

More than placeholders: The ‘century of empresses’ against modern succession laws

In the modern Japanese imperial family, women are prevented from taking the throne which is an artefact of the Imperial Household Law of 1889. The subject remains the centre of considerable debate in contemporary Japanese politics although surveys suggest broad support for the possibility of female enthronement, the ruling LDP is currently resistant to any change to the existing succession laws.

Proponents of change point to an historical tradition of female sovereigns, arguing that the current succession rules are not only sexist but deleterious to the imperial succession itself, running counter to historical practices (and a dwindling number of potential male heirs). Conversely, conservative perspectives on the law argue that the birth of Prince Hisahito in 2006, the heir to the throne, renders the issue low in importance, and that historical female sovereigns were enthroned only on a short-term ‘placeholder’ basis (*nakatsugi*) safeguarding the throne for a juvenile male heir. This latter point, argues women’s historian Yoshie Akiko, is mainly an extrapolation—with roots in Meiji, but largely established in the 1960s—from the relatively recent cases of Empresses Meishō (r. 1629–43) and Go-Sakuramachi (r. 1762–71), and does not reflect the actual role of empresses regnant in ancient Japanese history. What, then, do contemporary court annals such as the *Nihon shoki* tell us about these women and their relationships to imperial power and succession?

The century of empresses

Between 593 and 770 CE, no fewer than six women held the post of Empress Regnant over a total of eight reigns. This period in Japan’s history—dubbed the ‘Century of Empresses—marks the beginning of the (officially recognised) female sovereign in Japan, as well as their heyday: following 770, only the two aforementioned women would come to hold this post.

On the surface, the *nakatsugi* or short-term ‘placeholder’ explanation may seem feasible. All six of these empresses had a designated male successor; and all but one abdicated at least once in favour of a successor, a previously unheard-of act within the imperial line. While some were mother or grandmother to a male successor,

these represented pre-enthronement lineages during a previous tenure as Empress Consort; none formed their own matrilineal successions independent of a male emperor. However, a deeper look into these women's lives and reigns refutes the notion that female sovereigns were permitted *solely* in their capacity as placeholders, or that a female sovereign was restricted to preservation of the throne for a male candidate.

Empress Suiko (r. 592-628) came to the throne in a turbulent period. Her predecessor, Sushun (r. 587-592), was assassinated by her maternal uncle, Soga no Umako, chief minister and head of the powerful Soga clan. The daughter of one emperor and widow of another, Suiko had strong ties within the imperial clan. Her claim was also strengthened by the presence of her nephew Shōtoku, another Soga relative, who became her crown prince and intended heir. Connected to three separate predecessors of the ill-fated Sushun, the duo together had a more powerful claim to the throne than any one individual, as well as benefiting from the backing of their maternal kin. Shōtoku, being much younger than ancient enthronement usually demanded, benefited from an assured future on the throne without competing patriline; Suiko, being female, profited from a predetermined heir putting paid to any potential succession crisis.

To strengthen Shōtoku's position, he was placed in the role of regent and personally involved in governance. Although often interpreted as a means to install the male figure as the 'true' ruler, with Suiko a figurehead, court annals do not cast their relationship in such lopsided terms, instead portraying them more as co-rulers. Furthermore, it does not follow that Shōtoku's relative youth could have posed such an extreme obstacle to his accession that even the first female sovereign would be less controversial, and yet not prevented him from taking the reins of power. More likely, the post of 'regent' served as something of an apprenticeship for the young prince, allowing him to take a greater role in administrative affairs than would typically be permitted by his station, without handing him the entirety of governance. Suiko was not a passive placeholder merely saving the throne for her nephew, but rather his senior co-ruler and mentor, taking an active role as sovereign while preparing her successor for the task, the experience strengthening his own future claim.

This never came to pass, as Shōtoku predeceased Suiko by some years. Even so, the empress never took another prince under her guidance, or even designated a clear heir, instead defaulting to the standard of a contemporary male sovereign by leaving

only vague indications of succession preference on her deathbed. She may have been enthroned with a particular successor in mind, but she was also very much a monarch in her own right; her sovereignty was not dependent on her potential utility to a male heir.

Even so, one episode during Suiko's rule does betray a level of precariousness to her position as a woman emperor: she denied her uncle's petition for Kazuraki District to be placed under his control, arguing that this would cause later rulers to brand her as a 'foolish, stupid woman' losing the territory under her reign. The emphasis on her gender—the danger of being seen as a foolish *woman*—reflects a concern that any missteps on her part might be attributed to her gender, her womanhood used against her to cast her as unsuited for the role of monarch.

The second official Empress Regnant, Kōgyoku-Saimei (r. 642–645 as Kōgyoku, 655–661 as Saimei), was also the first imperial abdicant and first returnee monarch, setting a precedent for future female sovereigns. Another imperial widow, her accession may have been a strategy to preserve the throne for her son, the future Emperor Tenji (r. 661–672), whose elder half-brother was a strong rival. Tenji, however, had other plans. When his mother made to abdicate in his favour following the shock of the coup d'état of 645 known as the Isshi Incident, the crown prince refused the throne, ceding it instead to his uncle Kōtoku (r. 645–654). With Kōtoku on his deathbed, Tenji summoned his mother and ministers and spearheaded a return to the capital, where Kōgyoku was reinstated for a second reign as Saimei. Tenji's influence behind the scenes remained strong throughout his uncle's and mother's reigns, leading to the perception that Saimei was little more than a figurehead for her son's ambitions, fitting neatly into the mould of the placeholder-empress.

The position of Kōtoku should also be considered in this dynamic, however: enthroned at Tenji's insistence, and as much a figurehead as his sister; at one point, he was overridden by his nephew in the matter of a change of capital, and was left behind in the old palace while the court followed Tenji. Neither Kōtoku's reign nor Saimei's second were required for safeguarding Tenji's inheritance; he could have taken the throne at any time following Kōgyoku's abdication, and both male and female monarchs were made into figureheads for his political purposes, rather than this being a specific function of a woman emperor. The abdication itself was sudden and precipitated by political events; presumably, Kōgyoku-Saimei had initially been envisioned as a lifelong ruler in the vein of Suiko, her abdication in favour of a male

heir creating an unexpected precedent rather than being an intrinsic factor permitting her accession. The contrast between post-Shōtoku Suiko as a clearly autonomous female monarch, and the male figurehead Kōtoku, also shows us that the agency of the emperor to wield their own power was determined not by gender but by surrounding intrigue and circumstance.

As with Kōgyoku, Empress Jitō (r. 686–697) was heavily invested in securing her son's inheritance, stopping—or, perhaps, engineering charges of—a rebellion by his principal rival. It is clear from such actions that she was no passive 'placeholder'; nor was she expected to be, for her experience assisting her late husband, Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–686), in governance during his lifetime was presented by the *Nihon shoki* as a strong leadership credential. Clearly, there was far more expected of her as sovereign than simply sitting the throne until her son could take over.

Her aid to Tenmu, in the form of active participation in government as well as advice, is framed by the records as an act of feminine virtue: she is a dutiful wife, an able companion, a loving mother. Her gender is configured not as an obstacle to her rulership, but as a boon. It is not an unqualified boon, rooted as it is in her service to the broader male line, but it shows one way in which pre-existing gender roles could be appropriated to work for, rather than against, a female sovereign. As with Suiko, we see empresses regnant walking a fine line in their self-presentation. Could the image of the empress-as-placeholder have been part of this careful construction of their public image, a means by which an imperial woman could leverage power and influence, by humbly proclaiming her service to the patriline as a go-between? Although Jitō ultimately abdicated in favour of her young grandson Monmu (r. 697–707), she remained a significant political force, guiding the teenage emperor almost to the point of co-rulership. That abdication did not necessitate the full ceding of her power—or, as in Suiko's case, the loss of an intended heir render her obsolete—indicated that the idea of the placeholder-empress was not so much systematic and situation-restricted imperial tradition as a means of reconciling the idea of a female sovereign: a rhetoric of legitimation, rather than limitation.

Indeed, although abdication became the standard for the empresses of the Century, so too did the figure of the influential abdicant, guiding her successor in the role. Empress Genmei (r. 707–715)—herself manifestly no mere figurehead, for it was she who established Heijō-kyō as Japan's first long-term capital, sparking off the Nara Period—performed the unprecedented step of abdicating in favour of another woman: her daughter, Empress Genshō (r. 715–724). Her abdication edict clearly

laid out the intended path of succession, the relative youth of the male heir requiring another interim sovereign, and yet the future Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–749) was no younger than his father Monmu had been upon his accession. Genmei remained influential and powerful during her daughter's reign, and Genshō likewise during her nephew's. Again, the surface image of the empress-placeholder allowed women of the imperial line to attain and maintain monarchic authority, even beyond the official ceding of the throne.

These preceding figures refute the notion of the empress regnant as little more than a stopgap measure between male sovereigns. We see from Suiko that an empress could continue to reign without a defined male heir, and we see from Jitō, Genmei, and Genshō that the female sovereign wielded, and was always expected to wield, full monarchic authority and responsibilities. We have seen how the image of the 'placeholder-empress' could form not so much a limitation on imperial women as an opportunity of which to take advantage. But, as the final empress of the Century will show, this image was not strictly required for female accession, for Kōken-Shōtoku (r. 749–758 as Kōken, 764–770 as Shōtoku) was always meant to rule.

The Crown Princess

Unlike all others, Kōken-Shōtoku was granted the title of Crown Princess; indeed, she even received the seniority of title over her half-brother, so insistent was Shōmu that a child of his principal wife should succeed him. Her accession was not ordained to preserve a patriline; indeed, it required its own campaign of legitimation, concocted by Shōmu, Genshō, and Kōken, involving public spectacle emphasising Kōken's potential for wise and able rule. Shōmu also proclaimed an edict arguing that daughters of ministers ought to share in their inheritance of their fathers' posts, working alongside their brothers, for were they not equally a descendant? There appears to be no indication that actual inheritance law reform was enacted as a result of this edict, nor any sudden burst of female bureaucratic postings; rather, its purpose was to bolster Kōken's position by impressing upon the court the validity of a daughter as an heir. This process of smoothing the way for Kōken's accession was capped off with Shōmu abdicating in her favour, an inversion of the typical pattern for empresses and the first abdication ever performed by a male sovereign.

Even so, Kōken was still in a tenuous position as a female sovereign. While a female sovereign's inability to form a patriline was a boon when she was protecting the existing claim of a son or other male candidate, it was an obstacle to an empress

ascending the throne outside of the placeholder framework. While her father designated a successor for her in his posthumous edict, that prince was later stripped of his post; finally, under pressure from her mother and the ambitious minister Fujiwara no Nakamaro, Kōken agreed to cede the throne to Junnin (r. 758–764), who quickly became a puppet for Nakamaro. At first, Kōken accepted this state of affairs. However, after her mother's death, she increasingly returned to active political involvement, more and more acting as co-ruler and threatening Nakamaro's power base. These tensions came to a head with the Emi Rebellion, which resulted in Kōken's greatest inversion of and rebellion against her relegation to the role of placeholder: she dethroned her successor and seized back her imperial power.

Kōken-Shōtoku was never meant to be a placeholder; it was always she who was intended to succeed her father on the throne. Although a successor still had to be selected for her, the abdication that sees her categorised as a 'placeholder empress' was pressed upon her well after her accession, not a core component of it. Indeed, she ultimately—and successfully—rebelled against the idea, forcefully reclaiming her position and ruling until her death; her life putting the lie to the conservative idea that imperial tradition only permits women to take the throne as an interim for a male heir.

Itoyo, the Forgotten Empress

One more figure is perhaps worth looking at as an example of female sovereignty within the Japanese imperial line. Not the second-century shaman-queens Himiko and Toyo, whose relationship to the modern imperial family is unclear, nor the conquering Empress Jingū (r. 201–269 CE, in the traditional dating), whose story is rife with nebulous historicity and later mythologisation. While they are famous as female rulers, Itoyo (r. 484) is all but forgotten. This is accounted for partly by the brevity of her reign (about half a year) and the resulting dearth of information concerning her. Certainly, she was not thought of by ancient chroniclers as a legitimate empress; while the ostensible regent Jingū is still afforded her own section in the *Nihon shoki*, Itoyo warrants only a brief mention in the annals of her successor, Emperor Kenzō (r. 485–487). Early records never grant her the full monarchic title; only in the twelfth-century chronology *Fusō ryakki* is she known as a monarch.

Itoyo took power following the death of Emperor Seinei (r. 444–484). Her

enthronement was enabled by succession confusion, although two different eighth-century court histories give varying accounts. In the older work, the *Kojiki*, the only living male heirs are still in hiding following a bout of internecine rival-murdering on a previous emperor's part; Itoyo is portrayed more as a regent, merely holding court until the true (male) heirs can be found, fitting in more closely with the 'placeholder' narrative. In the other, the *Nihon shoki*, however, her reign occurs while said heirs cannot agree on which is to rule; here, she appears as a more disruptive presence, circumventing the patriline and even using a regnal name (derided by the text as 'self-styled').

The *Nihon shoki* interpretation presents her as a brief pretender-queen, a short-term challenge to the 'proper' line of succession; she is insistently dismissed as a legitimate monarch, and yet, recognised or not, Itoyo was the effective sovereign of Japan for a short time in the late fifth century. Itoyo in the *Nihon shoki* shows yet another side of the notion of the 'traditional' placeholder, in that early female sovereigns could be written out of official narratives entirely, despite functioning as empresses regnant in all other aspects. The imperial family's own internal chronology is itself a narrative constructed over the course of centuries; the 'traditions' present within it carefully curated by later generations. The question of what the imperial tradition even permits, in terms of female rulership, is further complicated by the very artifice of what gets to be considered as 'tradition' in the first place.

Throughout our examination of the 'placeholder-empress' concept in history, we find three key points that rebut the conservative viewpoint on empress accessions. The first point, seen from the earlier empresses of the Century, is that even those women who appear to have been enthroned to ensure a male candidate's succession were not *solely* placeholders, but rather fully capable monarchs in their own right, who could continue to reign without a designated heir or retain power as abdicants. The image could be leveraged by an ambitious imperial woman to attain, rather than limit, authority. The second point is the example of Kōken-Shōtoku, who was specifically selected to rule in her own right, the aspects of her rule used to cast her as a placeholder the result of later pressures rather than part and parcel of her accession. Thirdly, through glimpses in the annals of women such as Itoyo, we see how the concept of the imperial line's traditions is itself a cultivated construct, with early female monarchs who do not fit the 'placeholder' narrative excised from the official line. The 'placeholder' argument against female accession does not serve even to accurately depict Japan's imperial past, let alone determine its future.

Image: Depiction of Empress Suiko. Credit: Tosa Mitsuyoshi - Eifuku-ji temple, Osaka. Public domain.