived, and to build political offices close to that area in order to represent or assist the emperor. Moreover, the strengthening of the parental authority of the imperial house, and the confirmation of Michinaga's line as the house of the regency, were the results of Fujiwara no Shōshi's dominance as *nyōin*, in which she used her authority to select consorts.

While pushed to the periphery in public spaces, women could participate in politics at its core privately inside the imperial house. This participation was based on the way in which power evolved from the ninth century, when senior members of the imperial house began to exercise their authority, initially as parents of the rulers. In fact, it was because of this removal from the spotlight outside of the immediate center of the imperial court that leading women of the imperial house were able to continue to exert a profound influence on political issues. Still, it would not be until the end of the eleventh century, from the rule of Retired Emperor Shirakawa, that the imperial lineage could establish itself as one of the elite houses (*kenmon*). And it was through the power of the *kokumo* that this autonomy came to fruition.

Notes

1. For these views, see Kobayashi Toshio, *Kodai jotei no jidai*; and Araki Toshio, *Kanōsei toshite no jotei*. For an analysis in English of this topic, see Joan Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship*.

2. Satō Nagato, "Kodai tennō sei no kōzō to sono tenkai," 45.

3. The establishment of the title of emperor (*tennō*) has been the topic of much debate in recent years. The current consensus points to the court of Tenmu, but for convenience, I will use the title for earlier rulers as well.

4. See Inoue Mitsusada, "Nihon no jotei."

5. See the aforementioned works by Kobayashi and Araki (n. 1).

6. Araki, *Kanōsei toshite no jotei*, 5.

7. Yoshie Meishi, "Kodai jotei ron no kako to genzai," 34.

8. *Shoku Nihongi*, Tenpyō 1 (729) 8/24.

9. See Haruna Hiroaki, "Kōtaihi Abe no kōjo ni tsuite: ryōsei chūgū no kenkyū."

10. Kitō Kiyōaki, "Kōgōgūshiki ron."

11. See Yoshikawa Shinji, "Ritsuryō kokka no jōkan."

12. See Haruna Hiroaki, "Naishi kō"; and Katsuura Noriko, "Kodai kyūtei soshiki to seibetsu bungyō."

13. In the early modern period (*kinsei*, 1600–1868), political fighting between the *bakufu* and the court led to the enthronement of two female sovereigns. See Araki, *Kanōsei toshite no jotei*.

14. See Misaki Hiroko, "Kisaki no miya no sonzai keitai"; Hashimoto Yoshinori, *Heiangu seiritsu shi no kenkyū*; idem, "Kōkyū no seiritsu."

15. See Hashimoto, *Heiangu seiritsu shi no kenkyū*.

16. See Kitō, "Kōgōgūshiki ron."

17. Nishino Yukiko, "Bokō to kōgō."

18. See Okamura Sachiko, "Tennō shinsai saishi to kōgō."

19. *Nihon kōki*, Kōnin 6 (815) 7/13.

20. See Hashimoto, "Kōkyū no seiritsu"; and Yoshikawa, "Ritsuryō kokka no nyōkan."

21. Kuribayashi Shigeru, "Kōgō juga girei no seiritsu to tenkai"; idem, "Heian chō ni okeru sangō girei ni tsuite."

22. See Hashimoto, "Kōkyū no seiritsu."

23. Ibid.

24. Okamura Sachiko, "Onna joi ni kansuru kisoteki kōsatsu."

25. Translator's note: The establishment of male secretaries may also be related to the role played by Fujiwara no Kusuko, Heizei's favorite consort, in the insurgence against Emperor Saga.

26. Haruna, "Naishi kō."

27. *Shoku Nihon kōki*, Jōwa 9 (842) 7/23.

28. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Gangyō 3 (877) 3/22.

29. Nishino, "Kyū seiki no tennō to bokō."

30. *Shoku Nihon kōki*, Jōwa 9/8/4.

31. *Nihon Montoku tennō jitsuroku*, Saikō 1 (854) 4/26.

32. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Gangyō 3/3/23.

33. See Haruna, "Naishi kō."

34. Junshi is referred to as imperial mother even though she had already become grand imperial dowager on Saikō 1 (854) 4/26. The mother of Seiwa, Fujiwara no Meishi became imperial mother on Ten'an 2 (858) 11/7. Therefore, there was no *kōtaibunin* on Ten'an 2/8/29, and one needs to look elsewhere to deduce the identity of this figure. In an entry for the following year, Jōgan 1 (859) 4/18, there is a reference to the *kōtaigō* riding in the same palanquin as the emperor on the twenty-ninth day of the eighth month the previous year, making it clear that Junshi was the grand imperial dowager.

35. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Ten'an 2/8/29.

36. See Nishino, "Kyū seiki no tennō to bokō."

37. See Suematsu Hiyoshi, "Sokui shiki ni okeru bokō no tōdan."

38. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Ten'an 2/11/7.

39. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Jōgan 7 (865) 11/4. On 8/21, however, Emperor Seiwa temporarily moved from the Eastern Palace to one of the Grand Council's official halls (*daijōkan no zōshi*) to avoid a directional taboo (*hake monoimi*).

40. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Gangyō 3 (879) 3/23; Nishino, “Kyū seiki no tennō to bokō.”
41. This was common practice in the Heian age, and as long as the emperor did not accept the rejection, the appointment would be remade, as it was in Mototsune’s case.
42. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Gangyō 5 (881) 2/21.
43. See Hashimoto, “Kōkyū no seiritsu”; Okamura Sachiko, “Shiki no mizōshi ni tsuite.”
44. I have treated this topic in more detail in my “Ōken to kokumo: Ōchō kokka no seiji to sei.”
45. See Tsunoda Bun’ei, “Taikōtaigō Fujiwara no Onshi”; idem, *Heian jinbutsu shi*. By contrast, Kōchi Shōsuke does not address Princess Hanshi’s role in his *Kōdai seiji shi ni okeru tennō sei no ronri*.
46. *Kyūreki*, Tenryaku 4 (950) 6/15.
47. *Senso burui shō*, Emperor Daigo, Kanpyō 9 (897) 7/3.
48. *Nihon kiryaku*, Kanpyō 9/8/9; Shōtai 1 (898) 2/13.
49. *Nihon kiryaku*, Kanpyō 9/7/26.
50. *Nihon kiryaku*, Shōtai 1/4/25.
51. Translator’s note: Untimely deaths, epidemics, and other natural events caused many at the imperial court to believe that the scorned spirit of Sugawara no Michizane, who died in exile in 903 during the reign of Emperor Daigo, had caused these calamities. For an extensive account of these events, see Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court*.
52. This point is discussed in greater detail in my article “Ōken to kokumo.”
53. Satō Nagato, “Kodai tennō sei no kōzō to sono tenkai.”
54. *Kyūreki*, Tenryaku 4 (950) 5/26.
55. A prince born from a *nyōgo* took precedence over one from a *kōi* (female attendant). For more on this topic, see Yamamoto Kazuya, “Nihon kodai no kōgō to kisaki no joretsu.”
56. *Kyūreki*, Tenryaku 4 (950) 5/26. Morosuke’s deduction regarding Norihira’s selection as crown prince from a comparison of gifts is suggested by Kojima Naoko, “Monogatari no gishiki to ‘hi’ junkyo.”
57. *Kyūreki*, Tenryaku 4/6/15, 25, 27.
58. Satō Nagato, “Kodai tennō sei no kōzō to sono tenkai,” 45.
59. The directive issued by the Council of State on the tenth day of the eighth month shows that Princess Shōshi was born in Tenryaku 4, but the date remains unclear. However, imperial consort Kiko died on the fifth day of the fifth month, and it is believed her death may have been caused by childbirth. See *Dai Nihon shiryō*, 1:9, entries for Tenryaku 4/5/5 and 8/10.
60. See Fujiki Kunihiro, “Fujiwara no Onshi to sono jidai.”
61. See Tsunoda, “Taikōtaigō Fujiwara no Onshi.”
62. See the works by Tsunoda and Fujiki (nn. 60 and 61).
63. *Shōyūki*, Chōtoku 3 (997) 7/5.
64. *Shōyūki*, Eiso 1 (989) 8/23.
65. *Shōyūki*, Eiso 1/8/23; Shōryaku 1 (990) 8/29.
66. *Gonki*, Chōhō 1 (999) 12/7, Chōhō 2 (1000) 1/28, 12/7.
67. Tomita Setsuko, “Heian jidai chūki ni okeru rikkō jijō to gaiseki kankei — toku ni Michi-naga no baai wo chūshin toshite.”
68. Takamatsu Momoka, “Nyoin no seiritsu — sono yōin to chii wo megutte.”
69. Ryō Susumu, “Nyoin sei no seiritsu”; Hashimoto Yoshihiko, “Nyoin no igi to enkaku.”
70. *Shunki*, Chōkyū 1 (1040) 6/8.
71. Fukutō, “Ōken to Kokumo”; Maki Michio, *Insei jidai shi ronshū*.
72. For example, see *Shōyūki*, Chōwa 2 (1013) 1/19.
73. *Shunki*, Eishō 1 (1046) 10/22.

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Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Heian Japan, centers and peripheries / Mikael Adolphson,
Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-3013-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8248-3013-X (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Japan — History — Heian period, 794–1185.

I. Adolphson, Mikael S., 1961– II. Kamens, Edward,
1952– III. Matsumoto, Stacie, 1969–

DS856. H424 2007

952'.01 — dc22

2006024714

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-
free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and
durability of the Council on Library Resources.

Designed by April Leidig-Higgins

Printed by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

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