

Royal Abdications and the Quest for Power in Early Japanese History

Dr Daniel Schley

East Asia Seminar Series
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At the University of Cambridge



This year will witness the so far unprecedented case of a modern Japanese Emperor to relinquish his office. Scheduled for April 30th, the present Emperor will pass the throne to his son and designated successor, Crown Prince Naruhito. But resignation is not treated in the “Imperial House Law” (kōshitsu tenpan), in which Article four clearly states that “upon the demise of the Emperor, the Imperial Heir shall immediately accede to the Throne.” The topic of an early imperial retirement is, however, not a recent one. Besides the debates on Hirohito’s future following his involvement in Japan’s wars between 1937 and 1945, historiographical recorded precedents leads as far back into the past as to queen Kyōgoku’s abdication in 645 and the last one happened in 1817.

During this long period of time, abdication was one common option for many monarchs to organize a smooth transmission of kingship. Abdication has even been the principal means for a number of monarchs between the 11th and 13th century to establish their own rule apart from the throne. Resignation thus enabled them to wield in fact more political power than before.

In my talk I will explore the political meaning of voluntary as well as forced abdications from the larger perspective of a history of royal successions with its actors, objects and obstacles. Based

on an overview of the manifold regulations and rites, which compromised a kind of standard rule for premodern royal succession, I will address especially contested cases that did not fit into the contemporaries’ convictions of proper kingship. Yōzei’s forced abdication (884), Kazan’s escape from the throne (986) as well as Gotoba’s enthronement (1183) provide case studies, by which the present debates on succession in Japan appears in a new light.

Daniel F. Schley graduated from Hamburg University and received his PhD from Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich with a thesis on sacred kingship in medieval Japan. Currently, he is an assistant professor in the Department of Japanese and Korean Studies at Bonn University, where he teaches Japanese premodern history. He also participates in the DFG (German Research Foundation) funded Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1167 on “Macht und Herrschaft – premodern Configurations from a transregional Perspective”. His research focusses on medieval Japanese kingship, historiography and more recently the interplay of violence and religion. His publications include „Sacred Kingship in early medieval Japan“ (2014) and articles on fact and fiction in historiography, the Fujiwara regency and the modern philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō.

All are welcome // Monday, 25 February 2019 // 5-7pm

Rooms 8/9
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA
For further information email: fs468@cam.ac.uk



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