

# When Antiquity Meets the Modern: Presenting the Female Rulers in the Making of Japanese History

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## Preface

Today, Japan's Constitution clearly states that the Imperial lineage is based on hereditary succession and the Imperial Household Law 皇室典範 stipulates that Imperial Throne shall be succeeded to only by male descendants in the male line of Imperial ancestors; in other words, females are excluded from the line of succession.<sup>1</sup> Following defeat in war in 1945, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of Japan 日本国憲法 (enacted in April, 1947) First Chapter, Second Article: The Imperial Throne shall be dynastic and succeeded to in accordance with the Imperial Household Law passed by the Diet. The Imperial Household Law, Chapter One, First Article: The Imperial Throne of Japan shall be succeeded to by male descendants in the male line of Imperial Ancestors.

position of *Tennō* 天皇 (or “Emperor” in English) has shifted greatly from the “sacred and inviolable monarch” of the Great Japanese Imperial Constitution 大日本帝国憲法 (promulgated in 1889) to the “symbol of national unity” of the current Constitution (enacted in 1947). Yet the Imperial Household Law’s stipulation of succession based on patrilineage remains unchanged to this day.

However, the situation seemed very serious although the Crown Prince’s daughter was born in 2001, because there had been no male births in the Imperial family since 1965. People were concerned that there would be no successors to the throne in the future. Meanwhile, her birth triggered off a sudden movement aiming at the reform of the Imperial Household Law, which would make it possible for women to succeed to the throne. This is the so-called “Female Tennō debate.”

Thereafter, in 2006 a male baby was born, deriving of the Crown Prince’s brother. As a result, the movement of the reform appeared to tone down. Eventually, this son became the third in line to the throne following the Crown Prince and his brother according to the present Imperial Household Law. At the same time, the reform for female succession didn’t seem urgent for the time being, and the Crown Prince’s daughter was still eliminated from accession to the throne.

Nevertheless, many Japanese citizens seem to have conceived their uneasy feelings about the female exclusion from the succession line by just only one reason ; they are women. “Why and How long have female members been excluded from the line of succession just because they are women?” or “Why shouldn’t this practice be reformed?” These points through the debate helped me to realize that there emerged several deeply rooted problems pertaining to a historical and gender perspective.

Defenders of the conventional mode of succession have argued: that 1) present Imperial succession by “patrilineage” has consistently been the

tradition stemming from ancient times, and 2) some female emperors that have existed in history temporarily served as “interim” emperors just in case that the usual succession didn’t work due to some unexpected difficulties. Furthermore, they argue that accepting the idea of “female emperors” and “betraying the long-standing tradition” are linked together. They are concerned that it would lead the destruction of Japanese culture.

As I will argue in this paper, there are many misinterpretations in error in these arguments caused by those who claim that they have referenced to history. Nevertheless, the recent “Female Tennō debate” contributed to bringing the proposition that “hereditary succession” by patrilineage derives from an ancient Japanese tradition that “Women were not rulers in Japan” (the few real female emperors were exceptions). This proposition in the misinterpretations was reversely shared and reconfirmed widely among Japanese people.

On the other hand, some advocators for the reform of the Imperial Household Law have different opinions from defenders, to the effect that “it is natural in light of the common notion of gender equality,” and additionally that “a woman would be appropriate to be the symbolic Emperor of the Peaceful State of Japan.” These arguments, eventually, come to label women alone as “peace-lovers”. This debate may lie in the studies of female essentialism which suggest that a woman would be particularly appropriate to be a symbolic Emperor with no authority to rule. Ironically, this also endorses the proposition of “Women ≠ Rulers.”

The “Female Tennō debate” concerning the future Imperial succession, irrespective of these different positions, urged on the women’s history researchers’ deep insight and responses. The debate includes various points such as “the invention of tradition”, “the construction of gender” and “the referencing of history.” In terms of the feminist’s position, some of them positively support the reform which gives females equal rights to

accede to the throne. However, one feminist has expressed her sense of crisis, arguing that the Emperor system will reproduce a gendered order of society.<sup>2</sup> Her concern that even if female emperors appear and may change the boundary between male and female, the division of men and women in the public and private roles will ever remain. In this paper, as a researcher of ancient women's history,<sup>3</sup> I would like to make it clear how deeply the points of academic argument on "ancient female emperors" have been imprinted with the contemporary gender structure, even though academic ones seem neutral.

In studies of ancient kingship, the ancient female emperors have been considered "interim rulers" 中継ぎ as well as "priestesses" 巫女 possessing a magical power. Thanks to the developments of studies of women's history<sup>4</sup>, researchers have been able to obtain new facts, for instance, women in ancient Japan held high social positions, or women from aristocratic or provincial elites possessed great political and economic authority. Even so, there are still many researchers who believe that female emperors must have had their inherent special role unlike male emperors, then the "interim ruler" and "priestess" thesis are highly supported.

In fact, in ancient Japan, during the two centuries from the late sixth to the late eighth century, there were almost as many female emperors as male emperors. Despite the fact, we have had no "ancient male emperors argument." Why? I presume, that's because some researchers still believe that ancient female emperors had been involved accidentally in special circumstances to succeed to the throne focusing on the implicit premise, "the *Tennō* ( Emperor ) is a man". Furthermore, they have sought only the historical background behind the female emperors.

One thing must be clear. In ancient Japan, we had no premise which proves "the emperor is a man". And it has been realized that the monarchic

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<sup>2</sup> Muta 2006, pp.197-202.

<sup>3</sup> Yoshie 2005b, pp.451-470.

title of “Tennō” was used without gender differences. When there was a need to distinguish their sex, they were individually titled as “male emperor 男帝” or “female emperor 女帝”.<sup>4</sup> After patrilineal succession by modern legal system was established, the title of “Tennō” clearly came to refer only to men. Attempting to change this stipulation introduced recent “Female Tennō 女性天皇 debate”. The conventional “ancient female emperor argument”, asking “Why were there female emperors in the ancient period?” is based on Japan’s modern law which takes the “Tennō = man” formula. I must emphasize that the question itself is affected by gender bias.

The “female emperor argument” and “male emperor argument” are opposite sides of the same coin. In terms of their view that female emperors acceded to the throne through special circumstances or special abilities (not available to men), the question “Why were there female emperors in the ancient period” itself and its typical answers — the “interim ruler” or “priestess” thesis are inseparable relationship with the “men are the true rulers of the country” view of the “male emperor argument”.<sup>5</sup>

I will develop my argument below in the following order.

First, I will prove that the ancient male and female emperors exercised similar authority without distinction of gender and their ability, using the records which show the result from studies of kingship history and evidences on what female emperors achieved. Second, I will present the characteristics of gender in ancient Japanese society which produced female emperors by summarizing the results of studies of ancient women’s history. Third, I will analyze the process on how the misinterpretation has been generated as common theory in the studies of history in the modern period; female emperors were exceptional and special figures, then will reveal

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<sup>4</sup> In the imperial edict dated the 24th day of the sixth month of 731 (Tempyo 天平 3) in the Ruijū Sandaikyaku 類聚三代格, Vol. 1, (p.29), two different kinds of regions were charted symmetrically, one was assigned to send the ritual ministrants for the male emperors, another was assigned them for the female emperors.

<sup>5</sup> Yoshie, 2000, p.13.

concretely how gender has been structured through historical interpretations.

In conclusion, I will propound the “vulnerability” to be overcome hidden in both women’s history research and feminists’ “female emperor argument,” which are linked to the realm of female essentialism and the argument of divided gender roles.

## 1 Royal Succession in Ancient Japan and the Female Emperors

The first recorded female emperor in Japanese history is Suiko 推古, who acceded to the throne at the end of the sixth century. There were Six female emperors who ruled over eight reigns (two female emperors acceded the throne twice) concluding with Emperor Shōtoku 称徳 in the late eighth century.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter two female emperors<sup>7</sup> ruled in the Edo 江戸 period of the 17-18th centuries. In the Edo period, the *samurai* 侍 (the warrior class) gripped the state authority and the emperors did not continue to hold substantial power. Therefore, the regalia of this period requires a different analysis compared with the power of ancient emperors who were strong wielders of authority in accordance with the state formation. Just the fact on the existence of two female emperors in the Edo period is important, because this indicates that female emperors were never ruled out in pre-modern Japan.

In the first place, there was no legitimate law about the imperial succession during the pre-modern period. The first systematic form of law in Japan was established between the end of the seventh and the beginning of

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<sup>6</sup> Suiko 推古 (r.593-628); Kōgyoku 皇極 (r.642-645)= Saimei 齐明 (r.655-661); Jitō 持統 (r. 687-697); Genmei 元明 (r.707-715); Genshō 元正 (r. 715-724); Kōken 孝謙 (r. 749-758)= Shōtoku 称徳 (r. 764-770).

<sup>7</sup> Meishō 明正 (r. 1629-1643) and Go-Sakuramachi 後桜町 (r. 1762-1770).

the eighth centuries on the model of China's ritsuryō 律令 codes. In them, nothing is stipulated about the rules of royal succession. This is because the emperor was an entity that transcended the ritsuryō laws. However in one of the articles which stated that the emperor's siblings and children would be given the titles of prince or princes, there is a clause stating that "the same applies for female emperors." Judged from the process of the first legislation work in the early eighth century, the existence of female emperors was assumed as a matter of course.<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of any legal stipulation, succession to the throne was determined according to rules based upon custom and precedent. After the end of the third century, when a broad-based governing authority emerged on the Japanese archipelago, these rules changed greatly affected by historical period according to the establishment and change of royal reigns. In order to understand the background on emergence of female emperors, here let us view the process of change in the form of royal succession.

It was not until around the sixth century that royal succession of ancient Japan became fixed on a single blood line. Before then, it seems that the throne moved among several powerful elite lineages. From the fact that large *Kofun* 古墳 tombs (burial mounds, tumuli) whose sites had moved during the fourth and fifth centuries<sup>9</sup> and Chinese historical records in the fifth century,<sup>10</sup> it is inferred that the throne in Japan moved among several different blood lines. The superior with prominent ability and strong military command were selected by the powerful elite lineages to accede to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ritsuryō Codes, Keishiryō 継嗣令 1, p.281. "The emperor's siblings and children will all be considered princes. The same applies to the children of female emperors." Because this article is a verbatim copy of a Tang ordinance, the "emperor" originally referred to the Chinese emperor (i.e., a male). Because this prescription was applied to Japan's Tennō (referring to men and women) it became necessary to follow it with a stipulation about the children of "female emperors."

<sup>9</sup> It is inferred from the distribution of the largest *Kofun* tombs from each period that the throne was passed among the influential families.

<sup>10</sup> On kingship in the fifth century, see Piggott 1997, pp.44-54.

throne and established their authority by having been themselves recognized as kings by the Chinese Emperor.

Following the reign of Keitai 繼體,<sup>11</sup> who acceded the throne at the beginning of the sixth century, his descendants have acceded to the throne for generation after generation until the present day. But even after the sixth century, succession to the throne by a single bloodline was not self-evident. The children and grandchildren of Keitai continued extremely consanguineous marriages to enhance the nobility of their bloodline, but there were elite lineages that attempted to replace them as king.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a clear ranking rule for royal succession, those who satisfied a certain number of conditions for bloodline become *Ōkimi* 大王 (Great King) recommended by other powerful elite lineages. Elder males from royal lineages tended to be prioritized to the throne, but women were by no means excluded. Occasionally, female royal members with mature age, ripe experiences and distinguished ability were supported by many elite lineages and came to accede to the throne.

In the transitional times of seventh and eighth centuries, the old practice of succession by powerful lineages' recommendation had gradually been overpowered by the new formula which planned the royal autonomy that the king him or herself nominated the next king. There was an attempt

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<sup>11</sup> It is thought that the monarchical title of "Tennō" was established during the latter half of the seventh century. Previous to the seventh century, the title given to the supreme ruler in Japan was "king" or "great king," but in Japan's oldest chronicle, *Nihon Shoki*, all of Japan's rulers from the first reign of Emperor Jinmu 神武 are listed with the title of "Tennō 天皇." In this essay, I have followed convention in listing individual emperors as "Emperor," but prior to the seventh century, I write "royal succession" as opposed to "imperial succession." Moreover, the national title of "Japan" (*Nippon*) was established at the beginning of the eighth century, and "Wa" is the name for the Japanese kingdom (or region) recorded in Chinese chronicles prior to this period, but to avoid confusion, I write "Japan" throughout.

<sup>12</sup> The Soga 蘇我 called their residence *Mikado* 宮門 (palace) and called their male and female children *Miko* 王子 (princes/princesses). Article listed in the eleventh month of 644 (*Kōgyoku* 皇極 3), pp.259-61.

for stable sovereignty seeking the direct patrilineal succession in the first half of the eighth century as one royal autonomy formula, but this did not take hold. The nobility each attempted to place their preferred royal member on the throne and so plots and coups occurred repeatedly. There were nobles that plotted struggles over the imperial line,<sup>13</sup> on the contrary, an female emperor attempted to nominate one as a next co-ruler out of the royal lineage.<sup>14</sup> After such a tempestuous period, at last at the end of the eighth century, an imperial lineage was established among aristocratic classes as the core of their bonds, and brought about a certain degree of stability.<sup>15</sup>

The change in accession decrees 即位宣命 illustrates this well. The emperors of the eighth century had to present a detailed statement to their subordinates concerning the legitimacy of their accession to the throne.<sup>16</sup> The basis of the legitimacy that was spoken of varied according to emperor. But after the end of the eighth century, accession declarations became simple, formal expressions and thereafter, through the Edo period, accessions were made following roughly the same phrases.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (The Chronicles of Japan), compiled by the imperial court in the first half of the eighth century, states that Jinmu 神武 acceded to the throne in 1660 BC and that the throne has been inherited by the same blood line ever since. If we were to accept this at face value, the current Heisei 平成 Emperor would be the 125th

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<sup>13</sup> The leader of this rebellion, Fujiwara no Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂, gave his sons the title of princes. Article from *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀, September, 764 (Temyō Hōji 天平宝字 8), p.29.

<sup>14</sup> Emperor Shōtoku 称徳's investment of the monk Dōkyō 道鏡 with the title of Hōō 法王 was the product of a linkage between a powerful will to establish the autonomy of royal authority and the idea of *chinngo kokka* 鎮護国家 (Buddhism as a religion of state protection). Yoshie 2002, pp. 26-30.

<sup>15</sup> Yoshie 2002, p.37.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. The accession addresses of the emperors who appear in *Shoku Nihongi*.

<sup>17</sup> Hayakawa Shōhachi 1993, pp.135-171.

Emperor, starting from Jinmu. Of course, Jinmu's accession is not historical fact. It is reported that in ten emperors from the first to almost the tenth, the blood line was directly passed down from the fathers to their sons. However, as a result of close critical survey of the historical records, we find that those names of emperors are fictional. They were additionally recorded in the Nihon Shoki during its editorial process.<sup>18</sup> Between the 11th and 26th (held to be Keitai 継体) emperors, the Nihon Shoki includes many names of emperors who did not exist in fact.<sup>19</sup>

Yet it has been emphasized repeatedly in the current “Female Tennō debate” that among the 125 imperial reigns up to now, exceptionally there have only been eight female emperors over ten reigns. Even newspapers and other media outlets repeatedly printed “imperial line charts” listing all 125 reigns starting from Jinmu. The charts gave the impression of the “oldness of the imperial system” and the “rarity of female emperors.” The most extreme case of distortion was when some commentators claimed that the Jinmu's DNA has been inherited by the current Tennō through the male bloodline.

There are about 100 emperors between Keitai whose historical existence is verifiable and the current Tennō. Looking at eight out of one hundred emperors certainly does make it look like there were not many female emperors. But focusing on during the just two centuries from the end of the sixth century to the end of the eighth century, there were nine male emperors, thus making the ratio of male to female emperors roughly equal. Moreover, these two centuries were an enormously important and difficult period in Japan's ancient history. At home, the royal court plotted the

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<sup>18</sup> As previously mentioned, the first half of the eighth century when the Nihon Shoki was compiled was a period in which direct succession by the paternal line was being attempted. There is nothing concrete recorded about the emperors from the second through ninth reigns beyond their names and reign dates. Hence, historical researchers of this period have named this period “the eight reigns of missing history.”

<sup>19</sup> Partially reliable facts about the historical emperors begin to appear in the Nihon Shoki from about the fifth century. For a critical survey of historical records for royal lineages and a consideration of what may be concluded from them, see Ōhira 2002.

establishment of hereditary succession to the throne and consolidated its regime, while abroad there were conflicts and wars with the kingdoms of Korea and China. The establishment of a centralized state system modeled after China took place at the beginning of the eighth century, after Japan suffered a great defeat against the allied forces of Korea ( Shilla 新羅 ) and China( Tang 唐 ) in the battle of 663. Later, as stated previously, a process of trial and error continued until the end of the eighth century before stabilization of the regime.

During this important period, the numbers of female and male emperors were roughly the same. This makes it impossible to define the female emperors of the ancient period as temporary “interim rulers.” In the first place, during this period, there were no clear rules of succession in place to form the premise of an “interim ruler” thesis.

Let us look at the accomplishments of the ancient female emperors, focusing on the period up until the establishment of a centralized state regime at the beginning of the eighth century. Most female emperors were princesses in terms of their bloodline and queen consorts 后 before acceding to the throne. During this formative period for hereditary succession to the throne, there was above all a need to enhance the nobility of bloodline, and thus princesses who came from a powerful elite lineage on their mother’s side were prioritized for selection as queen consorts. Some of these women married emperors with whom they were half-siblings on their father’s lineage. Scholars have typically understood female emperors as “wives” who carried on the will of their emperor husbands or as “mothers” who acted as guardians for the child sons. However, this understanding is wrong.

Because emperors at this time had to exercise control over large and powerful elite lineages while at the same time steering a course through a very difficult diplomatic situation abroad, they were required to be elders with a well-trained hand at rule. Looking at the ages of accession to the emperors from the beginning of the sixth to the end of the seventh centuries,

one sees that most of them were at least forty years old.<sup>20</sup> Kinmei 欽明 (the son of Keitai 繼體) described in the *Nihon Shoki* exceptionally acceded to the throne at 31 years old, but he once tried to decline his enthronement, stating that he was too young and inexperienced but the queen consort of the previous emperor was more appropriate because she was politically mature.

As a condition of rulership, Kinmei was, at 31 years old, “too young and inexperienced.” The accession of an older woman, with results of participation in state politics as a princess and queen consort, was by far a more preferable choice than a young male from the ruling lineage (the son of the former king) that satisfied both the conditions of bloodline and her experiences.

Suiko, a daughter of Kinmei, the first recorded female emperor, became the queen consort of her half-brother at the age of eighteen years old. Then, she acceded to the throne in 592 with the support of influential elite lineages at the age of 39.<sup>21</sup> Thereafter, during her long reign of 37 years, she reopened diplomatic relations with China, which had been cut off for many years, and actively introduced Buddhism into Japan, establishing it as a spiritual and political pillar of the country.<sup>22</sup> The emissary mission that she sent to the Chinese dynastic government was an epochal event. It was the first mission since the end of the fifth century, almost 120 years earlier. Japan was still a tributary state to China, but it was not the completely subordinate relationship seen up through the fifth century, in which the Chinese emperor was requested to approve the title of the “King of Wa.” This emissary mission to the Sui 隋 Dynasty has typically not been attributed to the achievements of Suiko, but as having been led her ministers and the crown prince (Suiko’s

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<sup>20</sup> Nitō 2003, pp.6-7.

<sup>21</sup> *Nihon Shoki*, Vol.2, The records of Suiko’s accession, pp.172-173.

<sup>22</sup> Emperor Suiko sent a diplomatic mission to the Sui dynasty in 607, fifteen years after her accession to the throne.

nephew). This, however, has never been demonstrated to be true at all. The basic narrative style of the *Nihon Shoki* is to record that each subject of the sentences are always emperors centered in the main political events. To offer an interpretation of these political events that attributes to male emperors the reign period's accomplishments, but to view those of female emperors as the accomplishments of their male ministers is therefore nothing more than the expression of the researchers' gender bias.

When Suiko died at the age of 75, she suggested in her will who the next emperor should be. This act indicates a subtle transition to a new formula of royal accession. As stated previously, it was usual for influential elite families to confer with each other in choosing the next king.<sup>23</sup> But because Suiko's suggestion in her will was based on a long 37-year record of accomplishment, the powerful elite lineages had no choice but to respect it and, as a result, Suiko's will carried enough weight to overturn the old formula of royal succession.<sup>24</sup> Thereafter, the formula of royal succession based upon the previous ruler's nomination took root and the power dynamic surrounding royal succession between the elite lineages and the king was gradually reversed.

Kōgyoku 皇極 was Jomei 舒明's queen consort. Jomei was Suiko's successor. Kōgyoku acceded to the throne after her husband's death in 642 at the age of 49 and then she abdicated the throne to her younger brother just after the Taika Reform 大化改新,<sup>25</sup> in which several members of Soga lineage 蘇我氏 were assassinated. Until this time, emperors ruled in principle for life-term reigns; this was the first abdication of the throne. The accession of Kōgyoku's younger brother was carried out with her nomination. At that time, there was no sign of the usual recommendation by powerful elite

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<sup>23</sup> Yoshimura 1996.

<sup>24</sup> *Nihon Shoki*, Vol. 2, The records of Jomei's accession, pp.216-223. Yoshie 2005b, p.5.

<sup>25</sup> As a result of the Taika Reform, Soga no Emishi 蘇我蝦夷 and his son, who represented the most powerful force at that time, were destroyed. On the Soga lineage, see footnote 10.

lineages.<sup>26</sup> Kōgyoku was given a title by the powerful elite lineages. It signified that she was the highest-ranking elder woman in the royal lineages.<sup>27</sup> Thus she consequently gained a position to continue to participate in the exercise of royal power.

Suiko left her will as to who her successor ought to be, but ultimately had to leave the interpretation and execution of the will to the powerful elite lineages. Thereafter Kōgyoku took the process one step further by abdicating the throne while she was alive and thus succeeded in consolidating the autonomous selection process of the next emperor by royal authority.

Following the death of her younger brother, Kōgyoku again became the female emperor (Saimei 齊明) and constructed a grand facility for holding state and diplomatic rituals. In recent years, as the excavation of this facility has progressed,<sup>28</sup> researchers are reevaluating Saimei's achievements. This facility had been seen as the "worthless construction project of a foolish female ruler." In 661, the 68-year old Saimei died on an advance base in western Japan<sup>29</sup> while she was leading a 20,000 man military force assigned on hundreds of ships departing for war against the allied forces of Korea (Shilla) and China (Tang). It was the natural responsibility of the king, whether man or woman, to lead their forces at a time of critical military crisis.

Jitō 持統, who ruled at the end of the seventh century, was a daughter of Tenji 天智 and became the queen consort of her uncle, Tenmu 天武. After the death of her husband, she immediately plotted the death of the prince who was slated to succeed the throne<sup>30</sup> and became emperor at the age of 46.

<sup>26</sup> Nihon Shoki Vol. 2, The records of Kotoku's accession, pp.268-71, pp.268-271.

<sup>27</sup> Kōgyoku "abdicated the throne" to her younger brother "bequeathing to him an official seal 璽綬" and receiving the title of Sume Mioya no Mikoto 皇祖母尊 from the "ministers of the court." In this case, Mioya refers to the female chieftain elder of a royal lineage.

<sup>28</sup> The Asuka Ishigami 飛鳥石神 remains are in the southern half of Nara Prefecture.

<sup>29</sup> Nihon Shoki, Vol.2, Articles on the seventh month of 661 (Saimei 齊明 7), pp.350-351.

<sup>30</sup> The rebellion of Ōtsu no Miko 大津皇子, Ōtsu's mother and Jitō are sisters from the same parents. Nihon Shoki Vol.2, Shucho 朱鳥 1 (686), pp. 486-87. Yoshie 2002, pp.33-34.

She issued the first systematic legal corpus, which was premised on the Chinese model, compiled a residence unit register system whole over the state, and constructed a large-scale capital. Even after abdicating the throne to her 15-year-old grandchild in 697, she created the post *Daijyō Tennō* 太上天皇 (retired Emperor), became *Daijyō Tennō* and ruled “in tandem” with her grandchild Monmu.<sup>31</sup> If we place this development in the context of the establishment of royal authority, we can see that the formula of royal succession via-powerful elite lineages’ support was being steadily cast off step by step: Suiko’s “will” suggesting the next emperor, Kōgyoku’s abdication and acquisition of a post-abdication title, Jitō’s abdication and introduction of joint rule based on the *Daijō Tenno* system.

Researchers have typically seen Jitō too as the previous emperor’s consort = “wife,” who acceded to the throne in “interim” fashion as a “mother” passing on the throne to the child of her bloodline. Even the numerous accomplishments referred to above have tended to be attributed to the efforts of the ministers of Jitō. But according to Monmu’s accession declaration, Jitō is praised as a great ruler who has received the mandate of the gods sitting above in heaven; there are absolutely no references to her being the previous emperor’s “wife” or the “mother” of the successor to the throne. On the other hand, the legitimacy of her grandchild Monmu’s accession was based solely on the fact that his grandmother with a great record of accomplishments as ruler gave him the throne.<sup>32</sup> The accession of a young fifteen year-old emperor would have been impossible in the sixth and seventh centuries, but became possible for the first time at the end of the seventh century with the consolidation of state structure and the guardianship of his grandmother Jitō.

<sup>31</sup> Shoku Nihongi, Vol. 1, Seventh month of Keiun 慶雲 4 (707), the accession rites of Emperor Genmei 元明, pp. 118-121.

<sup>32</sup> Shoku Nihongi, Vol. 1, Eighth month of Monmu 文武 1 (697), the accession rites of Emperor Monmu, the content of the accession rites is from; pp.2-5. Kōnoshi 1997, pp.290-296. Yoshie 2005, pp.6-7.

Seen in this way, the actions taken by these female rulers are of the same quality of the male emperors of this period and there is thus no gender-based difference between them. A close analysis of the historical record demonstrates this clearly.

However, conventional research has neglected to see the point that female and male rulers were fundamentally homogeneous. Furthermore, the “female emperors argument” has been analyzed by focusing on their accession and actions based on the idea that they are primarily “wives” and “mothers.”<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, the history of ancient female emperors ended in the latter half of the eighth century. Even thereafter, there was a chance to choose a female emperor at the end of the twelfth century,<sup>34</sup> but this was not realized. And, as I stated in the beginning, there were two female emperors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the ancient period is the only situation in which Japan had an almost equal ratio of female to male emperors.

In the next section, I will reveal the historical background that produced female emperors from its gender structure in the ancient period and trace on how it changed during the eighth century.

## 2 Gender in the Ancient Society of Japan

In this section, I will raise the three points of ; 1)the foundation of kinship-principle and estate inheritance, 2) the marriage system and the palace management, 3) the broad-based existence of female chieftains, as

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<sup>33</sup> Araki Toshio has severely criticized this point, writing that conventional research “has neglected to investigate the female emperors in terms of their existence as great kings or emperors positioned at the innermost center of political power ” (Araki 1999, p.51.).

<sup>34</sup> Hachijōin-shōshi 八条院暲子, the daughter of Emperor Toba 鳥羽 . Araki 1999, pp.243-247.

elements of the gender structure underlying the emergence of female emperors.

First, like Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, Japan was a bilateral society in terms of the basic kinship-principle.<sup>35</sup> In such a society, both the patrilineal and matrilineal connections carry roughly the same importance. Generally speaking, there was little difference in the economic power between men and women, and male-dominated tendency wasn't seen in their society in terms of social positions. People potentially kept their right to affiliate with either their patrilineage or matrilineage, and they settled themselves in one lineage according to political and economic circumstances. This kinship-principle is reflected in the fact that many bilateral blood records tracing back three or four generations were produced until the end of the seventh century.<sup>36</sup>

Until the end of the seventh century, it was not uncommon for a royal or powerful elite lineages to affiliate itself with its matrilineage and adopt its *ujina* 氏名 (title of the lineage), or even to succeed to the maternal line's leadership.<sup>37</sup> It indicates that ancient Japan was not a patrilineal society in which political power was passed from fathers to sons. At the end of the seventh century, the patrilineal principle, which took China as its model,<sup>38 39</sup> was introduced and the principle that "children belong to their fathers 子は父に配せ" was legally established. But the bilateral principle potentially remained. Even when the principle of patrilineal succession was officially

<sup>35</sup> Yoshida 1983. Yoshie 1986. Akashi 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Yoshie 2000.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the chieftain of the Mononobe 物部, the great powerful lineage of the sixth century, simultaneously succeeded the maternal Yugei 弓削 line and combined the names of the paternal and maternal lines into Mononobe no Yugei 物部弓削. Yoshie 2000, pp. 74-76.

<sup>38</sup> On the principle of paternal lineage in the *ritsuryō* code, see Sekiguchi Hiroko 2003, pp.30-34.

<sup>39</sup> "The law of men and women 男女の法." The *Nihon Shoki* records the establishment of this law in the articles of the eighth month of 645 (First year of Taika 大化), but presumably it was proclaimed in the end of seventh century. Sekiguchi Hiroko 1973, pp.11-13.

established affected by the Ritsuryō system at the beginning of the eighth century, there was an example that sons inherited the title of matrilineage and its authority from their mother, who was a high-ranking court lady. Thus, their mother's status helped her sons to found a new powerful lineage.<sup>40</sup>

Because property was divided among male and female children from both the patrilineage and matrilineage, women from royal and elite lineages possessed estates such as residences, manors, and bound servants. This fact together with the marriage system, to be discussed in the next section, made up the foundation of the high political status of women belonging to the ruling stratum and queen consorts' own authority.

The marriage system in ancient Japan was uxorilocal consisting only of nighttime visits lasting over a long period. The wife's family provided the space of married life. When the children were born, they were raised in the mother's family.<sup>41</sup> These marriage practices were common from the general populace to the royal and elite families. The economic power of the women of powerful elites and royal lineages had its basis in their membership in their own lineages and were not dependent on their husbands. These women inherited the residence from their lineages, which became the headquarters for managing family affairs, where they greeted their male marriage partners and resided while they raised their children. They led separate economic lives from their husbands, and bequeathed all of their property to their own children, including their residences and the fields, bound servants and rice grain and subordinates who engaged in the management as well.<sup>42</sup>

These women did not merely manage the private affairs of their family estates. Whether married or unmarried, women from powerful elites and royal lineages served as court ladies in the royal residential palace. They

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<sup>40</sup> The Tachibana 橘 was created after the accomplishments of Tachibana Michiyo 橘三千代. On Tachibana Michiyo, see Yoshie 1986, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> On the matrimonial forms of ancient Japan, see Takamura 1966, a,b, and Sekiguchi Hiroko 1993.

<sup>42</sup> Yoshie 2005a, pp.442-445.

communicated the emperors' words to his or her ministers, announced the memorials to the emperors from these ministers. Moreover, they oversaw the passers at the palace gate, and acted as emissaries in important affairs. Until the beginning of the ninth century, the political function of these court ladies was enormous.<sup>43</sup> The Emperor Shomu 聖武's remark in the mid-eighth century, "it would be reasonable not only for men , but both men and women to serve the imperial court 男のみ父の名負いて女はいわれぬ物にあれや、立ち及び仕え奉るし理にあり,"<sup>44</sup> bespeaks how the Chinese bureaucratic principle of excluding women from public spaces did not easily take root in Japan.<sup>45</sup> Analysis of the records on emperor's trip from the eighth to the early ninth centuries makes clear that married upper-ranking court ladies were not viewed as the wives of high-ranking men, but as the lords of their own residences. They greeted, entertained the emperors and received the rewards there.<sup>46</sup>

The emperors and empress consorts or other consorts had the similar practices as married couples who lived separately and managed their affairs individually. However, both historical records and archaeological findings confirm that it was around the end of the eighth century that empress consort and other consorts began to live in the same palace with the emperor.<sup>47</sup> Earlier than that time, when women from powerful elites or royal lineages became consorts, the residence they inherited and lived in became a "consort's palace キサキの宮" and turned into an institution as one of the

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<sup>43</sup> For an overview of the ladies of the court, see Nomura 1978. Ijūin 2013 (She placed the court ladies as female bureaucrats.)

<sup>44</sup> Shoku Nihongi, Tenpyōshōhō 天平勝宝 1 (749), Article in the first day of April.

<sup>45</sup> Yoshie 1986, p.11.

<sup>46</sup> Ijūin 2008, pp.21-25.

<sup>47</sup> On the palace of consorts of the seventh century and their separate organization from the palace of the great king (ōkimi) see Misaki 1997. On the confirmation through archaeological investigation of the fact that empresses and emperor consorts did not have living spaces in the Heijō palace 平城宮, see Hashimoto 1995, Chapter One. On the changes in the position and political power of the emperor's consorts, see Yoshie 2005a, pp. 465-470.

functions under the royal authority. Their children, the princes and princesses, grew up in their mother's palace and solidified their bond in their mother's group. The children inherited the palace which would be used as the important base for political and economic activities. They enjoyed powerful support from their matrilineage and set about competing for the title of emperor.

In this political environment seen in the practices of matrimony and property inheritance, when princesses whose mothers came from powerful elite lineages became queen consorts they were considered formidable candidates to succeed to the throne by virtue of their bloodline, political and economic power, their connections from managing and ruling experiences as a queen consort in the consort palace.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that female rulers were widespread over the Japanese archipelago as the historical precondition for the emergence of female emperors. In the third century, there was a queen named Himiko 卑弥呼 who, as the ruler of a federation of over thirty chiefdoms (chiefdom here refers to a small region ruled over by a chieftain), developed diplomatic relations with China.<sup>48</sup> Her lineal connection to the later imperial family is unclear. There were a considerable number of female chieftains, including the supreme rulers over their areas, buried in the kofun tombs (tumuli) of the fourth and fifth centuries. From the buried artifacts, it is supposed that these women wielded both diplomatic power and military control; even after the sixth century, women chieftains continued to rule at local and regional levels.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Himiko's name and accomplishments are recorded in contemporary Chinese chronicle. On Himiko the female monarch of the third century, see Piggott 1997, pp.24-24 and Yoshie 2005c, pp.63-109.

<sup>49</sup> According to research analyzing the gender of the human bones buried in the kofun tombs, the ratio of male to female chiefs was roughly equal until the middle of the fifth century. Imai 1997, pp. 131-147.

There are many old local traditions in the provincial records compiled under the command of the imperial court. The records proved that numerous male and female chieftains appeared before the seventh century.<sup>50</sup> There are many stories about female chieftains who took up arms to resist the control of centralized power. In the first half of the eighth century, an ancient chronicle record offered an example that there were female chieftains amongst the southern Kyūshū 九州 forces that stubbornly fought against the central government.<sup>51</sup> Despite the description in the records that women leaders “brandished weapons to threaten the mission of the court,” most current researchers still, without any reason, view these women “as priestess leaders” who “ruled through religious authority.” Even in representative commentaries, men are “chieftains” and women are annotated separately as “chieftain daughters.”<sup>52</sup> It can be said that this tendency is shot through with the gender bias seen in the “ancient female emperors argument,” which sees women rulers as an exceptional case wielding special abilities (the religious power of priestesses).

When we remove this gender bias, it becomes clear that female leaders were widely existed ranged from small regional chieftains to great rulers. The female emperors who appear in the records of the late sixth century or later ought to be considered as the top figures among female chieftains. As previously discussed, even she is a female emperor, Saimei 齊明’s military expedition at the end of the seventh century may be seen within this context without the slightest inconsistency.

But the Chinese state system, which was introduced into Japan at the end of the seventh century as the model of ancient state formation, put in place ideologies of male superiority and thoroughly excluded women from public spaces, ranging from the legal system, to the bureaucracy and

<sup>50</sup> These are stories from the Fudoki 風土記.

<sup>51</sup> Shoku Nihongi, Vol. 1, The six month of Monmu 文武 4 (700), the third day, pp.28-29.

<sup>52</sup> Yoshie 2005, pp.58-59. Shoku Nihongi, Vol. 2, p.428, n. 18.

rulership over the common people. This system was very different from Japanese practices and customs and was thus not accepted easily, but gradually promoted social change during the transitional period of the eighth century.<sup>53</sup> By the beginning of the ninth century, a clear trend emerged toward the spread of the principle of patrilineal succession amongst the ruling classes, the decline in the political role of women from aristocratic and powerful elite lineages in the imperial palace. It was also the beginning of the strong matrimonial unit between husband and wife. At the same time wives began to depend on their husband's economy. As discussed previously, empress consorts began to move to the imperial palace at the end of the eighth century, this absorption into the palace (which meant losing her independent palace) is a symbolic example. The end of ancient female emperors must be understood within the context of a big change occurring in Japan's gender structure.

### **3 The Shift in the Image of Female Rulers during Modernity and Masculinity**

For intellectuals of the pre-modern period, it was assumed as a matter of course that the ancient female emperors were rulers of the same type as men and exercised military operations. During the first half of the thirteenth century, a famous monk, who wrote the first systematic Japanese history in private, commented the military expedition led by the legendary queen consort and her later rule noted in the *Nihon Shoki*. He remarked that she became the ruler due to her prominent ability without distinction between men and women.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in the eighteenth century, a well-known Confucian scholar argued in connection to the same legends and Saimei 齊明's accomplishments in the seventh century that "even though the ruler was

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<sup>53</sup> Yoshida 1983, pp.123-197.

<sup>54</sup> Jien 慈円, "Gukanshō 愚管抄", pp.130-131.

a queen, leading military expedition was the sovereign's duty."<sup>55</sup> During the Edo period, the male superiority in Confucian notions had permeated down through the common people, but this view of gender did not apply to the image of past sovereigns.

This situation was rapidly transformed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, because on the occasion of the beginning of a modern state based upon constitutional monarchy, the Constitution explicitly stipulated for the sovereignty by Emperor; through “unbroken imperial line 万世一系” and succession of male descendants of the male line. The “unbroken imperial line” was the argument that the imperial throne had been succeeded by a single bloodline since the first reign of Jinmu 神武. For the Meiji government, which was established after overturning the Bakufu regime, “the unbroken imperial line” was the only basis to legitimate the emperor's rule. In order to construct a strong country on par with the powers of Europe and America involving samurai ( warrior ) class, who embodied masculinity, the monarch had to be male at all costs.

Hence, the government was confronted with the need to present an “interpretation” of the irrefutable past existence of female emperors that matched their newly established norms. In the process of debating the establishment of the Constitution and Imperial Household Law 皇室典範 that excluded female emperors, the formal opinion was presented that “the unbroken imperial line” “succeeded by male descendants of the male line 男系男子繼承” was a “tradition” unchanged since ancient times. And that all past female emperors were “interim rulers” temporarily appointed under special circumstances.<sup>56</sup> As I have made clear in this essay, this position is at variance with historical fact. “The unbroken imperial line” and “succession by males of the male line” are both nothing other than newly created “traditions” as intellectual supports for an enormous monarchical authority with a stable

<sup>55</sup> Arai Hakuseki 新井白石, “Tokushi Yoron 読史余論,” Vol. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Miyazawa 1940. Kobayashi 1992, pp.381-87. Hayakawa Noriyo 1998, pp.123-128.

line of succession. United with “invention of tradition,” “interim rule” thesis; female emperors were ad hoc, was also created as historical fact. Current “interim rule” thesis occupied as common thesis in the “ancient female emperors argument” started from this. What is necessary today is not to end discussion just by studying on how strong or weak the individual female emperors were, or whether or not their “interim”-ness was existed, but to question the notion of the “interim ruler” thesis based on this modern political history and the historiography of the “female emperor argument” that is bound up with it.<sup>57</sup>

The “priestess” thesis is another commonly accepted position of “the ancient female emperor argument.” This is the position that, whereas male rulers held real military and political power, female rulers were priestesses who played only a religious function. This “priestess” thesis is also an interpretation produced from modern reality. When we trace the development of the “priestess” thesis, it is plainly visible that the modern construction of masculinity is inextricably bound up with the “ancient female emperor argument.” The concrete details of this process are as follows.

During the 1910s, the memory of female emperors to the Edo period had faded away and the presence of male emperor took root for the general populace. Then, several well-known scholars first proposed the thesis that the ancient female rulers were “religious ones who were secluded deep inside the palace to divine the will of the gods.”<sup>58</sup> In the research published before that time, ancient female rulers were described as “courageous and bewitched their people’s heart.” But in the 1910s, somehow these women were considered “not courageous monarchs who engaged in military and political affairs but religious rulers who served the gods.” Thus previous interpretations were directly rejected and their character as priestesses

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<sup>57</sup> Yoshie 2012. pp.6-9.

<sup>58</sup> Shiratori Kurakichi 白鳥庫吉 “Wa Joō Himiko Kō 倭女王卑弥呼考” and Naitō Torajirō 内藤虎次郎, “Himiko Kō 卑弥呼考.” Both essays are included in Saeki 1981.

appeared to our front. The 1910s were a period in which the Emperor as the supreme commander 大元帥 to lead Japanese military came to occupy a place in the Japanese people's heart after the victories of the Sino- and Russo-Japanese Wars 日清・日露戦争. By contrast with the Meiji Emperor as the head of Japan's military, the ancient female rulers as priestesses were historically reinterpreted.<sup>59</sup>

The modern Japanese state denied women's rights, for example to participate in politics and to enroll in the national universities or to work as civil servants, although there are some exceptions. Until the end of the Edo period, court ladies and the female servants of the Shōgun's family held the important role like relaying political messages. However, during the Meiji period, the political role of the court ladies and female servants was entirely excluded. The gendered definition of "politics as men's work" had been firmly constructed.<sup>60</sup> Looking back at the ancient period from the premise of this modern definition of gender, the ancient emperors need some special explanation in the different aspect from the one for the male emperors. The answer to the question, "Why were there so many female emperors? Women are not supposed be emperors in the ancient period," was exactly the "interim ruler" and "priestess" thesis.

It was the ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 who later completed the "priestess" thesis with works that are still evaluated positively today. He consistently argues that the essence of the Japanese female emperor was that of a priestess, but I think that the core of his argument changes subtly in 1945, after Japan's defeat in World War II.

After the Meiji Restoration, the Emperor was on the one hand the living Japanese military leader, but on the other, he strengthened his sacred character as a manifest divinity 現人神, and the nation's spiritual unity was plotted accordingly. In 1928, the Shōwa Emperor's accession ceremony

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<sup>59</sup> Yoshie 2005, pp. 191-199.

<sup>60</sup> Sekiguchi Sumiko 2005, pp. 207-214. Nagano 2009, pp.89-95 2005.

presented a complete performance in which the emperor gained his sacred character as a manifest divinity.<sup>61</sup> Orikuchi published the first of his “priestess” thesis in 1927, when the country was a buzz with preparations for the accession ceremony. Orikuchi explained in his essay that at the ancient accession ceremonies, a high-ranking priestess who served the emperor as “the god’s bride,” became a queen consort and then a female emperor.<sup>62</sup> In other words, priestess here means the Emperor’s “bride” (wife) = the Manifest Divinity’s “bride” (wife).

But with Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945, the emperor was forced to change the status from an absolute ruler. In the New Year’s Rescript of 1946, he denied that he was a manifest divinity. This is the so-called “declaration of humanity 人間宣言.” In response, Orikuchi published in the following year of 1947 several essays one after another, arguing that the conventional view of the Emperor as a manifest divinity had been in error. In fact, however, prior to these essays, Orikuchi had already published his second work on the “priestess” thesis in June, 1946. The essence of the emperor’s consort was to “communicate the words of the gods to the human emperor” and it was this emperor’s consort who became female emperor. Thus, the former “emperor as divinity” thesis and the “emperor’s consort as wife of god” thesis are denied as having been illusions.<sup>63</sup>

By comparing both essays, we can see that the relationships among the priestess (emperor’s consort), the gods, and the emperor, shifts greatly before and after the emperor’s “human declaration” in 1946. In 1927, the “god” referred to in discussions of the emperor’s consort as the “wife of god” meant the manifest divinity of the emperor. But in the work from 1946, when used in the context of “the highest-ranking emperor’s consort was a priestess tasked with the supreme job of relaying messages from the gods to the

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<sup>61</sup> Okada 1992, pp.145-149.

<sup>62</sup> Orikuchi 1955a, pp.100-102.

<sup>63</sup> Orikuchi 1955b, pp.11-17.

emperor,” “god” did not mean emperor. The emperor was merely a human who lent his ear to the gods. It has been pointed out that the understanding of the emperor in Orikuchi’s thesis changed in 1946,<sup>64</sup> but not one has paid attention to the fact that this change is inextricably bound up with changes in his “priestess” thesis.

Despite the fact that this 1946’s new thesis is inextricably bound up with the theory of the emperor as a non-ruler 天皇不親政論<sup>65</sup> proposed in response to the symbolic emperor system 象徴天皇制 under the new Constitution, without any awareness of the change, it continues to this day to be considered a persuasive thesis concerning the “ancient female emperors argument” and continues to occupy an unshakable position in the academic world.<sup>66</sup> The course traced by Orikuchi’s “priestess” thesis suggestively demonstrates the effect of gender construction in the “ancient female emperors argument”. The “priestesses” thesis is actually not an academic argument that considers historiographically what the “ancient female emperors” and “priestesses” were. This thesis formed the relationship of woman (priestess) to man (god). Therefore, changes to the definition of “man” (god) required that changes be made to the definition of “woman” (priestess). And by redefining the definition of “woman”, the change is established in the relationship of “man” and “god.”<sup>67</sup> Despite this change, the theme of “men were the ones who ruled, women were not true rulers” was not displaced at all.

## Conclusion

Historical research on ancient Japanese women’s history, which began

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<sup>64</sup> Mure 1990, pp.261-262.

<sup>65</sup> Hora 1959, 119-143.

<sup>66</sup> Yoshie 2010, pp. 34-37.

<sup>67</sup> Yoshie 2005b, pp.8-9.

in the 1930s as studies of family and marriage history, is now advancing across various academic fields, including those of religion and culture. As a result, it has become clear that in noble and powerful elite lineages and even village rulers, women and men both held property owning and management rights and exercised political authority. In addition, female emperors were a part of that context, not exceptions, and that patrilineal succession had not been established. The doubts about the prevailing thesis of the “female emperor argument” in much of recent research have been produced from the studies of women’s history.

But in spite of these valuable findings, we must acknowledge that within the studies of women’s history themselves, there has been a “vulnerability” towards arguing for the essential superiority of women based on their “maternal”-ity or “divin”-ity. In the first studies of women’s history starting with Takamure Itsue 高群逸枝,<sup>68</sup> the influence of maternalism 母性主義 was richly present.

Takamure revealed that patrilineal succession had not been established during the ancient period, but also had a strong tendency to exalt “maternal power.” This led to an understanding that the role of ancient female emperors was as “mothers” and thus was unable to directly overcome the “interim ruler” thesis. Moreover, the comparison of male secular authority and female “sacredness 聖性” to argue that the latter was essentially and spiritually superior is,<sup>69</sup> when observed objectively, a discourse that

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<sup>68</sup> As an independent researcher unaffiliated with any specialized research institution, Takamure Itsue (1894-1964) wrote great works such as “Studies of matrilineage system 母系制の研究” (1938), “Studies of Adopted Son-in-Law Type of Marriage 招婿婚の研究” (1953), and “Women’s History 女性の歴史” (1954) and is considered to be the pioneer of Japanese women’s history. She argued that ancient matrilineage system 母系制 and advocated a women’s liberation that privileged maternity.

<sup>69</sup> The theory of women’s essential “sacredness” was strongly argued in Japanese folk studies 日本民俗学, the pioneer of which is considered to be Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男, and which had a big influence on historiography. Up to the present day, research that attempts to explain the importance of women during the ancient and medieval periods simply in terms of their “sacredness” without subjecting this perception to careful

obfuscates the contemporary reality of the strength of male-dominated society. But the stronger the reality of male domination is, the more enchanting the temptation is for researchers of women's history to argue the "ancient fantasy 古代幻想" that in the past women had power as "sacred" entities.<sup>70</sup> The explanation as to why the "female emperor = priestess thesis" continues to be an influential argument lies here.

We can only overcome this essentialism and advance women's historical research by clearly recognizing the effects of constructing gender through the interpretation of history.

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scrutiny continues uninterrupted. From this point of view, even the view of women advanced by the great medieval historian Amino Yoshihiko 網野善彦 needs to be rigorously critiqued. Yoshie 2004, 126-130. Nagano 2010, 104-105.

<sup>70</sup> Kuratsuka Akiko 倉塚暁子, the great feminist women's historian of the 1980s, attempted to discover in the marginalization of female "sacred" power by male "secular" power the "world-historical defeat of women." For a critical examination of feminism and the sacred-secular binary 聖俗二元論, see Yoshie, 2010.

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