

Ancient Japanese Empresses

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During the period of the French Revolution in the late 18th century, a noted French philosopher, the Marquis de Condorcet, declared that a nation was “civilized” if it protected the rights and freedom of women. But the first Chinese travelers to Japan in the 3rd century CE, made an opposing observation. Chinese visitors expressed dismay at the freedom Japanese women enjoyed and were startled by the presence of female rulers in Japanese history.¹ According to the philosophy of Confucius, the dominant Chinese belief, women had a subordinate position to men. A woman ruler would upset the natural order like “a hen crowing at dawn,” as a Chinese saying put it. Therefore, the Japanese seemed an *uncivilized* people to these Chinese travelers because they allowed women freedom and even accepted them as rulers.



The Nara Deer Park

Nara was the cradle of Japanese Buddhism and Empress Genmyō established Nara as the first permanent capital of Japan.

Merrill M. Kuller, Private Collection

A Chinese history written in 297 CE recorded the impressions of earlier Chinese travelers to the Land of Wa, as they called Japan. The history related that “the men [of Wa] all tattoo their faces and adorn their bodies with designs... The women tie their hair in bows,

¹ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 11.

and their clothing...is put on by slipping it over the head. They use pink and scarlet to smear their bodies... They take their food with their hands, but have bamboo and wooden trays on which to put it.”² The travelers also commented on the living arrangements of the Japanese. The men lived with men and the women with women, but they maintained a spirit of sexual equality.

Empress Pimiko

This same Chinese history described the queen who ruled the Land of Wa. She was called Pimiko, meaning “sun-daughter,” and had come to power in about 183 CE.³ She was elderly and had never married. The Chinese history gave this description of how she came to rule:

“Formerly the country had men as rulers. However, for seventy or eighty years after that the country had disturbances and warfare. Finally people agreed to take a woman as their ruler, and called her Pimiko (Himiko). She was adept in the ways of shamanism, [using supernatural powers], and could bewitch people. In her mature years, she was yet unmarried and had her younger brother help her rule the country. After she became the ruler, there were only a few who ever saw her. She had one thousand maidservants, but there was only one male servant attending her. His functions were to serve her food and drinks, to communicate messages, and to enter and leave her quarters. The queen resided in a palace surrounded by towers and barricades, with guards maintaining a constant watch...”⁴

This early queen, Pimiko, sent envoys to China to pay homage to the Chinese emperor and sent gifts of slaves and bolts of special cloth.⁵ Her acts of friendship led to trade and diplomatic relations between China and Japan.

These very early ruling empresses like Pimiko were probably also female shamans. Shamans were thought to have supernatural powers acting as intermediaries between humans and gods. The Japanese word for shamans is *miko*—literally divine woman. There is no Japanese word for a male shaman. This suggests that one source of these early female rulers’ power was their status as *miko*.

Other early women rulers followed Pimiko.⁶ When Pimiko died, the Chinese account explained:

“A great mound was raised, more than a hundred paces in diameter. Over a hundred male and female attendants followed her to the grave. Then a king was placed on the

² Tsunoda Ryusaku, tr., *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories* (South Pasadena: P.D. and Ione Perking, 1951), p. 1-2.

³ J. Edward Kidder, *Ancient Japan* (Oxford: Elsevier-Phaidon, 1977), p. 4.

⁴ Quoted in David John Lu, *Sources of Japanese History*, Vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974), p. 10.

⁵ Dorothy Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), p. 6.

⁶ See: Yu Mizuno, “Shamanism in Early Japan,” *The East*, Vol. 9, No. 6.

throne, but the people would not obey him... [finally] a relative of Pimiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was made queen and order was restored.”⁷

Empress Jingū

A later empress, Jingū (or Jingō), who ruled in the 3rd century CE, became second only to the female god Amaterasu in the reverence shown her by the Japanese people.⁸ Her story is a combination of legend and fact but, even though sorting out fact from legend is difficult, a Japanese historian described her important place in Japanese history: “The Empress Jingū was our Joan of Arc. Fired by Divine inspiration; she displayed a military valor which was of incalculable service to her country in the crisis of its fortunes.”⁹

Accounts of Empress Jingū’s activities differ, but she seems to have become ruler upon the death of her husband, the Emperor Chūai. His death occurred after he refused to take her advice to invade Silla (now Korea). In autumn Chūai summoned his generals for a war council to plan an attack on a group of rebels.

“That night Jingū was visited by a dream, or she fell into a trance. A deity appeared to her and said, ‘Why should the emperor worry about the Kumaso [the rebels] not surrendering to him? The Kumaso have little to offer. It is not worth your while to raise an army against them. There is a better land called Silla, which lies on Mukatsu (the other side of the ocean). There you can find treasures in plenty, for Silla is a rich country full of marvelous things dazzling to the eye—gold, silver, and bright-colored jewels. . . . If you worship me with proper offerings, I shall see to it that Silla will yield. Your soldiers will not even have to draw their swords. Victory is yours. In return, I merely claim as offerings your husband's ship and the rice field which he has acquired from a chieftain of Anato.’ Chūai could not believe what he heard from his wife. He at first dismissed her story as a fanciful dream. But on second thought, he climbed to the top of a nearby hill to have a look. Even from that vantage point, he could see nothing in the great seas. He therefore concluded that if his wife really heard the voice of a god suggesting that she persuade him to give up his ship and the rice field, it must be a treacherous god.”¹⁰

Emperor Chūai’s expedition against the Kumaso was unsuccessful and soon after he died.

For a while Jingū managed to keep his death a secret and put down revolts within the kingdom by acting in his name. Although she was pregnant with the future emperor, she put on men’s clothing and went into battle. Using her powers as a shaman she claimed to hear the will of god tell her that the Japanese should invade Silla. She said to her minister:

⁷ Ryusaku, *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories*, p. 16.

⁸ Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun*, p. 6-9.

⁹ Tan Hamaguchi, “Some Striking Female Personalities in Japanese History,” Annual Meeting of the Japan Society, London, May 13, 1903 (London: The Japan Society, 1904), p. 241.

¹⁰ Michiko Y. Aoki, “Empress Jingū: The Shamaness Ruler,” in, Chieko Irie Mulhern, ed, *Heroic with Grace: Legendary Women of Japan* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991), p. 5.

“To listen to the will of God, to move the people of war, is a matter of great concern to the country. From above, I shall receive the support of the spirits of the Gods of Heaven and Earth, while, below, I shall avail myself of the assistance of you, my ministers. Brandishing our weapons, we shall cross the towering billows: preparing a fleet of ships, we shall take possession of the Land of Treasure. If this expedition is successful, it will be due to you, my ministers; and, if not, I alone am to blame.”¹¹

Empress Jingū’s expedition to Korea succeeded, but she faced revolts at home upon her return. With these rebellions subdued, it is said she ruled for seventy years, dying at the age of one hundred.



Women in Kimono and Obi

Empress Jingū’s girdle to hide her pregnancy may have been a source for the Obi.

Mel and Renee Maisel, Private Collection

Several aspects of Empress Jingū’s story have become part of Japanese culture and customs. The heroic deed of the pregnant empress binding herself to wear men’s clothes into battle was commemorated in Japanese women’s dress. In later times, Japanese women adopted a pregnancy “girdle,” used partly in remembrance of Empress Jingū. Perhaps this girdle became the *obi* which is the sash worn over the kimono. The Empress also became a national hero. Western travelers to Japan in the 1870’s found that the

¹¹ Mary R. Beard, *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1953), p. 25.

Japanese still referred to her military exploits with pride. This early empress gave them their first historical opportunity to display valor in making “the arms of Japan shine beyond the seas,” as they put it.¹²

The Epoch of the Queens: 592-770 CE

Later empresses brought warring groups together and encouraged culture and religion. One scholar suggested that the period in Japanese history between 592 and 770 CE was the “Epoch of the Queens,” as one-half of the rulers during that time were women.¹³ Historian E. Patricia Tsurumi calls these rulers “Female Emperors” to distinguish them as reigning sovereigns rather than as wives of rulers. The six women who ruled as Female Emperors were:

Empress Suiko – 592-628 CE
Empress Kōgyoku – 642-645 CE
(She also reigned from 655-661 as Empress Saimei.)
Empress Jitō – 687-697 CE
Empress Genmyō – 707-715 CE
Empress Genshō – 715-724 CE
Empress Kōken – 749-758 CE.
(She also reigned from 764-770 as Empress Shōtoku.)

The reigns of these empresses or female emperors follow similar patterns. The empresses:

- Were compromise candidates, chosen by warring factions, unable to agree upon a sovereign.
- Favored Buddhism as a religion.
- Worked to unify the state.
- Were interested in cultural matters.

After the death or abdication of a male emperor, there were frequent conflicts between the nearest male relatives of the emperor, his sons or his brother, about which of them should be the next ruler. In her role as emperor’s wife, the empress, as in the case of Kōgyoku, was often the mother or sister of men vying for power. She made an acceptable compromise candidate for emperor as someone both sides could trust her. The Empress Suiko served as female emperor until her death in 628 CE, but others abdicated in favor of a son (Kōgyoku as Empress Saimei), a grandson (Jitō), or a daughter (Genmyō). Sometimes the new ruler did not prove able, and in two cases the former ruling empresses were recalled to rule again. New “reign-names” were given to them, so eight names of reigning empresses appear in the chronicles, but only six different women reigned.¹⁴

¹² Quoted in, William Elliot Griffis, *The Mikado’s Empire*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), p. 79.

¹³ Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun*, p. 9. The Asuka (552-710 C.E. and Nara (710-784 C.E.) periods of Japanese history span this “Epoch of the Queens.”

¹⁴ E. Patricia Tsurumi, “Japan’s Early Female Emperors, *Historical Reflections*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 41.

These six earned the title of *tenno*. Historian Michiko Aoki points out that because Japanese words do not usually designate gender, *tenno*, meaning supreme leader, can apply to a woman or man. A male administrator and a female priestess often jointly ruled early Japanese tribal groups; therefore, the idea of a female *tenno* fit the traditional model for Japanese rulers.¹⁵

Buddhism

As rulers, these empresses frequently supported the Buddhist religion. Both Confucianism and Buddhism were introduced into Japan from China and Korea at this time. While the Buddhist religion did not always see women as equal to men, it did not have the Confucian restrictions against women as rulers, so Buddhism was more appealing to the empresses. Empress Suiko helped to establish Buddhism as a major religion in Japan by building a large monastery at Nara and bringing Buddhist scholars from Korea to encourage the spread of religious ideas. In her second reign, Empress Kōken, made a Buddhist priest her principal advisor and may have planned to make him her successor. The empress-consort Kōmyō (720-749 CE), the wife of Emperor Shomu, had Buddhist temples built, including the huge Buddha of Tōdaiji Temple in Nara. She was also known for charitable acts, including the cleansing of a leper. One scholar has suggested that she can be remembered as the “first volunteer social worker in her country.”¹⁶ The Buddhist religion gave empresses outlets for their energies in the areas of scholarship, art and architecture, and helping the poor.

Unification

The empresses were attracted to the Buddhist faith that was introduced into Japan from Korea in the middle of the 6th century. They also accepted some of the ideas of an orderly and highly organized state introduced from China during the same time period. Most empresses became rulers as compromise candidates between warring factions. Once in power, they tended to work to centralize the government under their control. Empress Jitō supported efforts to write down a code of laws that later became the important Taihō Code of 701 CE. Empress Genmyō strengthened and centralized the government by establishing the city of Nara as the first permanent capital of Japan.¹⁷ Empresses Jitō and Genmyō were interested in military affairs, and Jitō led troops into the field.

Culture and the Arts

Another pattern common to the reigns of 7th and 8th century empresses was their promotion of culture and the arts. The Emperor Temmu and his wife, the Empress Jitō, ordered the oral histories of Japan written down. During her reign, the Empress Genmyō ordered the completion of the histories. The first written chronicle of Japan, called the

¹⁵ Michiko Y. Aoki, “Women in Ancient Japan,” in, Bella Vivante, *Women’s Roles in Ancient Civilizations: A Reference Guide*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 77.

¹⁶ Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Robins-Mowry, p. 10.

Kojiki, is considered the most accurate of the early Japanese chronicles.¹⁸ The writing of this history—the chronicle—also involved a woman. The Shintō shrine maiden, Hieda no Are, was ordered to listen to the court storytellers and memorize the oral traditions, legends, and family chronologies. She then dictated these to the scholar Yasumaro, who wrote them down.

Empress Suiko supported the creation of art works, and Empress Shōtoku (Kōken) was responsible for printing one million religious charms in honor of a military victory. The printed charms that remain today are examples of some of the earliest printing in world history.¹⁹ Jitō, Genmyō and Shōtoku encouraged the collection and writing down of Japanese poetry. The collection, called the *Manyōshū* or *Collection of Myriad Leaves*, became an important part of the cultural heritage of Japan. Empress Jitō is remembered for writing the first poem in a poetry game traditionally played at New Year:

Spring has passed away
And summer is come;
Look where white clothes are spread in the sun
On the heavenly hill of Kagu!²⁰

These remarkable female rulers—Suiko, Kōgyoku, Jitō, Genmyō, Genshō and Shōtoku—were effective governors who also encouraged the creation and preservation of the arts and culture of early Japan.

Empress Shōtoku and the Decline of Women Rulers

This line of female rulers ended with Shōtoku. She broke with the tradition of female rulers who balanced internal power groups and, instead, associated herself with an outsider. The outsider was a Buddhist priest, Dōkyō, who was not a member of the imperial family. Because she was ill, the Empress Kōken, with the help of the medical priest Dōkyō, abdicated in 758 CE. She recovered from her illness. As Empress Shōtoku, Kōken took over the throne and elevated Dōkyō to chief advisor. She also indicated that he might be named her successor. His ambitions for the throne led to civil war. The year after Shōtoku's death, Dōkyō was banished and died in a temple in the mountains. With his banishment and death the tradition of having ruling empresses was discredited. After the “Epoch of the Queens,” there were only two women who ruled as Japanese reigning female emperors. Both were children when they reigned and their reigns were brief ones.²¹ Perhaps the tradition of female rulers died out as the military became more important. Although the practice of having female emperors was not officially outlawed until 1889, the custom virtually died out after the “Epoch of the Queens.”

¹⁸ Yoshiko Wada, “Woman and Her Power in the Japanese Emperor System,” *Feminist—Japan*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (February 1978), p. 15.

¹⁹ Robins-Mowry, *The Hidden Sun*, p. 11.

²⁰ Quoted in Robins-Mowry, p. 10.

²¹ Myōshō reigned from 1630-1643 and lived another 53 years after abdication; and Go-Sakuramachi reigned from 1763-1770 and lived for 44 years after her abdication.

As the wives of emperors, empresses continued to affect Japanese history through their influence on their husband's decisions. Some empresses ruled as regents for minor sons and often continued to give them advice once they became emperors. But the rule of Shōtoku marked the end of one powerful role for imperial Japanese women—that of tenno, leader of the empire. Women as female emperors were then only a memory recalled by reading the historical chronicles they had helped to produce.

Today, however, Crown Prince Naruhito and Crown Princess Masako have only one child, a daughter, Princess Aiko. In January 2005 a panel of prominent Japanese began a review of the 1889 rule outlawing female emperors with the possibility of allowing the first-born of the emperor to succeed to the throne, regardless of sex. Their recommendations will be presented to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in September 2005 and then submitted to the Japanese parliament. If Princess Aiko does eventually succeed to the throne, she will follow in the footsteps of the early empress of the “Epoch of the Queens.”



Tomb of Empress Suiko
First of Six Female Rulers during the Epoch of the Queens
J. Edward Kidder, Private Collection

Points to Consider

After reading over the following excerpts from speeches of two female monarchs, one Japanese and one British, answer the questions that follow.

One characteristic common to several early Japanese empresses was their military prowess and valor in battle. In the following account, Empress Jingū (200-269 CE) put on male clothing to lead her army in an invasion of Korea after her husband's death. She declared to her generals:

“If I were to leave the whole conduct of the war in your hands, and you were unsuccessful, the responsibility would fall on your shoulders alone. But that I cannot bear. Although I am only a woman and unworthy of the post, yet it seems that I have the full approval of the god, and the hearty support of all you officers and of the soldiers. It is for these reasons I venture to marshal the army, and share both the successes and failures of the undertaking.”

She then issued the following orders to her army on the eve of their departure:

- Unless the strictest discipline is preserved, success cannot be hoped for.
- Men who give themselves up to looting and to selfish considerations will in all probability fall into the enemies' hands.
- However weak your enemies may be, do not despise them.
- However strong they may be, do not be afraid of them.
- Do not spare those who are treacherous.
- Have mercy on those who surrender.
- When triumphant you will be rewarded amply.
- Severe punishment will fall upon cowards.²²

In 1588, over 1,300 years later, Queen Elizabeth I appeared before her troops at Tilsbury, England. Elizabeth's army was assembled to meet the threatened invasion of England by the Spanish. At Tilsbury, Elizabeth gave a speech to her troops:

“I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honor and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonor shall grow

²² Quoted in Hamaguchi, “Some Striking Female Personalities in Japanese History,” p. 239-240.

by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you, in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you.”²³

Compare and Contrast

1. In what specific ways are these two speeches alike or similar?
2. In what specific ways are they different?
3. In what ways were the occasions that inspired these speeches alike? In what ways were they different?
4. Why do you think both monarchs emphasize that they are: “only a woman” or “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman...?” What advantages might they have had over a male leader in inspiring their troops? Any disadvantages?

Interpreting the Importance of Japanese Empresses

A scholar of Japanese history G. Cameron Hurst, wrote, “An empress came to the throne simply to avoid succession troubles and ensure transmission of the succession to the proper person [a male of the imperial family]. 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.”²⁴

Historian E. Patricia Tsurumi argues that Hurst’s theory fits only the Empress Kōgyoku/Saimei and “does not take into account [the empresses’] functions as rulers.”²⁵ Michiko Aoki claims that Empress Jitō, daughter of the great emperor, Tenji (posthumous name meaning Divine Wisdom), “proved herself a woman of political astuteness fully capable of making cold calculations. Her husband Temmu (Divine Valor) was a great warrior but less of a statesman.”²⁶

1. Why might historians judge female emperors’ roles differently than male emperors’?
2. How might the lack of information about Japan’s ancient past lead to some of these differences in interpretation?
3. Thinking back on the two views of women’s freedom and rights in the first paragraph (those of the French philosopher, Condorcet, and the early Chinese),
Who in the society do you think might benefit from the outlawing of women rulers?

²³ Quoted in, Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples: The New World*, Vol. 2 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1956), p. 126.

²⁴ Tsurumi, “Japan’s Early Female Emperors,” p. 41-42.

Historian E. Patricia Tsurumi argues that Hurst’s theory fits only the Empress Kōgyoku/Saimei and “does not take into account [the empresses’] functions as rulers.”

²⁵ Tsurumi, p. 48.

²⁶ Michiko Y. Aoki, “Empress Jitō”

What might cause women's roles as military leaders or as empresses change?

4. Read over the following historical information about Jitō. How does this evidence support or refute the historian's interpretations above.

After the death of her husband in 686, Empresses Jitō (b. 646-704 CE) reigned first as acting empress and then as Tennō, or supreme ruler, from 690 to her abdication in 697 in favor of her grandson Monmu. However, she was the first to keep the title of *dajoō-tennō*. Although she had reigned as ruling monarch, she requested a modest, simple funeral without mourning ceremonies. After her death the following activities and rituals took place (read over the list and answer the questions that follow):

- “Five nobles, headed by an imperial prince, were appointed as a committee to oversee the erection of a temporary internment building to house [Jitō's] coffin. Another committee of four, also headed by an imperial prince, built a surrounding wall.”
- “[Jitō's] coffin [was] moved to the Western Palace.”
- “Funeral feasts [were held] in the Four Great Temples: Daian-ji, Yakushi-ji, Gankō-ji, and Kōfuku-ji.”
- “Obarae, the national purification ceremony [was] not held.”
- “Ogami (feast without meat, as a religious sacrifice) [were] celebrated in the Four Great Temples.”
- “49th day ogami ceremonies [held]...in total of 33 temples.”
- “100th day prayers [held] at the temporary internment building.”
- “Two large funeral committees [were] appointed, one to deal with procedure and one to build a suitable crematorium.”
- “Princes and officials read the funeral eulogy [before Empress Jitō was cremated].”
- The Jitō was given an important posthumous title.
- Jitō was cremated and “buried in the Ōuchi tomb with the remains of Emperor Tenmu [her husband].” She was buried one year after her death.²⁷
- Cremation was not a common form of funeral arrangement at the time of Jitō's death. After her death there was a “widespread adoption of cremation outside the priesthood.”²⁸
- One scholar has suggested that Jitō, who he feels made frequent pilgrimages for the purpose of communicating with the *kami*, can be considered to be a royal *miko* – mystic or shaman able to hear the *kami* or spirits.²⁹

²⁷ J. Edward Kidder, “Problems of Cremation in early Japan: The Role of Empress Jito,” *Humanities Christianity and Culture*, Vol. 13 (Tokyo: International Christian University Publication IV-B), March 1979.

²⁸ Kidder, p. 207.

²⁹ Kidder, pp. 206-07.

Questions:

1. List specific things that indicate the funeral was considered an important affair.
2. Speculate about possible reasons for planning such an elaborate funeral for a former empress who was not ruling at the time of her death.
3. How do Empress Jitō's title of Tennō and her funeral provide evidence that may refute the Hurst theory about the six empresses? What other things suggest her importance?
4. Why might there be no single theory about the relative importance of these empresses?³⁰
5. Recently historian Takamura Itsue examined archaeological and historical documents and concluded that until about 300 CE husbands and wives lived separately in matrilineal, matrilocal clans.
6. Define matrilineal, matrilocal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (virilocal).
7. What evidence from ancient accounts is there in this selection that supports Takamura Itsue's theory?
8. Suggest ways that women might have more power in a matrilineal/matrilocal family system.

Sources

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³⁰ See footnote number 19.