

**When Antiquity Meets the Modern:
Representing Female Rulers in the Making of Japanese History**

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Goals of this presentation

In present-day Japan, laws governing imperial succession dictate that only males of the male line can inherit the throne.¹ However, in the ancient period (c. 6th-10th centuries), several female emperors² ruled Japan. In the standard historical interpretation, these female emperors were anomalies who served as temporary ‘place-holders’ when a male could not immediately succeed to the throne, and who performed distinctive religious functions different from those of male emperors. By ‘place-holder,’ I mean a woman who ascended to the throne to temporarily ‘hold the place’ during certain periods, such as when the designated heir was too young, or when the existence of too many candidates for the throne prevented consensus on a successor. By ‘own distinctive religious functions,’ I am referring to the idea that female emperors possessed extraordinary abilities in serving the gods as ‘shamans’ (*miko*).

However, as this presentation will show in an exploration of the following three points, these standard interpretations are incorrect. First, as rulers, female emperors of the ancient period were no different from male emperors. Fundamentally, no distinctions were made on the

¹ In the postwar Constitution of Japan (went into effect on May 3, 1947), chapter 1 article 2 stipulates that, “The Imperial Throne shall be dynastic and succeeded to in accordance with the Imperial House Law passed by the Diet.” Chapter 1, article 1 of the Imperial House Law (on qualifications) states, “The imperial throne is to be inherited by males in the male line of Imperial descent.”

Translator’s note: translations from the 1947 constitution are from the official English translation compiled by the Ministry of Justice in 1958. Among other places, it can be found in the appendix of, Dan Fenno Henderson, ed., *The Constitution of Japan*, (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1968).

² Translator’s note: “female emperor” is used to translate and the term empress is used to designate the wife of the reigning emperor.

basis of sex. Second, despite these practices of the ancient period, the process of building the modern nation-state gave birth to the interpretation that female emperors were exceptions. This modern interpretation became the commonly accepted historical narrative. Third, although the field of women's history has succeeded in correcting some of these mistaken assumptions, it has been weakened by its failure to overcome its dependence on theories of female essentialism and the sexual division of labor. In exploring these three points, I will present a historical interpretation that illustrates processes of gender construction. The focus of this investigation will be the female rulers of the ancient period. However, the aim of this presentation is not only to prove the existence of female rulers, but also to raise issues surrounding perspectives fundamental to both historiography and the study of women's history.

1. Female and Male Emperors in the Ancient Period

The first recorded female emperor in Japanese history, Suiko Tennô, ascended the throne at the end of the sixth century. Between her reign and that of Shôtoku Tennô, who ruled in the latter half of the eighth century, six women comprising eight reigns became emperors (two women ascended to the throne again after retiring).³ In addition, in the early modern period, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were two more female emperors.⁴ In the ancient period, before the establishment of dynastic kingship after the sixth century, it appears that the kingship shifted among several powerful local elite families.⁵ From the advent of

³ Suiko reigned from 593-628. Kôgyoku reigned from 642-645 and again from 655-661 as Saimei. Jitô reigned from 687-697, Genmei from 707-715, and Genshō from 715-724. Kōken reigned from 745-758, and then again as Shôtoku from 764-770.

⁴ Meishō (r. 1629-1643) and GoSakuramachi (r. 1762-1770). The early-modern emperors did not hold any actual political authority and so require a different type of analysis from the emperors of the ancient period who wielded immense amounts of authority in the formative years of the Japanese state. However, the existence of female emperors in the early modern period is significant in that it demonstrates that before the modern period, women were not excluded from becoming emperor.

⁵ The presence of giant *kofun* tumuli confirms the appearance of wide-reaching political authority from the late third century. From the locations of the largest scale tumuli in each period, it has been possible to determine that succession to the kingship moved among several powerful families. In other words, it is possible to

dynastic kinship until the present emperor, there have been around 100 emperors.⁶ Eight female emperors out of a hundred is certainly a small percentage and, from this perspective, female emperors seem the exception. However, if we focus on the 200-year period from the mid-sixth through the mid-eighth centuries, there were only eleven male emperors, the ratio of male to female rulers becomes much more even, and no longer can we perceive female emperors as anomalies.

Furthermore, this 200-year period is perhaps the most crucial and most difficult part of Japan's ancient period to understand. Inside Japan in this period, dynastic kingship and institutions of authority were established. Externally, Japan engaged in fierce rivalries and wars with China and various states on the Korean peninsula until suffering defeat in these conflicts in the latter half of the seventh century.⁷ Beginning in the early eighth century, Japanese leaders established institutions of centralized governance based on Chinese models. Experimentation to stabilize these institutions continued through the end of the eighth century. In this crucial period, female emperors numbered about the same as male. As a result, the question, "why were there female emperors in the ancient period?" would seem in fact to be a question full of

prove through archaeological evidence that a dynasty had yet to be established. In addition, records in Chinese histories of the fifth century also suggest that dynastic kingship did not yet exist. It is only from the early sixth-century accession of Keitai Tennô that descendents of a single line successively inherited the throne.

⁶ The *Nihon shoki*, an official court history compiled in the first half of the eighth century, chronicles that the first emperor, Jinmu, took the throne in the year corresponding to 1660 BCE. From Jinmu to the present-day reign of the Heisei emperor, there have been 125 reigns. Of course, there are no historical facts to substantiate the existence of Jinmu Tennô. The names of the first ten or so reigns were added in the process of compiling the histories. In the records for the successive emperors, reliable evidence only begins to appear in the *Nihon shoki* from around the fifth century.

⁷ On the Korean peninsula, the three states of Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla fought amongst themselves for hegemony for many years. Japan intervened in the wars of these three states in order to reap military and economic benefits. In the latter half of the seventh century, Silla allied itself with China and succeeded in establishing a unified state. Japan dispatched an army of 20,000 to revive the destroyed state of Paekche, but suffered a great defeat in a battle against a coalition of armies from Silla and China in 663. As a result of this defeat, Japanese leaders perceived a need to establish a strong centralized state and very quickly moved to found government institutions based on a Chinese model.

gender bias premised on the modern experience of an emperor system that limits the emperorship to males.

From the standpoint of bloodlines, most female emperors were imperial princesses. Many became empress before ascending to the throne themselves. During the period in which dynastic kingship was established, it was imperative to exalt bloodline above all else. As a result, imperial princesses were favored when selecting an empress. Several of these women married stepbrothers who became emperor. Additionally, it was desirable in this period for an emperor to have acquired the long years of training and experience necessary to control the powerful local elite families and to navigate the treacherous waters of foreign affairs. If we look at the ages of accession for emperors from the early sixth through late seventh centuries, almost all were over forty years old.⁸ Those younger than that age were considered too inexperienced to ascend the throne.⁹ As a result, an imperial princess who possessed the practical experience of participating in state governance as empress and who ascended the throne as a mature woman was a favorable choice as she fulfilled qualifications of both bloodline and experience.

Let us next turn to the actual activities of these female emperors as rulers. The first female emperor was Suiko Tennô, and she enjoyed a long reign of thirty-seven years. While on the throne, she reopened diplomatic relations with China that had ceased for many years.¹⁰ In

⁸ Nitô Atsushi, "Kodai josei no seiritsu," *Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan kenkyû hôkoku*, 108 (2003).

⁹ The *Nihon shoki* records that the father of Suiko Tennô, Kinmei Tennô, who ascended the throne at age 31, first declined the offer of the throne, saying, "Whereas I am young and have but shallow experience, the previous Emperor's empress is well versed in politics and is much more suitable." As a qualification for being a ruler in that period, thirty-one years old was considered, "young and inexperienced."

¹⁰ In 607, the fifteenth year of her reign, she dispatched an emissary to the Sui court of China. Her mission to China was the first in about 120 years since the last mission in the late fifth century and was an epochal achievement in that it sought to establish diplomatic relations as equals. In truth, the Japanese failed to establish equal relations, but they avoided the subservient status they had been relegated to in previous exchanges. This mission to the Sui was originally attributed not to Suiko, but was considered to have occurred under the auspices of

addition, before she died, she designated her choice of successor in her will, pioneering a new method of succession to the kingship and contributing to the stability of the throne.¹¹ Saimei Tennô constructed a magnificent edifice for conducting ceremonies of state and diplomacy.¹² She also dispatched the ships and troops that fought the coalition of Silla and Chinese forces, and she died at the army's advance base in western Japan. At the end of the seventh century, Jitô Tennô promulgated Japan's first system of laws and oversaw construction of the first large-scale capital. After abdicating the throne, she 'ruled jointly' with her successor as the first retired emperor, initiating a retired emperor system.

Thus, if we look at the activities of these women as rulers, they are essentially the same as male emperors of the period. Their achievements were not dictated by sexual differences. Arguments that female emperors were shamans are often based on records that describe how Saimei Tennô manifested special abilities in praying for rain. However, the male emperor Tenmu Tennô also prayed to the gods and called up a divine wind to win a great victory in battle. Regardless of whether the emperor was male or female, expertise in military command and the spiritual powers necessary to conduct worship with the gods were both essential qualities for an emperor in the ancient period.

her senior counselor and crown prince [Shôtoku Taishi]. However, there is no evidence for such an interpretation. In interpreting the *Nihon shoki*--a record that takes as its subject the important political achievements of the emperors--researchers only show their gender bias when they attribute events to male emperors as described in the *Nihon shoki* while giving credit for female emperors' achievements to male officials.

¹¹ Before Suiko, the normal method of determining succession was for powerful elite families to meet in council to select the next king (Yoshimura Takehiko, "Kodai no ô'i keishô to gunshin," in *Nihon kodai no shakai to kokka*, (Iwanami Shoten, 1996)). Based on her experiences from long years of ruling, Suiko's testament overturned this older method of selection. The method she began in which the previous ruler selected a successor reversed the power relations between the powerful families and the king.

¹² The excavation of this facility in southern Nara prefecture has proceeded in recent years, encouraging a rethinking of the achievements of Saimei Tennô as sovereign. This structure was originally understood as 'a female emperor's wasteful public works project.'

From its inception, Japanese society in the ancient period was based on a system of bilateral kinship.¹³ As a result, succession to the kingship went not just to the father's side. The mother's side was also highly valued. Before the end of the seventh century, it was by no means rare for local elite families to be controlled by the mother's side or for family headships to be passed through the mother's line.¹⁴ In this period from the mid-sixth through the mid-eighth centuries when these female emperors reigned, there was no law dictating father-to-son succession. With no such succession rule, the idea of 'place-holders' loses any validity. As a result, the argument that female emperors in the ancient period were temporary 'place-holders' is unfounded.

So as we have seen, from the standpoint of their numbers, their activities as rulers, or their patterns of succession, female emperors in the ancient period were not anomalies. And, if we expand our scope of analysis to the period before Suiko, we find a female ruler named Himiko in the third century.¹⁵ Although genealogical links between Himiko and the later imperial line are unclear, the existence of female chieftains in various locations throughout the Japanese archipelago from the fourth through seventh centuries has been corroborated by the results of combined analyses of archaeological and written sources.¹⁶ Female rulership in the

¹³Cultural anthropologists have found societies from Southeast Asia to the Pacific Islands based on systems of bilateral kinship. For ancient Japan, study of methods of recording genealogies, systems of family naming, practices of inheritance, and other customs also reveals a society based on bilateral kinship. After the introduction of Chinese styles of government in the late eighth century, patriarchy began to permeate Japan beginning with the ruling classes. This process has been made clear in recent years as a result of the cooperative efforts of scholars of ancient women's history and ancient family history. Yoshida Takashi, *Ritsuryō kokka to kodai no shakai*, (Iwanami Shoten, 1983); Yoshie Akiko, *Nihon kodai no uji no kōzō*, (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1986); Akashi Kazunori, *Nihon kodai no shinzoku kōzō*, (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1990).

¹⁴ For example, in the sixth century, the head of the powerful Ōtomo family concomitantly succeeded to the head of his mother's family, the Yugei family, and called himself Ōtomo-Yugei, combining the names of his father's and mother's line in his name. The powerful Tachibana clan established in the eighth century began when a son chose to take the name of his mother, a high-ranking palace official.

¹⁵ Her name and accomplishments are known because of their having been recorded in contemporaneous Chinese historical sources (*The History of the Wei Dynasty*).

¹⁶ From analyses of the sex of the remains of people buried in *kofun* (tumuli), before the mid-fifth century, the percentage of male to female chieftains was about equal (Imai Takashi, "Kofun jidai zenki ni okeru josei no

ancient period was extensive and the female emperors who appear in records from the late sixth century comprised part of that tradition.

2. Exclusion of female emperors in the modern period

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Japan emerged as a modern state with a constitutional monarchy. The new Meiji constitution declared that the reigning imperial house was of ‘one line, eternal and unbroken’ and it specified that only males of the male line could inherit the throne.¹⁷ The phrase ‘one line, eternal and unbroken’ emphasized that, from the first emperor, Jinmu Tennô, imperial succession had been continuously passed down within a single bloodline. This idea provided the strongest legitimizing foundation for the new imperial sovereignty. In the premodern period, imperial succession was governed by custom and not codified in law. Often, when the emperor was a child, a female relative might govern as regent and in the early-modern period, there were two more female emperors. The institutionalized exclusion of female rulers only occurred in the modern period.

In the process of prescribing the exclusion of women from the throne, the Meiji government officially pronounced that ‘one line unbroken and eternal’ and ‘inheritance by males of the male line’ were ‘traditions’ unchanged since ancient times. Female emperors in the past were all temporary ‘place-holders’ needed in unusual circumstances. However, as this

chii,” *Rekishi hyôron*, 383 (1982)). In addition, gazetteers compiled in the early eighth century contain many old regional legends in which appear large numbers of both female and male chieftains. There are also several tales of female chieftains wielding weapons and fighting in resistance against conquest by the Yamato court.

¹⁷ In the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (promulgated in 1889), article one states that, “The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal.” Article two dictates that, “The Imperial Throne shall be succeeded to by Imperial male descendants, according to the provisions of the Imperial House Law.”

Translator’s note: Translations from the Meiji constitution are from a standard translation found in Itô Hirobumi, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan*, trans. Itô Miyoji (Tokyo: Igitrisu Hôritsu Gakko, 1889).

presentation has already demonstrated, in actuality, there was no dynastic kingship prior to the sixth century and bilateral inheritance was a fundamental part of society until the eighth century. Patrilineal inheritance only really became well established after the ninth century. Both the idea of ‘one line unbroken and eternal’ and ‘inheritance by males of the male line’ were nothing more than fabricated traditions used as ideological pillars to buttress the powerful authority of the modern emperor and to secure a stable line of succession. The ‘historical fact’ that female emperors were merely temporary ‘place-holders’ was also concocted as part of this same ‘invented tradition.’ The ‘place-holder’ thesis--the standard interpretation of female emperors in the ancient period—originated in the modern period.

One other part of the standard interpretation of female emperors in the ancient period is the ‘shaman’ thesis. This argument states that, as opposed to male rulers who wielded real political and military authority, female rulers were ‘shamans’ who had only religious functions. Many scholars argued that, beginning with Himiko in the third century, female emperors were ‘shamans’ more than anything else and they explained that over time, female emperors changed from “from shamans to place-holders.”

However, this ‘shaman’ thesis was also an interpretation born from circumstances of the modern period. It was in the 1910’s that several famous scholars first advocated the theory that ancient female rulers “were religious rulers cloistered deep within the palace attending to the will of the gods.”¹⁸ Previous studies described female rulers of the ancient period as, “valiant rulers who had the power to control the hearts of their people.” However, from the 1910’s, these women became “not heroic sovereigns conducting military and political affairs, but religious sovereigns serving the gods.” Earlier interpretations were attacked head on and the shaman

¹⁸ Shiratori Kurikichi, “Wajo ô Himiko kô” and Naitô Torajirô, “Himiko kô,” in *Yamatai koku kihon ronbunshû*, vol. 1, ed. Saeki Arikyo, Sôgensha, 1981.

thesis was pushed to the fore. By the 1910's, Japan had won both the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, and it was a time when the idea that Japan was a military power led by an emperor who was also commander-in-chief became engrained in the consciousness of the population. In this 'reinterpretation' of history, the female sovereigns of the ancient period became 'shamans' to contrast with the image of the Meiji Emperor as Commander-in-chief.¹⁹

The modern Japanese state denied women voting rights and did not permit them to attend national universities or to become public officials. Whereas female palace officials played important roles as political intermediaries until the end of the early modern period (c. 1867), in the Meiji period, these female officials were completely denied any political function. The gendered construction of politics as 'a man's world' had been firmly established. When looking back at the ancient period, scholars took as normative this modern gender construction and so were forced to conclude that female emperors constituted an anomalous category fundamentally different from male emperors. Thus, in response to the modern question, "if women cannot be rulers, why were there female emperors in the ancient period?" scholars answered with the 'place-holder' and 'shaman' theses.

3. Problems with the results of women's history

In Japan, the study of women in the ancient period began in the 1930's with investigations into the histories of family and marriage. Now, work is progressing on many fronts, including religious and cultural history. As a result, it has been made clear that, from aristocratic families and local elites to the leaders of villages in the ancient period, women and men both possessed the same rights to own and manage property and both exercised political authority. Female emperors were part of this world and by no means anomalous in the period before the establishment of patrilineal succession. As I stated earlier, recent studies of women's

¹⁹ Yoshie Akiko, *Tsukurareta Himiko—'onna' no sôshutsu to kokka--*, (Chikuma Shobô, 2005).

history are responsible for much of the research that cast doubt on the standard interpretations of women emperors in the ancient period.

Although the field of women's history has contributed some very valuable results, it is necessary to recognize that 'weaknesses' remain, chiefly the ideas of woman as 'mother' and woman as 'spiritual' that argue for the essential superiority of women. In the early period of the study of women's history pioneered by Takamure Itsue,²⁰ the influence of 'maternalism' was tremendous. While making clear that in the ancient period patrilineal descent had yet to be established, this scholarship also tended to proclaim 'the power of mothers,' which led to the definition of female emperors as mothers. As a result, women's history has not been able to truly overcome the 'place-holder' thesis.

Furthermore, in contrasting the secular authority of males with the spirituality of women, some theories took the latter as a marker of women's essential superiority,²¹ but when looked at objectively, such discourse only conceals the strength of actual male dominance. Nevertheless, there is a 'fantasy about the ancient period' that states that however strong the actual power of men was, women held equivalent power through their 'spirituality.' This fantasy has ceaselessly cast its alluring spell on scholars of women's history²² and I think that it is an underlying reason why the 'female emperor as shaman' thesis remains persuasive. Only by

²⁰ Takamure Itsue (1894-1964) was a pioneer in the field of Japanese women's history. As a researcher unaffiliated with any professional research institution, she wrote classics such as *Bokeisei no kenkyū* (1938), *Shōseikon no kenkyū* (1953), and *Josei no rekishi* (1954). She emphasized the matrilineal character of ancient Japanese society and advocated a maternalist platform for women's liberation.

²¹ Japanese ethnological studies pioneered by Yanagita Kunio enthusiastically espoused theories on women's essential spirituality. This scholarship also exercised profound influence on historians. Even to this day, there is no end to the studies that, seeking to demonstrate the importance of women's roles in the ancient and medieval periods, avoid performing detailed investigations and turn to facile explanations of women's 'spirituality.'

²² In the 1980's, the distinguished scholar of feminism and women's history, Kuratsuka Akiko argued that the marginalization of women's 'spiritual' power by man's secular power represented the basis for "women's world historical defeat."

illuminating the processes of gender construction through historical interpretation can we transcend such essentialism and propel the study of women's history further.