

Differences and reasons of Japanese female official systems between Nara and Heian period

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Abstract: As a political role, female officials played an important role in the political process of ancient Japan. The system of female officials in Japan was established in Nara period and lasted until to Edo period. Female officials were important in the overall political operation of the country. In the Heian period, Female official system showed new directions of development. There are some differences between Nara and Heian period. As for the term “female official”, it appeared at the end of Nara period or the beginning of Heian period. They were also called "court women" in the early historical materials. With regard to the differences and reasons of female official systems in Nara and Heian period, this paper attempts to discuss this question from social history, female history, marriage history and so on. Through the analysis of the historical data, this paper believes that the changes of female official system in political activities between Nara and Heian period may be related to the changes of marriage, family and social structure behind them.

1. Introduction

Since Taika Reform in 645, Japan has carried out many reforms successively, gradually breaking away from the original social structure and moving towards a centralized state system. Women have always played an important role in the local production and domination in ancient Japan. The system of Japanese female officials was established in Nara period. The main institution of female officials is called Kokyu Junishi (twelve offices belonging to imperial palace), which based on the system of female officials of Tang Dynasty. In order to understand the changes and reasons of female official system, we should not only analyze the system itself, but also from the systems of family, marriage, and social background of female officials, so as to look at the female official system in Nara and Heian period from a broader perspective.

2. The system of female officials in Nara period

As for the early systems of marriage, family and society in ancient Japan, according to previous studies, the stable marriage relationship, family and patriarchal society may have not been fully established in Nara period. In terms of marriage system, it was a kind of relatively loose marriage relationship at that time. According to the study of Akiko Yoshie, it was not until the Heian period that families as private business units sprouted in the aristocratic class [1]. That is to say, the family system may not be mature when the female official system was established. In terms of social structure, it is now believed that Japan was a dual-system society in ancient times, not a patriarchal society. Even though the Ritsuryo system had been established, the society at that time still have some traces of clan and headman systems. These backgrounds are important in discussing the establishment of the system of female officials. When we discuss the system of female officials in ancient Japan, we should not only look at the system itself, but also pay attention to the transformation of marriage, family and social structure behind female officials.

In the early days of ancient Japan, the government maintained its rule by coordinating the forces of local powerful families. According to Yoko Ijuin's research, the main sources of female officials were Uneme and Ujime, Uneme were provided by the local powerful families. *Nihon-shoki* (the oldest chronicles of Japan) records: " Uneme will be selected from local officials' (above assistant

director) sisters or daughters with good appearance” [2]. According to *Taiho code*, one third of the prefectures in a province provide Uneme, who will be selected from the directors or assistant directors’ sisters or daughters, from 13 to 30. And Ujime originated from the central powerful families, they were also from 13 to 30. The systems of Uneme and Ujime lasted until the Heian period, while limited the source of female officials, who could only come from the nobles and powerful families.

In the early days of Japan, female leaders were prevalent in local areas. According to Akiko Yoshie’s research, many female leaders dominated local production, labor, sacrifice, etc. They played an important role in the local areas before the founding of ancient Japan as a country. From the names of female officials in Nara period, we can find some traces of the past. The word "Toji" can be often seen in the names of female officials in the periods of Tenpyo, Hoki (770-781) and Kanmu (781-806), such as Akumo Toji, Kamitsukeno no Sai no Asomi no Ootoji, Musashi no Sukune Ietaji (Uneme from Adachi prefecture of Musashi province), Oohachioka no Imiki no Hamatoji (wet nurse of imperial prince Kami), Osadanohimatsuri no Atai no Isaotoji (Uneme from Unakami prefecture of Shimousa province) [3]. Toji, is a kind of honorific title for the women from local powerful clans in ancient times. According to the study of Akiko Yoshie, Toji played an important role in local society by carrying out farming, rice scooping, wine making, clothing production, weaving and other activities, some of them were in charge of local affairs and agricultural work, and before the 7th century, the belief regarding Toji as god gradually formed. Female leaders are closely integrated with the production and spiritual activities of local society in ancient times. The word Toji appeared in the names of female officials may indicate that part of the female leaders from local society became female officials, concubines, wet nurses and so on after the establishment of the Ritsuryo system, and continued to serve the emperor in the palace.

As for the characteristics of female officials in Nara period, we can sum up a few points, such as political independence, obvious official qualities and so on. In Nara period, there were many examples of female officials’ continuing promotion after their husbands’ deaths, which shows that female officials had relatively independent political status, and did not entirely rely on men. For example, in Nara period, Fujiwara no Momoyoshi continued to rise after her husband Fujiwara no Toyonari died, and finally she rose to the junior second rank, which means couples did not have much influence on each other’s career. Female officials in Nara period were often given higher ranks, which shows affirmation of their work and their official qualities like men.

According to prior research, there are other factors such as family background could also influence female officials’ promotions. The systems of internal and external rank in 728 were based on female officials’ hereditary titles. Many female officials belonging to the clans of internal rank (the families with hereditary titles such as Fujiwara no Ason, Ki no Asomi, Tajihi no Mahito, etc) were promoted faster than those belonging to the clans of external rank (the families with hereditary titles such as Imiki, Atai, etc). As for the relationship between men and women, officials’ wives entered the palace as female officials, may also influence men’s promotions. According to prior research, Kadoi no Hironari and his wife Agata no Inukai no Yae can be seen as an example, because of the close relationship between female official and the emperor, the couple were given higher ranks when the emperor visited them in 748. That is to say, men and women were in cooperative relationships. The nobles actively sent women to the palace may be related to their political status and interests, they could approach the emperor through female officials.

Generally speaking, female officials in Nara period were active in the palace. As for the reasons, it may be related to the family system, economic independence and marital status of female officials. In Nara period, some of female officials had economic strength, women’s roles in local society since ancient times may be remained to some extent, and they were not very influenced by men in marriage. Family system may not be perfect, so they served the emperor like men. After entering Heian period, the social transformations began. The so-called community society, chieftain society and clan society established in the early days of Japan changed greatly after the establishment of the Ritsuryo system. From Nara to Heian period, it is also a period of transformation of social structure.

3. Female official system in Heian period

The maturity of ancient Japan's court system was roughly at the end of Nara period. After entering the Heian period, the Japanese female official system has shown some new features. The main characteristics of female officials in Heian period may be the enhancement of male influence, deterioration of female official system and so on, the system of female officials gradually changed.

According to the prior research, in Nara period, female officials with high ranks were mostly promoted step by step from the low-level female officials such as Uneme and Ujime [4]. The promotion of ranks represented the efforts of their work. In Heian period, noble women no longer needed to get ranks through their own work. As spouses of senior officials, they could also be given ranks. The ranks couldn't represent the evaluation of their own work, the officials' couples cooperated with each other in the court disappeared, and the phenomena that women were awarded ranks as wives of senior officials increased. Yukiko Nishino believes that the palace dominated by concubines or their families during the Heian period was different from the "sacred space" of the past, relatives of the concubines entered and dominated the palace, and the range of activities of female officials promoted from Uneme narrowed, and from the end of the eighth century to the ninth century, great changes took place in the bureaucratic aristocracy, and most of the clans that had been dominant have declined [5]. In a word, in the Heian period, Japan's social structure and the roles of men and women in politics have changed tremendously, the imperial harem and the bureaucracy also changed.

In the period of emperor Heijo, the government reformed the system of female officials. In 806, it was stipulated that the age of Ujime should be changed to 30- 40, with no spouse, Yoko Ijuin believed that this reform is essentially the abolition of the system of Ujime, in 807, it was stipulated that Uneme sent from local areas should be stopped, in November, only the old and meritorious Uneme in the palace were left, Uneme above the fifth rank or those with positions were removed the title of Uneme, in 808, Uneme no tsukasa (Uneme's office) was abolished and Uneme became to belong to Nuidonoryo, the method of providing Uneme was also changed from prefecture tribute system to province appointment system [6]. The original function of Uneme was to connect the local and central areas. These changes can be understood as the strengthening and maturity of centralization. It is precisely because of the maturity of the centralized state system that Uneme and Ujime were no longer needed to maintain the unity between the central and local governments. The system of Kokyu Junishi (twelve offices belonging to imperial palace) established in Nara period also declined after the early days of Heian period. According to the analysis of Shinji Yoshikawa, the system began to disintegrate from the end of the ninth century to the beginning of the tenth century, and fully disintegrated in the period of Tenryaku (947-957) [7]. During the Heian period, New female officials appeared, such as Nyogo (high-ranking lady in the court) and Nyobo. According to Shinji Yoshikawa's *The existing forms of Nyobo in Heian period*, Nyobo in Heian period are classified into three categories- serving the emperors, concubines and nobles [8]. According to Haruko Suda's *Research on the imperial harem and the female officials' institutions in Heian period*, the system of Nyokurodo (lower-ranking court lady) was founded in Kanpyo period (889-898). In Heian period, Naishi (female official) became more like concubines and lost their essence as female officials [9]. The aristocratic women gradually retreated from the positions of female officials, some positions held by female officials in the palace tended to be family-oriented [10].

Through the above analysis, we can find that the system of female officials in ancient Japan changed after entering Heian period. It is also believed that these changes are related to the changes of the state domination system and the whole society at that time. We can not only pay attention to the female official system itself. The economic base and political domination mode of the country have changed, so the system of female officials from Nara to Heian period must change. The economic base decides the superstructure, and the changes of economic base will inevitably lead to the changes of domination system.

4. Differences and Reasons

Through the above analysis, we can find that there are some differences in female official system between Nara and Heian period. In Nara period, female officials were less influenced by men. They served the emperor in the palace like men and were active in court politics. After entering Heian period, female officials were more influenced by men and their families. The main institution of female officials -Kokyu Junishi disintegrated, new female officials came into being, the system of female officials and the imperial harem deteriorated. Now let's discuss the reasons for these changes. Firstly, according to prior research, before the Nara period, it is believed to be a relatively free and loose marriage relationship in the society. As for the reasons for this kind of marriage relationship, Akiko Yoshie believes that it was related to the relatively independent economic basis of women at that time. With the development of society, this kind of marriage has gradually changed. After the 10th century, more stable and sustained marriage relationship gradually formed [11]. Secondly, in the early days of Japan, the family system was not very perfect. After the 9th and 10th centuries, families as private business unit appeared in the aristocratic class, after entering the medieval period, families began to be established in all social strata [12]. Therefore, the establishment of the ancient Japanese family system is a process from the central to the local areas, from the upper to the lower levels, and the time of popularization is relatively late. Thirdly, as for social attributes, according to previous studies, it is now believed that Japan was a dual-system society. With the development of society, the patriarchal system was established. After the establishment of the Ritsuryo system, officials' kabane (hereditary title) became important for their promotions. In order to facilitate the promotion in the palace, some officials tried to inherit their paternal kabana, which shows that patriarchal power in society has increased, and the society has gradually turned to a patriarchal society.

From the prior researches of marriage, family and society in ancient Japan, this paper made a brief analysis of the background of the changes of the female official system in Nara and Heian period. With the establishment of the Ritsuryo system, Japan has gradually changed from the original community society, headman-system society and clan society to the centralized state system. According to the prior research, the early marriage relationship was not stable, the community still played a role in social life, and women could live an independent life with community's help. All these backgrounds are related to the form of the female official system in Nara period. With the development of society, marriage relationship has become stable, family management has become independent from the community, family system has been fully established, and society has also changed from a dual-system society to a patriarchal society. In a word, during the period from Nara to Heian, some changes have taken place in the systems of marriage, family and society. Female officials began to be influenced by men in the family, and gradually depended on men economically. A society dominated by men emerged gradually. This is roughly the reason why the system of female officials has changed. At the same time, in Heian period the bureaucracy and aristocracy also changed. These changes should also be related to the changes of the female official system.

5. Conclusion

Female officials, played an important role in Japanese history. Due to the changes of society, family and marriage, the female official system in Nara and Heian period presents different characteristics. Before the establishment of the female official system, women have played an important role in local domination, spiritual belief, production and management in ancient times. The system of female officials established in Nara period shows many characteristics, such as political independence, obvious official qualities, etc., female officials were active in politics. However, in Heian period, female officials seem to be more influenced by their families and men. The role of female officials in politics also changed.

With regard to the reasons for the differences of female official system between Nara and Heian period, this paper believes that it is related to the transformations of the systems of marriage, family and the social structure behind them. With the development of society at that time, marriage became

stable, family system was established, and society changed from the dual-system society to a patriarchal society. During the period from Nara to Heian, some changes have taken place in the systems of marriage, family and society. Female officials began to be influenced by men and family in political activities, and gradually depended on men economically. At the same time, the economic base of the country changed, which led to changes in the way of political domination and bureaucratic aristocracy. The changes of the female official system maybe only one of the manifestations. Through the above analysis, we find that on the changes of the system of female officials in ancient Japan, we should not only pay attention to the female official system itself, but also to the social background, the changes of systems of marriage, family and society behind female officials. These information constitutes the background of female officials' differences in the court, and also the background of Japan's society at that time. The discussions of these aspects are of great significance for us to correctly understand the changes of female official system in this period, and hope it can provide us with a thinking to understand the changes of female official system from Nara to Heian period.

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