

The process of imperial succession at the turn of the 19th century and Emperor Kokaku

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This article examines the political attitudes of Emperor Kokaku (r. 1779-1817) and their consequences during Japan's Edo period Kansei and Bunka eras, by analyzing the process of the succession of Kokaku's son Prince Ayahito as Emperor Ninko (r. 1817-1846) and the response to problems that arose over Kokaku's Empress Chugu-Yoshiko and their princes.

Chugu-Yoshiko was the daughter of retired Emperor Gomomozono (r. 1770-1779), and was thus destined to be Kokaku's consort. During the Kansei era (1789-1801), both Yoshiko and her brother Prince Masuhito held important positions at the Imperial Court with regard to the succession of the next emperor. However, due to the death of Masuhito, Prince Ayahito, who was borne by Kajuji-Tadako, Kokaku's concubine, became the crown prince and was thus treated by the emperor as Yoshiko's son and ordered to be raised in the empress' Chugu-Goten Palace. However, the Empress spurned the Crown Prince and refused to raise him at Chugu-Goten.

Then from the 8th year of the Bunka era (1811), Emperor Kokaku began indicating an intention to abdicate the throne, which was frustrated by dissension that arose between the Crown Prince's "mothers", Chugu-Yoshiko and Kajuji Tadako. Despite retired Emperor Gosakuramachi's mediation to settle this strife, the Emperor remained reticent about expressing his intention to the Tokugawa Shogunate until the 10th year of Bunka (1813).

Despite the birth of Prince Atenomiya by Chugu-Yoshiko, the abdication and preparations for enthronement were not postponed,

resulting in the accession of the Crown Prince as Emperor Ninko. Only later, during the Bunsei era, would Ninko and retired Emperor Kokaku plan the designation of Prince Atenomiya as the legitimate heir to the throne.

The sudden death of Prince Atenomiya put an end to such plans, combined with the continuing deaths of other princes and Ninko's official consort, presenting difficulties for succession to the next generation. Considering the situation to have been caused by a lack of legitimate princes, Kokaku decided to summon concubines from the Takatsukasa Family, which had close kinship ties with the Kan'in-no-Miya Family, from which Kokaku himself had been adopted by Emperor Gomomozono. The idea was to reinforce the imperial lineage by means of the Kan'in-no-Miya Family pedigree.

The author concludes that the political attitudes of Emperor Kokaku and their aftermath during the Kansei and Bunka eras may be summarized in the following three points. First, for the Emperor, the issue of how to reinforce his princes' status and authority vis-a-vis their legitimacy to the throne after the Kansei era was a determining factor in the operations of the imperial court. Secondly, the dissention between Chugu-Yoshiko and Kajuji-Tadako during the mid-Bunka era relating to Prince Ayahito's succession to the throne, which caused a delay in Kokaku's intention to abdicate, shows the significant influence of imperial family women in actual Court politics prior to the accession of Emperor Gomomozono. Finally, throughout the Bunka era, the Court relied on the Kyoto Imperial Palace construction building policy, financed by the Shogunate, as a means to deal with conflicts and difficulties over succession to the throne and as an opportunity to renew the cooperative relationship between the Court and the Shogunate.