

“Women in the Bureaucratic Structure in Classical Japan, as Seen in the Laws on Officials of the Back Palace, and Historiography Thereon”

Ijûin Yôko

I am Ijûin Yôko. Thank you very much for inviting me to the University of Southern California today. I am very glad to have the opportunity to discuss the Japanese *ritsuryô* law codes. In our project, “Gender in the Japanese Administrative Code,” I am examining the compilation and organization of laws concerning the bureaucratic system and its administration. Today, I would like to talk briefly, in introductory fashion, about the Laws on Officials of the Back Palace, or women’s quarters of the royal residential palace.

These laws governed the bureaucracy of women that served the *tennô*, and included rubrics on the numbers and duties of female officials. What image do we have of these women in classical times? In Japan there is still the impression that they were part of the *tennô*’s harem. Many people still see the female officials of classical times as similar to the women in Ottoman Turkish harems, the back palace of successive Chinese dynasties, or the inner palace (Ôoku) of the Tokugawa shogunate—women whose sole function was to preserve the bloodline of the ruler or, in the Tokugawa case, of the shogun, the primary holder of power in Japan. What was demanded of women in harems was the reproduction of the ruling line. Thus these women—queens and female officials alike—were strictly forbidden to have contact with men other than the ruler.

But things were different for female officials in classical Japan. They made love to male courtiers, marrying them and divorcing them. This was unthinkable in China, and indicates that female officials at the time did not hold their positions strictly for the purpose of reproducing the *tennô*’s bloodline. For a correct understanding of female officials in classical Japan, it is absolutely necessary to realize their differences with women of the back palace in other Asian societies, from classical to early modern times.

So what were the functions expected of female officials in classical Japan? Let me explore this matter through an analysis of laws in the eighth-century codes.

Laws on officials of the Back Palace, and problems in previous research

The framework of the early classical polity—the polity based on legal codes—was fully constructed by the beginning of the eighth century. One section of the Taihō code, the initial set of eighth-century laws, was called the “*Kôkyû kan’in ryô*”; in the subsequent Yôrô code promulgated in 757, the name was changed to “*Kôkyû shikiin ryô*.” Both refer to laws for officials of the Back Palace.

Four sets of laws concerning officials were included in the Yôrô code. One dealt with male officials in general, one with the Back Palace staff, one with the staff of the Crown Prince’s Household, and one with the household staffs that served royals and nobles. These laws set the numbers and duties of the offices and officials for each venue. The

Laws on Officials of the Back Palace covered the *tennō*'s consorts (excepting the queen-consort) and female officials. The Laws are composed of eighteen clauses that can be categorized in four general topics. The first topic includes Clauses 1 through 3, on the *tennō*'s wives, and Clause 17, on wet nurses—in other words, regulations that concern the reproduction of the *tennō*'s bloodline. The second topic, covered by Clauses 4 through 15, regulates the duties and evaluation of officials in the twelve offices of the Back Palace. The third topic, covered by Clause 16 alone, concerns the status order of princesses and senior female officials as well as wives of male officials being presented at court. In early classical Japan, these women served at public events at court, and such ordering was needed for that purpose. The fourth topic is qualifications and conditions for the service of female officials, which is covered in Clause 18.

Misunderstandings about female courtiers

The laws on residence units that Prof. Yoshie discussed on Monday are laws concerning the organization and control of residence units, the lowest level of the administrative structure of the realm. These regulations are viewed as crucially important for research on revenue collection, the actual organization of the family, and the origin of the *ie* (stem family), and research concerning these laws has produced many results. On the other hand, the Laws on Officials of the Back Palace are considered to be regulations concerning women who served the *tennō* in his private life—they served in his kitchen and sleeping quarters, and they arranged his library. Thus it was rare for the Back Palace staff to be analyzed as a part of the bureaucratic structure. In the eighth century, the Back Palace staff was headed by the wives of hereditary court ministers and nobles, but it was thought that they were sent there primarily to further their husbands' political aims. So until the 1970s, when historians wrote about the officials of the Back Palace, the latter usually appeared in the background of the history of political conflict among male nobles.

Research on female officials and problematic points

The work of Nomura Tadao (1970, 1978) and Tsunoda Bun'ei (1973) provided a general overview of the twelve offices of the Back Palace in the 1970s. Nomura, a scholar of the eighth-century bureaucratic system, analyzed the female officials' duties and their promotions in rank. Tsunoda conducted inclusive investigations of the Back Palace from classical to early modern times. And Suda Haruko (1978, 1982) focused more narrowly on the twelve offices of the Back Palace from the eighth century to the middle of the Heian Period (794-1185).

Moreover, researchers who specialize in Japanese literature and history from the medieval period onward often consult Asai Torao's *Shintei jōkan tsūkai* (An Overview of Female Officials, Revised; Kōdansha Gakujutsu Bunko 1985). Originally published in 1906, this work broadly examines the back palace system. However, it tends to explain female officials in the classical period while referring to sources from medieval times and later, when great changes had taken place in the classical system. Asai's work demonstrates the constraints of research in the Meiji period, when scientific methods of investigation into the history of classical Japan had not yet been established. While Asai's

research involved the consultation of a huge number of sources, it is unsuitable for understanding the system of female officials under the eighth-century law codes when seen from the level attained by today's research, which has undergone rapid development given advances in classical history and the history of women. I want to point out that it is necessary to use Asai's work with caution.

The emergence of new research on female officials

In the 1980s research revised earlier views of women's work in the Back Palace by referring to several primary sources: *Ryōnogige* and *Ryōnoshūge*, early Heian commentaries on the Yōrō code, and the early tenth-century *Engi shiki*, which compiled detailed information on the actual execution of laws. Results of this research made clear that the Back Palace in early classical Japan was not off limits to men, but that men and women alike performed official duties there (Monjū Masako 1995, Hashimoto Yoshinori 1995, Katsuura Noriko 2000).

Male and female officials working together

Within the structure of the eighth-century bureaucracy, there were originally offices of male officials whose duties were similar to those of the women in the twelve offices of the Back Palace. (See the Table at the end of this essay for a list of parallel duties by the women's twelve offices and their male counterparts.) As Monjū Masako (1992) points out, legal experts from the early Heian period explained in the *Ryōnoshūge* that male and female officials worked together, indicating that at times female officials may have worked alongside men while performing their duties. Monjū thinks that this is based on practices that date from before the seventh century. This way of doing things is certainly a major characteristic of the system in which female officials worked in the Back Palace in Japan.

For men and women to work routinely alongside one another in this way was unthinkable in Tang China. There, female officials—court ladies--served the emperor's consorts, who lived together in seclusion in the back palace, in their daily activities. (For example, in the Chang-an palace, there were extensive quarters known as "side-apartments.") Court ladies worked in this space, and had no contact with male bureaucrats. When it was necessary for male and female officials to communicate, a male official who was a eunuch served as intermediary. But there were no eunuchs in Japan, because eunuchs had a function only in the case of a fully secluded back palace. Since in Japan men and women commonly worked together, there was no need for a system using eunuchs.

The *tennō*'s orders and law

Let us return to the main theme of research concerning female officials. Since the 1980s one more important viewpoint has been added to this work: how the position of women within this structure was revised over time. This theme has been thoroughly investigated by Haruna Hiroaki (1997) and Yoshikawa Shinji (1998). Haruna has examined the process by which the *tennō*'s ideas were turned into law. His is an analysis of the *tennō*'s

statecraft, but one important result of the research process is also clarification of the role of female officials. To examine this in more detail, among the public document types that announced that the *tennō*'s orders were decrees called *shō* or *choku* (both also pronounced *mikotonori*). According to Clause 3 of the Yōrō Laws on Officials, in the section regarding the Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs, it was the job of a residential palace secretary, a male official, to write these documents for execution as policy in the realm. This secretary worked in the Ministry, but when a royal decree was to be drafted, he did not receive the order from his direct superior. Rather, it was the job of a senior manager in the Office of Female Chamberlains to transmit the *tennō*'s order to the palace secretary, who would then draft the necessary document. This means that in the process of making the *tennō*'s order into law, the female official supervised the male official (Haruna 1997). Through Haruna's research, we can escape the image of female officials as the *tennō*'s housekeepers and situate them as functionaries in the government bureaucracy.

The establishment of offices of female officials

Yoshikawa (1998) examined the ritual texts of the early Heian period, noting that male officials needed to obtain the *tennō*'s permission before entering his quarters, and making it clear that this permission was mediated by female officials of the Office of His Majesty's Gate (*Mikado no tsukasa*). In the Table at the end of this essay, the duties of this office are listed on Line 6. According to Yoshikawa, the duties of this office date from well before the establishment of the classical polity. It is listed in the Taihō codes as one of the twelve offices of the Back Palace, providing, as Yoshikawa points out, an important clue to how the twelve offices of the Back Palace took form when the classical polity was established.

Where the *tennō*'s consorts lived

While it is not research directly related to female officials, work since the 1980s in philology and archaeological investigations has made it clear that in early classical Japan there was in fact no Back Palace as a residence for the *tennō*'s chief consorts, who lived separately in their own palaces (Misaki Yūko 1997, Hashimoto Yoshinori 2011). From these residences, consorts involved themselves in political affairs along with their own kin. Not until the later eighth century did the queen-consort begin to live together with the *tennō*, and a number of buildings were constructed in the rear area of the *tennō*'s palace. And it was not until the Heian Period that other consorts began to live in the *tennō*'s palace, in such buildings as the Kiritsubō and Kokiden made famous in *The Tale of Genji*. I think that clarifying this point is an important contribution to research on female officials.

The classical bureaucratic system's exclusion and subsumption of female officials

Finally, I want to discuss contradictions that developed within the bureaucratic system of classical Japan. Its structure was changed by the Taihō code of 701, but of course a system of royal officials existed before that, with women in it serving as attendants to the

paramount great kings (Hirano Kunio 1969). For instance, according to the *Nihon shoki*, a group of retainers headed by a woman from the royal kin served at the early seventh-century court of Suiko Tennô (see the records of Jomei Tennô's accession). And it is clear that in the provinces as well at the center, women from elite families worked together with men (Ijûin Yôko 2013). In the country of Wa, as Japan was called in early times, it was thought that women as well as men should render service to the monarch, and that practice was carried out.

However, the emergence of a unified empire on the Chinese continent under the Sui and Tang dynasties in the late sixth and seventh centuries greatly influenced the country of Wa. The three kingdoms of the Korean peninsula—Baekche, Silla, and Goguryeo—were threatened by the powerful Sui and Tang empires. So in 663 Wa sent troops to assist Baekche, but they were badly defeated by the combined armies of Tang and Silla in the battle of Paekchon Harbor. Then in 668 Tang forces invaded first Baekche and then Goguryeo, and the Korean peninsula was unified under the rule of Silla, Tang's ally. In the midst of this upheaval in the East Asian world, the Wa monarchy rushed to construct a centralized polity on the Tang model. The bureaucratic structure thus formed excluded women, as in China, as a matter of principle. Nomura Tadao (1970:525) calls this “the principle of male dominance, which penetrated the entire structure of the early classical bureaucratic system of Japan.”

Separate rules regarding male and female bureaucrats

The exclusion of women is manifested in the different treatment of men and women in regard to their membership in a titled clan (*uji*). The law codes assumed that all men of the central nobility could obtain court posts, but only one woman from each clan could be appointed to a bureaucratic position. Since she was to be selected from her lineage, she was called the “*ujime*,” or woman of the titled clan.

Exclusion from the system of matching court posts and ranks

Moreover the system in which job performance was evaluated, and a promotion of rank also meant a promotion in post, was applicable only to male officials. While there were female officials who were promoted in rank when their performance of duties was favorably evaluated, they did not necessarily obtain a higher-level post. Thus women were excluded from the hierarchy of the bureaucratic system.

Nevertheless the actual work of female bureaucrats in the twelve offices of the Back Palace, which followed the Tang model and provided the framework for the female bureaucratic system, differed from that of Tang China. In Japan men and women commonly worked together to support the *tennô*'s private life. The women in the Office of Female Chamberlains assisted the *tennô* in his public duties as well. So were women both excluded from but also subsumed into the power structure and administrative system of the realm. The origin of this contradiction was the attempt by the classical polity to reproduce a Chinese-style centralized realm and construct a bureaucratic system from which women were excluded, even as female officials followed traditions from before the

seventh century and supported the *tennô* in his private life and public duties. It was impossible to bar women from the actual management of society and the realm.

Conclusion

I have discussed important results of research concerning female officials in the classical age. Currently I am working on the project entitled, “Gender in the Japanese Administrative Code—Part 2, Laws on Officials of the Back Palace” wherein we are building on previous research to analyze, annotate, and explain these statutes.

Thank you for listening to my talk today.

**DUTIES OF THE 12 OFFICES OF THE BACK PALACE, AND
CORRESPONDING MALE OFFICES**

	Office	Duties	Corresponding Male Posts and Units
1	Female Chamberlains	waiting on the <i>tennô</i> ; delivering reports and issuing proclamations; supervising cleaning and lighting lamps; overseeing court attendance of upper-ranked female officials and male officials' wives, and palace etiquette	chamberlain (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs); major and minor counselors (Council of State); Office of Royal Protocol (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs)
2	Treasury	maintenance of regalia and tallies; care of the <i>tennô</i> 's clothing, treasures, and items for gifts	Royal Treasury Bureau (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs)
3	Library	care of Buddhist and Confucian texts, and paper, brushes, desks, and strings for musical instruments	Bureau of Books & Drawings (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs)
4	Medicine	care of the <i>tennô</i> 's medicines	Royal Pharmacy (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs)
5	Armory	care of the <i>tennô</i> 's weapons	Royal Armory
6	Gatekeeper	holding and passing out keys to the gates to the <i>tennô</i> 's quarters	Gatekeeper (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs)
7	Provisions	maintenance of carriages for royal progresses, and fuel stores for everyday use	Custodial Office (Ministry of the Royal Household)
8	Purification	Purify and provide facilities for royal rituals	Palace Purification Office (Ministry of the Royal Household)
9	Potable Water	preparation of <i>tennô</i> 's water and rice gruel	Palace Water Office (Ministry of the Royal Household)
10	Table	serving the <i>tennô</i> 's meals; tasting	Royal Table (Ministry of the Royal Household)
11	Brewery	brewing sake for royal use	Sake Brewing Office (Ministry of the Royal Household)
12	Seamstresses	supervision of sewing for His Majesty as well as presentation of ladies at court	Bureau of the Wardrobe (Ministry of Residential Palace Affairs), Office of Sewing Guild Members (Treasury)