

# Japan's Early Female Emperors

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According to conventional Japanese chronology, the time between Suiko's accession in 592 and Shotoku's death in 770 is divided into sixteen reigns, half of which featured female emperors.<sup>1</sup> Since two of these women reigned twice, returning to the throne after abdication to rule under different reign-names than before, these eight sovereigns in reality numbered six individuals. For at least two centuries scholars—mostly Japanese although in recent times they have been joined by Westerners—have studied the lives and careers of these six, along with the early male emperors. Because even the most intelligent use of these chronicles as primary sources for historical research is full of problems, the historians' studies have been enlivened by a variety of controversial interpretations. Although troublesome gaps in their comprehension of pre-ninth century Japan do exist and approaches to these do vary, specialists in ancient Japanese history probably know as much about most of these six women as they know about their male counterparts. What have they told us about these early female emperors who reigned eight times, occupying the throne throughout approximately half of the 178 years between 592 and 770?

They tell us that with Suiko's accession in 592 began the practice of an empress-consort (Kōgō) ascending the throne after the death of her imperial spouse in order to secure the throne for a descendant of that deceased male sovereign. That descendant was usually her son who was perhaps still a child or in danger of being challenged by another royal claimant to the throne.<sup>2</sup> Echoing the voice of his mentor, Inoue Mitsusada, G. Cameron Hurst explains: "An empress came to the

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1. The term "female emperor," in the title, and elsewhere in this essay is preferred to "empress" because the latter is ambiguous—it can refer either to a reigning sovereign or to the spouse of an emperor.

2. See Inoue Mitsusada, *Kodai Kokka no kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1965), pp. 223-228. According to Inoue, a distinguished advocate of the intermediary theory, the practice began with Suiko's accession, although Suiko's way had probably been paved by the widowed consort of Emperor Ankan (531-535).

throne simply to avoid succession troubles and ensure transmission of the succession to the proper person. Once the troubles had been settled—one of the claimants had died, for example, or a younger crown prince had come of age—then there was no longer any need for the empress to remain on the throne.”<sup>3</sup> Hurst, like Inoue before him, claims that his theory is supported by “an examination of all the female rulers in Japan in the period after historical records become reliable.”<sup>4</sup> Thus an examination of the careers of our six female rulers from Suiko to Shotoku is surely a reasonable way to test the validity of this claim.

Daughter of Emperor Kimmei (539-571), Suiko was younger sister to Emperor Yōmei (585-587) by the same mother. At age eighteen she became very active in politics. In her day, the position of empress-consort was a very powerful one. This is illustrated by the tales of the semi-mythical, semi-historical figure, that great Empress-Consort Jingū who, without formally ascending the throne, was supposed to have ruled brilliantly from about 201 to 269. As Kishi Toshio has pointed out, all of the marvellous Jingū tales are certainly not literally true, but they do reveal something of the importance of the political role of an empress-consort at the time they were first written down—which was during Suiko's reign.<sup>5</sup>

During the reign of her brother, Yōmei, which followed Bidatsu's death, Suiko continued to be a major force in state affairs. As is well known, when Soga no Umako killed the thirty-second emperor, Sushun (587-592), in 592, she came to the throne. Did she thus secure her position through her descendant? No. When Yōmei's son, her nephew, Prince Umayado, (better known as Shotoku Taishi) died seven years before she did, Suiko did not appoint an heir to replace him. It therefore seems clear that she did not see herself as an intermediary. Book XXIII of the *Nihongi* which relates the details of the reign of the next emperor, opens with a lengthy description of the confusion that Suiko's omission caused among the leading court figures who after her death devoted much attention to trying to choose the heir Suiko should have chosen.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly the power of her blood relation Soga Umako and the new leadership class he represented had much to do with Suiko's accession, but Suiko was no passive figurehead. With domestic crises at home, and problems with enemies in Korea, even the powerful Soga needed an especially commanding presence as sovereign. They needed an experienced politician who because of her combined religious and political background as empress-consort—a role which probably embodied ancient concepts of queenship harking back to the dawn of Japanese

3. G. Cameron Hurst, *Insei: Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan, 1086-1185* (New York, 1976), p. 49

4. Hurst, p. 49.

5. Kishi Toshio, *Nihon kodai seiji shi kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1966), pp. 243-244.

6. W. G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi* (Tokyo, 1972), pp. 157-164.

history—was an extremely charismatic figure. They needed a candidate held in such high regard that no one would oppose her selection, regardless of what was thought of her bloodthirsty Soga supporters. Ueda Masaaki has suggested that the depiction of Suiko as an intermediary sovereign came from writers who had later female rulers in mind and who were influenced by their readings of Chinese history and their knowledge of the Chinese practice of establishing the consort of a deceased emperor as a regent of the realm.<sup>7</sup> Certainly Suiko was no intermediary sovereign.

After Suiko's successor, Emperor Jomei (629-641), died in 641, his empress-consort, then aged forty-nine, acceded and ruled for three years as Emperor Kōgyoku (642-645). Kōgyoku already had a reputation as a shaman so it seems that the notion of an emperor as a religious leader who talked to the dieties on behalf of her people was still significant. As Ueda Masaaki reminds us, these female shamans were no cloistered virgin-priestesses who acted as mediums but priestess-queens who ordered generals as often as they prayed to gods. They often lived life lustily—indeed Jomei was Kōgyoku's second husband. Unlike Suiko before her, however, Kōgyoku was not a politically active sovereign. And unlike Jitō after her, she did not play a large role in state affairs after her abdication. Participation in the religious side of the emperor's duties took up more of her energies than state politics, which were dominated by the Soga clan. Ueda has suggested that she was the first female emperor who, while carrying out the religious role of an emperor, could be seen as a political puppet.

Under pressure from powerful figures around her she gave up the throne to her younger brother, who became Emperor Kotoku (645-654) in 645. When she came back a decade later to reign again as Emperor Saimei (655-661) at age sixty, she is said to have done so in order to alleviate the tension that had mounted after Kotoku's succession and to clear the way for her son, Crown Prince Naka no Ōe, who during her second reign appears to have been the real holder of power. Kōgyoku can be seen as the typical intermediary sovereign. She held the throne for her son, the crown prince, whose formal accession as Emperor Tenji (668-671) did not take place until 668.<sup>8</sup>

The next female emperor, Jitō (690-697), was also a deceased emperor's empress-consort; she abdicated on behalf of an heir whose line she wanted to see continue. But the resemblance to Kōgyoku goes no further. Unlike Kōgyoku/Saimei, Jitō was no one's puppet and always a political activist. When her husband acceded as Temmu (673-686), the

7. Ueda Masaaki, *Nihon no jotei* (Tokyo, 1973), p. 107. For an interesting account of empress dowagers as regents in Chinese history see Lien-Sheng Yang, "Female Rulers in Imperial China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-1961):47-61.

8. Ueda, *Nihon no jotei*, pp. 117-124.

then-Princess Uno was twenty-nine. The *Nihongi* tells us that from the beginning of his reign she "assisted the Emperor in pacifying the Empire."<sup>9</sup> In the first year of his reign she "followed the Emperor when he took refuge in the Eastern provinces. She addressed the troops and mingled with the throng, until at length they together formed a plan by which several tens of thousands of fearless men were separately ordered to take up their posts in all the most defensible positions."<sup>10</sup>

In non-military affairs too, the future Emperor Jitō shared power with her reigning husband. For fourteen years Temmu left the post of great minister vacant because he and his consort governed jointly. In fact, Temmu and Jitō led a team of imperial princes, which often made political decisions without consulting the Council of Nobles. In an age of imperial-family politics, Uno stood second to no one as an imperial-family politician. In 681 when the edict announcing the beginning of compilation of an important new body of law-codes, the *Asuka no kyomihara ritsuryo*, was promulgated, Temmu and his consort addressed the assembled princes and ministers jointly, seated in the same seat as befitting individuals of equal status.<sup>11</sup> Five years later Temmu gave orders that "all matters of the Empire, without distinction of great and small, should be referred to the Empress-Consort and the Prince Imperial."<sup>12</sup> The prince imperial was of course Uno's son Prince Kusanokabe who had been made crown prince in 681.

When Temmu died in 686 this energetic consort took over his functions of her own accord without bothering to have the Council of Nobles install her as emperor. Cleverly she disposed of able Prince Ōtsu, whom she saw as an obstacle to her son Kusakabe's succession. She relied heavily on her own abilities rather than upon the last will and testament of Temmu. She did not insist, for example, that the deceased emperor wanted her enthroned although it was common for an incoming sovereign to do so. By her own political maneuvers she strengthened her position and that of her son, Crown Prince Kusanokabe. But when in 689 her beloved Kusanokabe died at the age of twenty-eight, she did not retire. Calmly she saw to the completion of the *Asuka no kyomihara ritsuryo*, and at the beginning of the following year, 690, she had herself formally enthroned as Emperor Jitō. After seven years of vigorous rule she abdicated in favour of Kusanokabe's son, who acceded as Emperor Mommu (697-707). After abdication she remained an important force in the government sharing all control of state affairs with Mommu. In her later years she was called by the title, *Dajō tenno*, great abdicated emperor, the first abdicating sovereign of either sex to be granted this

9. Aston, *Nihongi*, p. 383.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 382.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

title.

She had developed a very warm relationship with Princess Abe, a younger half-sister from the same father, Emperor Temmu. Since the mothers of Jitō and Abe were sisters, they shared the same maternal grandfather, and perhaps this brought them closer than was usually the case with half-sisters seventeen years apart in age. The friendship was solidified by Abe's marriage to Jitō's beloved Kusanokabe, to whom Abe bore a son. After Kusanokabe's death, Jitō was a great patron of Abe and her son, and it was on his behalf that she abdicated in 697. He was fifteen at the time, and Jitō, at fifty-three, maintained him in power. When she died five years later, Mommu's rule was threatened by bloody rebellion. Voices claiming that his succession violated conventions in force from ancient times became louder and louder. The claims were false but this is beside the point; more pertinent is the fact that without the powerful Jitō to protect him, Mommu's position was shaky. Therefore, although Jitō had been interested in securing the succession of her son's line, her efforts in this direction were only one part of a larger, outstanding career as a statesman before and after as well as during her reign as the forty-first emperor.

When Mommu died in 707 in his twenty-sixth year, his mother Abe, emulating the great Jitō declared herself emperor on her own initiative. The proclamation which formalized her enthronement as Emperor Gemmei (707-715) announced that her accession was not only the will of Mommu and Jitō, it was also in accord with "the immutable law" of her father Tenji. Although there is much disagreement among scholars regarding the specific content of Tenji's immutable law, was Gemmei not perhaps invoking Emperor Tenji's authority because he had been her father? Could she be trying to suggest that as a descendant of Tenji she had some claim to the throne? Does this mean that a princess as well as a prince might conceivably advance such a claim?

Certainly she was interested in securing the throne for her grandson, Mommu's son, Prince Obito. But this was not her sole accomplishment. She was supported at her enthronement by Fujiwara Fubito, of the newly powerful Fujiwara clan because she was advancing the claim of the son of Mommu whose mother happened to be Fubito's daughter. It seems likely that there was a trade-off between Fujiwara support and Gemmei's interest in Mommu's son, Obito.

As a ruler, Gemmei was fearless; even military crises did not faze her. After her abdication in 715 she remained an important figure in the highest councils of state. Her death in 721 destroyed an important balance of power in the imperial government—a balance between two strong politicians, herself and the minister of the left.<sup>13</sup>

13. Ueda, *Nihon no jotei*, p. 176.

It is interesting to note that when she abdicated in 715 it was not to enthrone the sickly Crown Prince Obito. At seventeen he was certainly old enough to succeed, but perhaps Gemmei thought that the way was not yet clear for him, since she knew his appointment as crown prince had met with opposition. She still had some work to do—demotions, for instance, for the mother of Mommu's other two sons. An even stronger possibility is that she simply thought that her own beautiful, able and energetic daughter of thirty-six years would make a better monarch than Obito. At any rate, when she abdicated she put this daughter on the throne as Emperor Genshō (715-724), Japan's forty-fourth sovereign. The intermediary theory does not explain her transfer of the throne to Genshō.

Fujiwara support for Fubito's grandson Obito, however, grew ever stronger. Fujiwara advisors, attendants and tutors surrounded him and managed to engineer his accession in 724 as Emperor Shōmu (724-749). When Asukabehime, a wife of Shōmu who was also a daughter of Fubito, bore the emperor a son, her brothers and father gleefully saw this baby named Japan's first infant crown prince, but to their great sorrow, this prince died before he reached his first year. Since another spouse of Shōmu bore a son about the time of this child's death, Fujiwara Fubito's sons decided they must raise the rank of their little sister to that of empress-consort—a shocking thing to do since this position had always been reserved for princesses of the blood. Violently mowing down all opposition, they raised Asukabehime's rank in 729 with great fanfare, which included a change in the name of the era. In order to justify this shocking departure from precedent, they made tortuous claims that the consort of Emperor Nintoku in the fourth century had not been of royal blood—but such apologetics were too awkward for anybody at court to swallow. They also made extravagant claims for the exceptional qualities supposedly possessed by their sister, who now became known as Empress-Consort Komyō. Much was made of the fact that the new consort's mother had been rewarded by Gemmei for loyal service. Because of this, Gemmei's name was invoked to drum up support for the appointment which, as everyone knew, had been achieved through brute force.

The next Fujiwara-initiated event at court also departed from all previous precedent: their protégé, Shōmu, made Komyō's surviving offspring, a twenty-one year old daughter, Japan's first crown princess. (Interestingly, this took place after the epidemics of 737 had killed off four powerful Fujiwara leaders.) Since clans other than the Fujiwara also showed themselves willing to support the unprecedented choice of a young woman as heir to the throne, it seems to have shocked people far less than her non-royal mother's rise to the rank of empress-consort had done. In 740 the new heir, by means of a ritual ceremonial dance which

linked females to sacerdotal and secular rule, took the initiative to show the assembled nobles that she meant to accede, and was no temporary heir to be replaced by another before she came to the throne. Indeed, Shomu, in accord with the will of Empress-Consort Komyo, gave up the throne to his heir nine years later, and his appointment to the post of Dajo tenno was accompanied by Komyo's promotion to Kotaigo, great retired empress-consort, a post from which she expanded her political influence, helping her Fujiwara relatives attain high rank and position.

The new Emperor Koken (749-758) was a vigorous ruler with a mind of her own, but Fujiwara power, especially in the person of Fujiwara Nakamaro, chief of the great retired empress-consort's office, was growing strong again too. The great retired empress-consort, who was Nakamaro's aunt, moved him from one important post to another until he gained admittance to the highest councils of state. In 756 Shomu, in a deathbed wish, named a crown prince for Koken, but the promise to uphold this choice was violated within a year. Nakamaro forced this prince to resign and replaced him with his own candidate, a prince with in-law links to his own family. Two years later he was able to get Koken to resign in favour of this prince, who became the ill-fated Emperor Junnin (758-764).

Perhaps Nakamaro was able to persuade Koken to abdicate because she was ill—it was during her illness that she met the learned Buddhist priest, Dokyo, a medical authority called in to treat her illness. Restored to health, she became more politically active than the emperor himself. Just as Nakamaro had been patronized by the great retired empress-consort, so Dokyo was promoted by her daughter, Great Abdicated Emperor Koken. In 762 Koken appears to have lost all patience with Emperor Junnin and seemingly with the power behind him, Nakamaro. Before the nobles she had invited to court, she formally chastized the reigning emperor, and in an edict attacking his very legitimacy, argued that unlike herself, he was not in direct succession from the true line of Prince Kusanokabe. Her edict contained the announcement that henceforth only minor ceremonies and functions would be carried out by the reigning sovereign. She, the great abdicated emperor, was taking back into her own hands all important affairs of state.

Such bold action threatened even the mighty Nakamaro. His meteoric rise had, of course, been supported by an alliance of Koken, her mother, and the Emperor Junnin. In 764 Nakamaro seized the emperor's seal and appeared about to replace Junnin with another candidate for the throne, but Koken moved even more quickly. Getting wind of the plot, she sent forces to capture Nakamaro and his wife, who were banished and killed. She deposed the unfortunate Junnin and came back to the throne again, this time as Emperor Shotoku (764-770).

There is no question that during her second reign she awarded pres-

tige and position to her religious mentor, Dōkyō, and even seems to have been prepared to see him occupy the throne. Yet the political, social, and cultural leaders of 770 were not as shocked by this as we might think, since by then, they were well prepared. In earlier times, the position of empress-consort had been as religiously revered and politically crucial as the position of emperor. Consorts no less than emperors had always been of royal blood. Yet the Fujiwara had achieved for Kōken's own non-royal mother the outrageous goal Kōken wanted for Dōkyō. Fujiwara Nakamarō had also helped pave the way of Dōkyō's ambitions by ensuring that posthumously at least—in the way their graves were honoured—the Fujiwara were treated as equals of the emperor of the land.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Dōkyō may have represented a new push for power on the part of rising forces in the countryside. And, thanks to steadily increasing numbers of Korean immigrants who had settled in Japan, the Chinese concept of the heavenly mandate—which went to a contender for the throne on the basis of virtue rather than pedigree—was gaining acceptance among Japanese leaders.<sup>15</sup> The challenge to the imperial line posed by Dōkyō cannot be attributed, as it sometimes is, solely or even chiefly to the whims of a doting, love-sick female sovereign.<sup>16</sup>

Shomu's career reminds us that female emperors did not monopolize abdication in order to secure a successor and Junnin's reminds us that an emperor need not be female in order to be a political puppet. The two reigns of Kōken/Shotoku conclusively disprove the shaky claims that the intermediary theory applies to "all the female rulers in Japan in the period after historical records become reliable." As should be clear by now, the intermediary theory fits only the case of Kyōgoku Saimei perfectly. All other fits are imperfect at best, and sometimes they are impossible. The theory may help explain some of the functions the eight female sovereigns performed but certainly does not take into account their functions as rulers.

Why, then, have historianas so tenaciously clung to this hopelessly one-dimensional theory to explain the presence of women on the throne? All the hints we have about the hazy pre-historical past suggest a greater role for female leadership than was true even in early historical times. There is nothing in the Chinese observations regarding Pimiku and Iyo or the Japanese chroniclers' exposition of the folk heroine, Jingu, to encourage the assumption that in early Japan the norm was

14. Kishi, *Nihon kodai seiji shi kenkyū*, pp. 253-254. Kishi views this honour to Fujiwara graves as direct encouragement to Dōkyō's ambitions.

15. Ueda, *Nihon no jotei*, pp. 203-208.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198, persuasively argues that the Dōkyō relationship was no sordid, lustful affair. He sees Kōken's long attachment as rooted in respect and love for Dōkyō's learning. She was, in this view, attracted to his knowledge and intellectual abilities. Ueda suggests the popular portrait of Dōkyō as a charming, dashing, priestly smoothie was quite false.

always a male emperor and that females must therefore be intermediaries.<sup>17</sup> The great ethnologist and pre-historian Takamura Itsue (1894-1964) suggests one important reason for this historians' blind-spot: "Is it not," she says, "because for several hundred years from the time of the scholars of the Edo period down to that of the progressive scholars of our own day, the historians have always been male?"<sup>18</sup>

17. See Kitayama Shigeo, *Nihon kodai seijishi no kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1959), p. 375 for a typical example of an unsupported assumption about male sovereigns as the norm.

18. Takamura Itsue, *Josei no rekishi*, 1(Tokyo, 1972):261.