

The transformation of ancient Japan's Grand Council of State  
during the Fujiwara Regency era as seen  
through its administrative bureau

by HAYASHI Yurie

One major development in document administration in ancient Japan was the transition in the governmental affairs system relying on the oral presentation of edicts and petitions to their issuance and submission in writing. The present article presents the findings of the author's investigation of this transition (development) process as reflected in the changes which occurred in the role played by the Benkan-kyoku 弁官局, the administrative arm of the Grand Council of State (Daijokan 太政官).

Originally, one of the routines in the Daijokan's daily schedule was the submission of administrative proposals from the Benkan to the Council's policy deliberation arm, the Giseikan 議政官; however, with the appearance during the Heian period Encho and Johei eras (923-935) of the documentary instrument known as *jin-no-moshibumi* 陣申文, issued drafted close by the emperors in the confines of the Imperial Palace, the Benkan's daily routine and the documents it compiled for presented (*katanebumi* 結文) to the Council became isolated from the political process. Consequently, the document administrators operating in the Hall of State became limited to the heads of the Benkan (*daiben* 大弁) as compilers of *katanebumi*, and thus became merely representatives of the Bureau itself, no longer involved in the administrative affairs of all the bureaus and provinces under the Council's jurisdiction. Furthermore, the appearance of *jin-no-moshibumi*, by departing from the custom of orally presenting policy proposals, put into effect a system of governance based solely on written documents.

As the Benkan became isolated from the Council (in the narrowest sense), the document administrative duties of the Bureau's officials were taken over by

officials, such as shonagon 少納言 and geki 外記, who were involved in drafting written edicts and documents. Overall, since even the Council's scribes were not involved in the flow of *jin-no-moshibumi*, the Benkan became obsolete in how documents were presented to the Council of State. These changes were reflected in the vagaries of the document, Daijokan-So, the vehicle by which the policy proposals of the Council's Giseikan were submitted via shonagon and geki scribes to the emperors (and their regents). Now, the process of submittal was conducted through the Giseikan and the Benkan. Through its involvement in the Daijokan-So submittal process, the Benkan thus avoided losing all contact with document administration duties.

The author concludes that since the isolation experienced by the Benkan was rooted in the method of determining bureaucratic functions directly and concretely, as exemplified by governance based on oral pronouncements, as soon as that particular style was abandoned, the Benkan's alienation from the political process came to an end. The fact that such a change of style accompanied the developments taking place in document administration procedures, was not due solely to the increased reliance on written forms, but also reflected changes in the Council of State's agenda and the abandonment of traditional, unrefined elements lingering in the Ritsuryo Codes. In this sense, the developments that occurred during the early 10th century in ancient Japan's document administration required radical reform of both governance procedures and culture.