DAUGHTERS OF SEXUAL POLITICS: THE FUJIWARA’S RISE TO REGENCY
THROUGH ROMANTIC POETRY & MARRIAGE

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The Heian period, lasting from 794 to 1185, remained the last division of Japan’s classical age, acting as a relative time of peace and tranquility. Following the relocation of the capital to Heian-Kyō, it served as an influential hub that both departed Japanese history away from the pre-established systems and ways of thinking created by imperial Tang China and acted as the beginning processes of a national culture that matured into a unique identity. The cultural upbringing brought forward the rise of the Japanese imperial court, a system directly influenced by the Chinese. The court became a central point for court members and aristocrats alike to live in isolation from the rest of the provinces, the lack of any foreign or internal threats allowed for aristocratic life to exist without care of the outside world. This also allowed the court to spearhead a culture of artistic expression in the form of poetry and literature; most of the extensive literary works of this period still exist in today’s world. This aesthetical approach enveloped the day-to-day lives of aristocrats. Public interactions, like ceremonies, festivals, court meetings, friends, and family conversations, all followed certain etiquette procedures that were both socially and politically promoted by the aristocrats of Heian society. It became a constant push for aristocrats to fight for positions of courtly power through a rigid ranking hierarchy by demonstrating their aesthetic abilities.

Most of the aristocrats of the Heian period originated from a series of Japanese clans, most of whom had existed for centuries before the Heian court began. The prominence of older Japanese clans (large collections of closely related family members) constantly played for political positions of power to gain influence over other clans, aristocratic people, and the rest of the provincial populations surrounding Heian-Kyō. The formalities of Japan’s cultural bloom are mostly attributed to the Northern (Hokke) Fujiwara branch, which allowed themselves to become the role of regent on behalf of the ruling imperial family (Fujiwara is pronounced foo-jee-waa-
ruh). They famously intermarried with the imperial family by having women of the clan marry princes and emperors in line to rule Japan. The Fujiwara became the true source of political power during the vast majority of the Heian period through their ability to engage in sexual politics with the imperial family. Romantic relationships in Heian aristocratic society became a social and cultural formality that required specific steps of the romance process to be performed correctly in order for the marriage to become officially recognized by their society. For the Fujiwara to leverage themselves into the role of regents in the Japanese court, it became a necessary measure to understand these systems and teach their daughters proper romantic practices. Although this essay will not exclusively approach this topic from the perspective of women’s history, it is worth noting that the Fujiwara and other Heian clans functioned on a patriarchal basis. Daughters of Fujiwara were restricted to following proper techniques as well as methods of composing poetry and were forcibly married into the imperial family. Both of these practices are vital components of the Fujiwara clan’s rise in court rankings. To understand the proper functionality of Fujiwara daughters and their role in facilitating the clan’s ascension to power, a focus will be placed on how women performed their roles in court and aristocratic society. Looking at official court documentation, fictional literary works, diaries, and other personal forms of poetic exchange, the importance of proper etiquette for the female Fujiwara court members becomes clear when they marry into the imperial family.

Through focusing on the patriarchal authority of Heian society, this essay seeks to establish a framework for the Fujiwara reconstructing the Heian political system. The primary idea will be to explain how the Fujiwara utilized poetry and marriage practices to conduct themselves to be integrated into the imperial family. The first section will provide background contextualization regarding aristocratic society, its cultural aesthetic focus, the functionality of
the Heian ranking system, and the foundational court government, and explain how all of these aspects relate to the poetry and marriage systems. From there, the discussion will be focused on explaining the structure of romantic relationships in Heian aristocratic society. First, there will be a focus on the importance of poetry during the Heian period, both in its ability to provide a written form of communication and its functionality inside the Heian romantic process. Then the focus will look at the physical relations of marriage practices between the Fujiwara and the imperial family, looking to see how the marriage practices were in favor of the Fujiwara using their daughters as political tools to gain control over the Heian court. By manipulating the social and cultural elements of the Heian poetic and marriage systems of the mid-9th to 11th centuries, the Northern House of the Fujiwara clan was able to successfully take over both the political structure of the court system, alongside reaching the highest placements in the Heian society ranking system.

Society, Court, and the Fujiwara

The aristocrats of Heian society lived within the city of Heian-Kyō (later known as Miyako in medieval Japan and Kyōto in the modern day), which served as the Heian’s state capital (794 - 1185). The city was designed to resemble Ch’ang-an, the previous capital of the Chinese Tang dynasty, but on a smaller scale. The city took on the shape of a rectangle, with sources such as the Cambridge History of Japan stating that the measurements of the city’s exterior walls were roughly three and a half miles going north and south, and two and a half miles from east to west.1 Roads were constructed into grid spaces to create intersecting right angles that were formulated into evenly segmented blocks, which became the basis for

determining specific locations in the city. These specific locations became a constructed boundary that segmented people in what is referred to as wards. Each ward was separated by a main road, which can be referred to as an avenue, with the importance of each ward increasing with distance from the northern sections of the city. The main avenue of the capital, called *Suzaku ōji*, served as the main passageway to the Greater Imperial Palace, called *Dai Dairi*, the northernmost point of both the emperor and aristocratic life. Here the location of not only the housing residence of the emperor and imperial clan but also the seat of the Heian government’s central administrative buildings and functions.

Many aristocratic families that held important positions in the Heian court lived close to the palace, in the first, second, and third wards of the city (located between the Tsuchimikado and Konoe avenues; look above the dark blue square in Figure 1 on p. 5). The closer the aristocrat’s clan or living quarters were to the imperial palace, the higher in importance they and their clan were to the government’s functionality. It showed the people involved to be of important status and presented themselves as a part of the emperor’s ruling court inside the Heian government.² The vast majority of Heian aristocratic elites lived and resided within these selective areas for most of their lives, only rarely leaving its walls to fulfill governing duties in the outside provinces or visiting Buddhist or Shinto temples. The Fujiwara clan, as a whole, lived inside the previously mentioned wards or within the Great Imperial Palace. Each branch of the Fujiwara functioned independently from one another, however, they still held onto a core familial bond. They assisted one another if other aristocratic clans sought to undermine their importance in the Heian court.

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Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the Heian capital (Heian-Kyō). All major avenues, the Greater Imperial Palace, and the Tsuchimikado Mansion (labeled in the blue square) are listed in both native and romanized translations. Adapted from McCullough, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*. 
For this paper, the discussion will revolve around the Northern Fujiwara house specifically and how their interactions with the imperial family shaped the political scene of the mid-Heian period.

The isolation of the aristocratic court system led to an artificial bubble surrounding the Greater Imperial Palace, creating a distinctive gap between people living in the aristocratic society and to the rest of the Heian population. The unique culture adopted by the aristocrats was set to a small percentage of people, only the most powerful people a part of well-established clans were able to partake in the customs. For this essay, it’s important to understand the small population pool that the Heian court functioned with through the beginning of the Heian period until the Fujiwara rose to the regency role. Urban social historians, like Gideon Sjoberg and his writing in *The Preindustrial City*, have long speculated about the rough total population of people living inside the capital. The size of the aristocratic population, although based on crude estimated work by drawing similarities to other city population numbers of the time, was estimated to be 5,000 to 10,000 out of roughly 70,000 total population of the city in the 10th and 11th centuries.³ Smaller estimations dictated the high elite of the aristocrats, or those of the third rank or higher inside the Heian government made up roughly 200 to 1,000.⁴ Making up a very small minority of the population at the time, the most conspicuous and well-known sections of Heian society originate from the top three ranks (those being the first, second, and third ranks), or those inside the Great Imperial Palace working inside the Heian court directly.

Heian aristocratic society, in the way their cultural, social, and political custom functioned, was heavily centered around the aesthetically cultured way of life. Historian Nancy

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³ Although stated to be mildly inflated numbers, this population number seems reasonable for later sections (10th - 11th centuries) of the Heian period. See Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City, Past and Present* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960), 80-85.

Stalker coined the term, “the rule of taste,” which refers to the unique focus on beauty seen within the written records left behind by Heian society. Courtly life revolved around the value of personal style and aesthetic expressions much more than the moral principles that were embodied in traditional Chinese scholarship that previous Japanese societies, such as the Nara, adapted into their customs. This form of artistic expression became a formal presentation in everyday life, as these public interactions dictated how aristocratic members were to be treated depending on their rank in the court. From imperial ceremonies requiring males of all ranks to perform stylized dances to the exchanging of poems and letters requiring specialized decorative properties to represent who they were in rank, gender, and clan relations, it became important for an aristocrat to follow the regulations of “the rule of taste” established by the Heian court. Failure for either males or females to abide by these regulations often meant a person could be demoted in court rank, or in specific situations like ruining important court ceremonies, would be exiled to outside provinces of Heian Japan.

Specifically looking into the characteristics of the aristocratic society’s culture, the community formulated shared traits to differentiate themselves from people outside the circle. The primary traits that helped contribute to the development of their courtly culture are considered the following: a strong sense of a person’s individuality regarding rank and status; a general focus on emotionalism and the intellectual imagery presented by the person; expressive ways to represent the person, such as literature, calligraphy, and music; and a sensibility towards beauty alongside the moods seen in nature. The last listed mention of beauty stands as the most

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essential connection to the influence of the newly founded culture. Fixation on beauty regarding a person’s emotions and sensitivity was a critical part of Heian aristocracy. It created a standard of social behavior for all aristocratic people, in their public and private lives, to represent their true selves while serving as an aristocrat in the Heian court. For the purpose of this essay, the ideas of beauty acted as a connecting bridge to explain how an elite must establish themselves in the application of romantic poetry and marriage practices to fit into aristocratic society. All of these characteristics began to formulate roughly around the later decades of the 9th century and into the beginning of the 10th century, a time when the Heians were still a subordinate state to China.

Shifting gears, it’s important to understand the ranking system and the じつじゅうゆう女性 government structure of the Heian period. Focusing on rank first, its role served as the principal determining factor in judging the merit of an individual and their positioning of power inside the government. The Heian court system was a class-based hierarchy, with there being 9 total ranks as part of the ranking system. Starting at the ninth rank (which mostly were craftsmen and merchants who held little to no significance inside Heian-Kyō), the system progressed upward up to the first rank (a position that held significant political influence in the court system); the lower the number the rank number was, the higher political status an individual had in the governing system. The greatest division of the small aristocratic society existed between the third and fourth-rank positions. Methods of fair recruiting of any personnel into the ranks of the Heian court were rare, seeing as the most common way a person rose to the fifth rank or above was through being born into either the imperial clan or high court nobility clan residing in or surrounding the Greater Imperial Palace. Heian founder Emperor Kammu (736 - 806) focused on only appointing older, trusted clans to the position of power since they were already subordinate
to the emperor alongside having more central control located within the capital. The isolated nature of Heian aristocratic society was partly due to the move to centralize Heian authority over other provinces. In combination with the strong cultural belief among the aristocracy those born into a particular rank, *yoki hito* or “good person,” were more qualified to fill the needs of the court over a person without rank, *tadabito* or “mere person,” this created a constant strive for clans and individual people alike to find lucrative ways to advance oneself in the hierarchy.

For the sake of simplification, the most important ranks to focus on for this essay are those of the fifth rank or higher. The first to fifth ranks were the highest placement positions an aristocrat could reach in the Heian court, as they worked directly on the day-to-day affairs seen inside Heian-Kyō. Members of the top three ranks, who were commonly referred to as high court nobles (*kugyō*) or the true nobility of the aristocracy, received the most valuable privileges and luxuries. Outside the already mentioned political position, high court nobles had access to a substantial amount of wealth granted through owning land provinces. They also held tremendous amounts of social actions such as what clothing a noble could wear or bypassing distributed punishments given out by the status of law. When later references are made to the top three ranks, this essay will refer to them as the high court nobles. The creation of the ranking system came from amendments to the Taika Reform (645 CE), which primarily aimed at placing individuals as part of the nobility above the rest of the population. Later it would be followed up by the Yōrō Code (757 CE) that created the nine major ranks seen during the Heian court, each rank being categorized to describe the importance of a person being a “good person” or a “mere

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person.” It created a system that stirred away traditional forms of rank inauguration that helped station people into certain ranks, such as the Civil Service Exams that put people on their performance of understanding traditional Chinese scholarship. What resulted was a system where members of the court were forced to adapt and follow the principles of their rank to maintain their “good person” status.

Secondly is the functioning of the *ritsuryō* government style. The administrative and civil codes created by the long-running political philosophies based on Confucianism and legalism inside Tang China allowed the Heians to adopt and remodel their principles into their system. The Heian emperor, under this created system, stood at the top of the political and social regime, holding onto an absolute monarchy over the ruling subjects of Heian-Kyō and its surrounding provinces. All governmental actions say the passing of laws or standards of social regulations were to be determined by his final word. The arrival of the Heian period, however, changed the ruling position of the emperor by the addition of the rising court official positions gaining more saying power as well as the creation of the regent role. The most influential court positions of the government were in the hands of the high court nobles. These positions were only governed by males a part of powerful clans inside Heian aristocratic society. Court members held the power to control entry into their level or lower-level ranks through clan positioning, as well as officiate the creation of new laws and documentation issued according to the emperor’s word. In the beginning decades of the 9th century, before the takeover of the Fujiwara clan, the emperor

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11 It’s worth mentioning The Taika Reforms were created during the Hakuho period (673 - 686) but carried over into the Heian period. Parts of the system process, like the Civil Service Exams, were dropped out of favor for various reasons throughout the classical Japanese period. See Morris, *The World*, 64.
13 Although there were females that held provenience inside the Heian court as high court nobles, they were never involved in the political matters of the government, rather only involved in ceremonies and festivals. See McCullough, “The Capital and its Society,” 123-28.
remained in the most powerful position when dictating the social order of aristocratic life, acting as the arbiter for having the final say on political matters. This would change with the Fujiwara rising to power, utilizing their position as high court nobles to create the role of regent or someone who would take the head position of power in the place of the emperor. It allowed for the control of the government instead of the emperor, creating a shifting balancing of power. It stood as one of the core conflicts in how the Heian court functioned at the time, with the ruling emperors battling their official powers with that of the Northern Fujiwara. As it will be explained later, the creation of the regent position was a result of the Fujiwara house beginning to marry themselves to imperial family; this being a result of younger princes and emperors being placed into power so male Fujiwara members could take the position of regent in their place.

The Fujiwara’s rise to supreme power in the Heian court stood as a slow, burdensome process due to the difficulty behind the ranking system. Rising in the ranking was a rare occurrence to naturally occur when being a good court official. It became a game of favoritism as multiple different clans bid for power alongside the Fujiwara, making it difficult for one particular member to be chosen and agreed upon for ranking up. The Emperor was able to place members of his choosing into positions he saw fit, but this personal selection by his authority rarely occurred in the Heian era. The most common way a person was able to rank up in the court system was through the negotiations and marriage practices of the Heian period. Both clans were able to benefit from the marriage, these neutral exchanges ranging in wealth transfers and the mentioned ranking-up of a court official. The Fujiwara were one such clan that recognized the advantages of this exchange and made it their mission to ensure they held leverage over other parties seeking to undergo the relationship of marriage practices.
Figure 2. Genealogy of the Northern Fujiwara House marrying into the Imperial family between mid-7th to late 12th centuries. Adapted from McCullough, *The Heian Court*, and *The Capital and its Society*. 
The origins of the clan date back to the Japanese Asuka period (592 - 710). The Fujiwara’s founder, Nakatomi no Kamatari (lived 614 - 669) assisted in the deposing of the Soga clan in a bloody conflict to place the emperor back as the head of power. Emperor Tenchi (ruled 668 - 671; was only a prince at the time of the Soga overthrow) decided to grant Kamatari the new clan name of Fujiwara. Being a clan of significant influence by the time the capital was relocated to Heian-Kyō at the dawn of Heian rule, as well as assisting in the creation of a court ranking system in the Taika Reform, the Fujiwara rose to be a powerful clan a part of the high court nobility going into the Nara and Heian periods.14

The Fujiwara’s position, however, would soon be jeopardized by the absolute power that Emperor Kammu (wielded regarding checking the powers of the court through his imperial seat. A formulated Council of State emerged that held many powerful high court nobles (all a part of power clans including the Fujiwara) working together to limit Emperor Kammu’s ruling power in any way they could. They recruited people in powerful court positions to have a larger voting majority of rules and regulations Emperor Kammu wasn’t able to have direct control over. In response, Kammu began to remove and limit central positions of power in the court. It reduced the influence of government clans and their ability to conspire together against the Emperor’s word.15 By this point, the Fujiwara branches were limited in their ability to hold multiple powerful positions at a time and many of the old heads of the four Fujiwara houses began to die off.

A critical point in the imperial line began to work in favor of the Fujiwara at the turn of the 9th century, however. Following the death of Kammu in 806, the northern branch of the

14 Morris, The World, 47.
Fujiwara began its ascendence to higher court positions once again. All of Emperor Kammu’s heirs to the throne were descendants of mothers from the Hokke Fujiwara branch. Emperor Saga (r. 809-23) and Emperor Junna (r. 823-33) both maintained their positions as emperors separated from the control of the Fujiwara. Soon after both their deaths, the last remaining person not of Fujiwara blood, Saga’s son Nimmyō (r. 833-50) took to the throne. Nimmyō’s son Monotoku (r. 850-58) had a direct family connection to the Fujiwara as he was a nephew of the head of the northern Fujiwara house, Fujiwara no Yoshifusa. The situation became ripe for conflict not only with the imperial clan and the Fujiwara but with other high court nobles attached to other clans recognizing the position of the throne. A coup was planned by outside high court nobles to depose both Yoshifusa and Nimmyō from the family lineage, but this coup ultimately ended in the arrest and removal of many high court nobles. With the passing of Nimmyō in 850, Yoshifusa was able to rise to the court position of chancellor and oversee the political measures of Monotoku.16 Although he didn’t possess the ability to directly control the imperial position yet, Yoshifusa managed to reach a substantial position all the while the Fujiwara bloodline now became intertwined with the bloodline of the imperial family.

The regent position (referred to as Sesshō for child emperors and Kanpaku for adult emperors) soon followed as an official position in the Heian court thanks to Yoshifusa granting the imperial seal towards the law establishing the Fujiwara line in the position. The position became the central piece for Yoshifusa to gain control over the court. Soon Yoshifusa would shift into becoming the regent for Emperor Seiwa (r. 858-876), Yoshifusa began the two-century-long continuation of Fujiwara's rule through the regency of child emperors. It was the principle of Fujiwara women and marital ties that connected the Fujiwara directly to the imperial family.

16 McCullough, “The Heian Court,” 36-37; 45.
seat of power in the first place. What progressed onward from Yoshifusa was the Fujiwara’s maintenance of their family holding onto the usage of child emperors, regent status, and first rank court positions to maintain this sphere of political power inside the Heian court. Before delving deeper into the explanation behind the Fujiwara’s continuing decisions to take the throne through poetic and marital practices, it is important to take an in-depth look into the ritual practices behind how Heian romance worked.

Heian Poetry

The principles behind aristocratic Heians utilizing romantic relationships for political gain is nothing new by historical standards. The ideal thinking of what someone of today’s world would see in male attractiveness, that being attracted to physical appearance, personality traits, and other culturally relevant cases, weren’t relevant concerns for a Heian aristocratic female to have when considering possible romantic relationships. Instead, arousing propositions for potential partners came through the exchanging of poetry through interconnected ties within the court system. Examination of various literary works spanning the centuries of Heian rule further highlights this process as the key component in the ritual of aristocratic romance.

Heian Japanese poetry, otherwise known as *waka*, holds a distinctive history pre-dating the Heian era. Many of these early variations of poetry were based on Chinese styles of poetic exchanges. The primary form of poetry that would be most commonly shared and exchanged between members of the Heian aristocracy was the *tanka*. This poetic style was a short, thirty-one-syllable poem written in rows, following a pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. Although it was required for an aristocrat to have the ability to write in Chinese in professional settings inside the court, the

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tanka was more commonly written entirely in Japanese characters. It was a method of communication describing the environment surrounding a person. It also was a poetic exchange between people of interest through the court, these two ideals relating to the aesthetic phrase of “the rule of taste.” The formalities of every day became obsessive in aristocratic society through variations of artistic expressions, incorporating the tanka and other art forms as an extensive embodiment of the individual. Beauty, in this situation, was sought through how a person was able to express themselves despite only having short syllable sentences to work with. Whatever the subject may be for a poet to talk about, a key focus is needed to have a clear emotional attachment to the self while also progressing in their development. There was no differentiation between males and females in this case. What was considered proper poetic characteristic was the quality present in a vulnerable form of writing that related to an individual's unique perception of their feelings.

A plethora of Heian written records in the form of books and diaries follow this “directly emotional” form of tanka writing. One such collection from this era is the Kokinshū, which includes a total of 1,100 waka entries (the vast majority being the 31-syllable tanka style) compacted into twenty total books. Most scholars today describe the collection of books within the Kokinshū as an imperial anthology, meaning the creation of these poems was done by imperial authority. It’s further said that the total collection of books was created by four prominent poets from the fifth rank of the court. The first variations of the Kokinshū were made by the poet Ki no Tsurayuki between the years 906 and 913. Controversy has formed among historians about the exact date when this waka collection was created, as well as looking into

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why this book collection was created in the first place. The seal of imperial authority showed these books only to the imperial clan’s eye, yet the rise of the Fujiwara as a political entity pushes the narrative of their influence being heavily involved. Emperor Daigo (ruled 885 - 930) was the acting emperor at the time the *Kokinshū* was presented for review. Although he acted as one of the sole emperors to act without a regent, he was still a member of the Northern Fujiwara family. Many of the ranging narratives of the *tanka* demonstrate the tellings of clan members ranking between those of the first to third ranks, or high court nobles. It mostly corresponds to clan members of the Fujiwara and the many clans that supported their positions in courtly power.\(^{20}\) The content of the *Kokinshū* creates a narrative behind many of the Fujiwara’s attempts to teach proper etiquette, although the Fujiwara weren’t directly in control of the court due to them having no regency rule over Emperor Daigo. Nevertheless, the poet Tsurayuki and others presented an influential piece of Japanese literature that helps scholars of the modern day interpret various forms of *tanka* and the ways it was utilized throughout the court after their inception.

The concept of “affectionate emotions” became an ideal quality for all standards of Japanese poetry and the total book collection of the *Kokinshū* became a judgment tool for all standards of the *tanka*. Written in his preface Tsurayuki explains, “Many things happen to the people of this world, and all they think and feel is given expression in the description of things they see and hear.”\(^{21}\) It was of utmost importance to be both intelligently prominent with the poet’s words as well as empowering a poet’s voice. Tsurayuki goes on to explain how a person can achieve this ideal poetry style by breaking it down into small steps. Similar to how “the rule


of taste” functions, the first step is to create a deep emotional response to reading the poem. The second is to be expressive with a poet’s words and capture affectionate emotions while using the proper poetic technique a poet is creating (whether that be a waka or tanka). The final step is incorporating what aspects greatly influenced the poet when writing a poem while keeping proper poetic techniques. Following the guidelines will allow a poet’s written words to create a proper idealistic form that represents the standard for Heian poetry; it led the aristocracy to establish themselves as worthy to be a part of this exclusive society as opposed to the rest of Heian’s population.

With the tanka serving the primary purpose of acting as an expressive form of the self, the vast majority of skillful poetry examples available from the Kokinshū and the overall Heian era relate to love. Aristocratic lovers emphasized merit in romantic exchanges as they were seen as a direct representation of who the person was. The Kokinshū’s first five books were all dedicated to love stories, ranging from the first signs of interest in the developing stages of a relationship to speaking about the inner turmoil a person felt when being cheated on by a spouse. Using references from these poems and incorporating their literary elements into personal poems was seen as attractive in Heian society.

It became a customary part of aristocratic education for males and females to interpret and utilize the empirical meanings stated in the Kokinshū. For many of the high court nobles, such as the Fujiwara, it was a critical part of schooling for children to understand these writing principles when they engaged in romantic affairs. Males were directed towards a courtship education by men of the court, starting around the age of five. They were taught both Chinese and Japanese writing systems. It followed up by remembering Chinese Confucian texts to dictate proper edicts of the court. This became a repetitive cycle of writing and memorization,
progressing in difficulty as an aristocratic man continued in his education. Poetic skills would become a natural measure of a courtly man through this cycle. They were regularly used as a test measure for establishing a man as a proper court official. By adulthood, a man was expected to have mastered both the symbolic and emotional measures when constructing and forming the *waka*.

Female aristocrats, on the other hand, were taught by older, more experienced ladies-in-waiting (ladies-in-waiting being a common phrase to describe women of the sixth or below ranks who served those part of the fifth rank or higher). Even though this form of education wasn’t the formal schooling that men received, it was still expected that women would become masters of both artistic poetry and calligraphy. Most literacy sources related to personal diaries of aristocratic females detail the constant struggle of needing to master the forms of expression seen in the collection of the *Kokinshū*. Once mastering their technical abilities of writing, most women would remain in isolation until a large celebratory ceremony or festival occurred, until they visited a temple for religious purposes, or when marriage came into the picture.

Women, during the time of the Fujiwara’s hand on political power, exclusively lived inside private quarters, inside clan households, or within the Great Imperial Palace. They would have little to no interactions with the public, only having ladies-in-waiting (servants to higher-ranking clans) carry their messages to individuals. Ivan Morris and other historians have highlighted how the education and living standards of women were shown in Heian poetry and literature pieces. It placed aristocratic females in extreme conditions of isolation from the rest of the capital. Morris points out that women part of the high court nobility experienced “a state of

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almost perpetual twilight” because they “rarely ventured into the open.” When considering the sources of the Heian era, it is important to understand what is the setting of aristocratic reality and what is considered fiction in narration. Both can be considerably extreme, with fictional aristocracy portraying idealized variations of poetry while autobiographies are standard to what is a realistic depiction of how poetry was exchanged between members of the court. Many scholars have failed to show literary diaries, such as *The Kagerō Diary*, *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, *The Murasaki Shikibu Diary*, and *The Pillow Book*, as separate entities from existing narrative fiction, such as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo*. To grasp the picture of how female aristocrats' lives were, it’s critical to take into account literary source types and not be blinded by the poetic perfections presented inside fictional narratives.

It’s also worth noting that most of the literacy sources that remain today were written by Heian aristocratic women. Their lives were to be filled with extensive periods of boredom fulfilled by a desire to communicate their minds through the use of *waka*. Unlike the men’s education system which demanded the knowledge of how to read and write in Chinese, women developed a more creative variation of the Japanese language known as “women’s script” (or *Hiragana*). This writing style was a more simplified variation of the standard Japanese phonetic script that allowed for smoother methods of creating poems. Many women took this writing style with stride, pioneering the great literary works seen in the Heian period. It created a great influence over both the higher court nobles alongside the lower-rank people of the city due to its nature of being entirely in Japanese, considered the people’s language, opposing the high nobility’s use of the Chinese language. This also explains the massive differences between how

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women had more personal diary entries over male courtiers, that being the extensive periods of isolation seen during the Fujiwara regency. Women had more leisure time than males servicing the court alongside their mastery of the simplified poetic style resulting in the creation massive imbalance between male and female poetry and literature.

In the case of the Fujiwara clan, a large number of authors were Heian aristocratic women directly related, or were in close connection, to Fujiwara members. Many of the literary works that survive from this period originate from the court ladies of the Fujiwara. Most of these cour ladies were either already extended members of the Fujiwara, or were outside, low-ranking individuals that became ladies-in-waiting for Northern Fujiwara daughters. Notable ladies of this period include the ladies-in-waiting named Izumi Shikibu and Murasaki Shikibu.

*Heian Marriage*

The Fujiwara’s other forms of success stem from their ability to marry their daughters to the future princes and emperors of the imperial family, letting themselves exert a level of control over the Heian court. Mentioned earlier was the Yōrō Codes, which created the nine major ranks seen in the Heian court. The critical provisions of the codes restrict a man’s rank based on his father’s or grandfather’s rank in the court. It was also reliant on his if mother was the primary wife to the father or grandfather (Commonly, the primary wife was referred to as the *kita no kata*). The Fujiwara clan, however, were able to bypass the usage of the Yōrō Codes through their position of regency, both in their shared bloodline with the imperial family and in their ability to marry their daughters. The previously mentioned court position of regent stood over the emperor in terms of political power, taking the roles of *sesshō* and *kanpaku* respectively.27 Ever

since Fujiwara no Yoshifusa rose to the regent position of sesshō over the child emperor of Seiwa, the Fujiwara maintained successive regent positions up until the end of the 11th century. The continuous control of the Fujiwara allowed them to maintain a level of authority by being maternal father-in-law or grandfather to the ruling emperor, with the majority of the emperors being obliged to follow their word. Fujiwara no Michinaga (966 - 1028), one of the most powerful regents of the Fujiwara regency, was the grandfather of one emperor (Go-Suzaku r. 1036 - 1045) and the father-in-law of three emperors (Ichijō r. 986 - 1011, Sanjō r. 1011 - 1016, and Go-Ichijō r. 1016 - 1036; worth mentioning Ichijō was the 66th emperor, Sanjō was the 67th, Go-Ichijō was the 68th, and Go-Suzaku was the 69th). Historian William McCullough details that much of Michinaga’s success came from the fact he had an abundance of wives (who altogether gave him 8 daughters) and his daughters’ ability to give birth to heirs to the throne.  

Although Michinaga would be one of the last successful regents of the Fujiwara regency, his position demonstrates the Northern Fujiwara branch’s ability to create female offspring fit to marry into the imperial family.

It should be stated that Heian Japan was a polygynous society; men could marry multiple wives at the same time, while women were only allowed to take one husband at a time. Despite this common practice for all high court nobles of the Heian court, the Fujiwara were able to maintain their regent positions over the emperor by having their daughters be the primary wives of the young imperial males of the family over other powerful clans. The strict hierarchy of the Yōrō Codes did allow for polygyny relationships to form freely, but the main marriage between a primary wife and male courtier was seen to be the more important social and political relationship, this being the primary marriage between two different clans. Compared to

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28 McCullough, “The Heian Court,” 71.
concubines, who were secondary wives, which were seen as love interests in the modern day.\textsuperscript{29} The imperial family at this time, however, was mostly restricted to as few as three wives on average, and to sustain a level of peace between their shared relationships, they chose to limit their relationships to avoid turmoil inside the court.\textsuperscript{30} By the start of the 10th century, the Northern Fujiwara practice of polygyny allowed them to gain a large web of connections through marital ties of their daughters to important positions of power while resetting restrictions upon the male imperial family to not only limit their marital relationships to a few selective wives but to take on a Fujiwara daughter as their primary wife.\textsuperscript{31}

There also remains the practice of marital residency that the Fujiwara utilized to their advantage. Concubines throughout the Heian period were a duolocal marriage, that being the wife and the husband remained in separate homes, with the male commuting to her in situations like having children. The primary wife, at the start of the Fujiwara regency, followed a similar duolocal pattern, but by the turn of the mid-10th century, it became common practice for uxorilocal marriage to take place, with the husband living inside the residence of the wife’s home. Although it’s not explained if the Fujiwara’s practice of marriage caused uxorilocal to become the standard, it can be noted the Northern Fujiwara branch was responsible for being the first to implement this style of marital living in the Heian period. It indirectly influenced the imperial family, high court nobles, and the rest of the Heian court to follow. Michinaga, for example, despite becoming the owner of the Tsuchimikado quarter and mansion originally belonging to his wife’s (Minamoto no Rinshi lived 964 - 1053; Tsuchimikado’s location is

\textsuperscript{31} McCullough, “Japanese Marriage Institutions,” 108; 114.
referenced in Figure 1) family before being granted to him. The shift for males to live inside the home of the wife also extended to how males were able to move up the ranks inside the Heian court through social and political assistance; Michinaga himself quotes the importance of a male’s relationship to the primary wife inside *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*. Even in the position of emperor, the role of the primary wife became critical for the status of the emperor to be maintained through social and political measures.

Even before the engagement of the relationship began, the man was expected to be the first to engage in conversation. Boys underwent their coming-of-age ceremony as young as the age of twelve, where it was common for high court nobility and imperial families to have them already paired or, in rarer cases, married to a wife. The first part of the engagement began with a series of poetic exchanges indirectly shared between the partner’s servants, namely the role of the ladies-in-waiting looking out for the male’s first response. The lady would then judge the prospective partner in their quality of calligraphy, masterful usage of the *waka* style, and value the physical qualities of the paper itself. The lady would then send her *waka* to the male if she found him a suitable candidate. This process could last months on end before the next stage begins, where the male would finally meet with the female in person for the first time. The process of *yobai* (or night crawling) consists of the male visiting for three separate nights in a row, arriving around sunset and leaving just before dawn the next morning. The marriage would be official on the third day, with the lady’s parents discovering the groom and leading into a family celebration. This celebration would quickly become a public affair, due to the competitive males seeking to climb the social hierarchy and the influence of a clan rising inside

the court system. Especially in the case of the emperor, the marriage of Fujiwara daughters to the emperor was an important ceremony that later signified the rising status of not just the emperor’s marriage, but also the emerging position of the Fujiwara regent position.

The usage of monogamous marriage for imperial family males became a critical element for the Fujiwara’s regency to continue being successful. To further explore the implied monogamous relationship, examining the monogatari (a form of Japanese literature expanded as a large narrative tale similar to epic literature) literary pieces of *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo* and *The Tale of Genji* will help avert polygyny relationships seen by emperors and princes and focus more on their monogamous relationships with the Northern Fujiwara daughters. First looking at *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo*, The story follows Lady Ochikubo’s lover, Michiyori, who magically rises in the rank of the Heian court despite the refusal for him to engage in polygyny relationships. Instead, he remains faithful to Lady Ochikubo, who is a complete nobody and exists outside of the political hierarchy altogether. Ochikubo’s abilities inside the fictional story are nothing but phenomenal for a Heian courtier, either male or female, to admire; She is a good poet, physically beautiful, well-tempered for her non-rank status, and loyal only to Michiyori throughout the story.

In all terms of the Heian court, Michiyori's marriage to Ochikubo remains an impossible luxury that even the Fujiwara were unable to obtain. Comparable members to Michiyori’s final rank status at the end of the story mimics the position of Fujiwara no Kaneie (lived 929 - 990) who was the father of Fujiwara no Michinaga, and father-in-law to Ichijō. Kaneie’s political success was heavily reliant on polygyny relationships, rarely seeking to marry higher than himself, but having extended marriages across his rank and placing his children in important positions of power for the benefit of the Fujiwara clan. The existence of *The Tale of The Lady
Ochikubo directly goes against moving up in Heian society, directly denying the importance of women’s role within marriage politics. The character of Michiyori directly bypasses the Heian hierarchy and becomes the First rank position of Chancellor (daijō daijin; the position at court which is directly below the emperor by court standards prior to the Fujiwara regency) by the end of the story, with only the favoring of his father’s previous position and the blessing of the emperor. It refutes the traditional method of women serving as ways for men to rank up in the court.

For a later explanation regarding the teachings of monogamy inside the imperial family, it’s important to understand the general plot of The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo. It’s a story that follows a lowly servant named Lady Ochikubo after the room she was forced to live in by her stepmother. With the death of her mother and having no other relatives alive to care for her, she was forced to live in her father’s house, that of the Minamoto clan. She was forced to create all of their fine clothing for the family while she lived in poverty, only given rations on selective days and being punished for the smallest mistakes made in the clothing design. Michiyori, who at this point is a lowly courtier below the fifth rank but a favored individual of the emperor, begins to reach out to Lady Ochikubo. They eventually go through the process of yobai, Michiyori being successful in his attempt to take Ochikubo away from her harsh reality and live the rest of her days in luxury inside his mansion.35 The story then observes Michiyori’s rapid advancements in rank and never discouraged away from his marriage to Lady Ochikubo. Though this essay won’t go into detail about every rank promotion of Michiyori, it’s worth noting that

35 Due to the condition of Lady Ochikubo being unable to provide a necessary home for the marriage, the couple resulted in a virilocal marriage, where the wife would instead live with the husband. This style of marriage was common in fictional Heian stories, like The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo. It’s worth mentioning that they eventually move back into the family home Ochikubo grew up in later in the story through his connections of property and her newly founded position of Empress at the end of the story.
Michiyori’s success also came from the hands of his father. Like his son, Michiyori’s father rapidly climbed the ranks of the Heian court due to favoritism with the emperor. Once his father reached the position of Major Captain of the Left, both he and the emperor granted him the position of Chancellor shortly after the father retired from the court.

The rise in political power for Michiyori stems from his father granting him political moveability that isn’t seen in the real Heian court as well as gaining the favor of the emperor in his promotions. In reality, however, paternal influences only extended the courtly position of their children, and the practice of marriage politics, as mentioned earlier in this essay, remained the fundamental way to move up in the Heian court. Men relied on their sisters, wives, and daughters as political tools to better position themselves into a favorable rank. The strategic marriage practices of the Fujiwara were established and sustained based upon the principle of their female figures being married off to powerful people of the court. More often than not, as historian William McCullough notes, the father-in-law of the Northern Fujiwara branch was the biggest contributor to placing a man of the family into positions of power compared to the man’s father.36

The true spectacle of *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo* comes from its ability to demonstrate the dangers that come with polygyny relationships, specifically pointing out that having multiple wives can cause a high-ranking man more trouble than benefits. The male-authored creation of *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo* relates the situation of monogamy to be a more favorable option for a male to be successful in the Heian court.37

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37 Although the exact author of this piece has been lost to history, is commonly agreed upon by historians and researchers alike that the story was created by a man who was a part of the high court nobility in the later 10th century. See *Ochikubo Monogatari or The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo: A Tenth Century Japanese Novel*, trans. Wilfrid Whitehouse (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 277-79.
Ochikubo is an influential piece of literature passed around the court from the middle of the Fujiwara regency up until the end of their reign. It was enjoyed by all people of the court, specifically in the hands of the emerging bloodlines shared between Northern Fujiwara and the imperial family. Noteworthy in the tale is the extended relationship of monogamous marriages most emperors would undergo. It opposed the Fujiwara and the rest of the Heian high nobility clans practicing polygyny relationships. The practice of uxorilocal upbringing of child emperors inside the Northern Fujiwara household pushed the narrative of The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo onto the imperial family. This enforced practice kept their position of power to a minimum while the Fujiwara continued their pursuit to maintain the high court nobility positions.

Now looking at the monogatari story of The Tale of Genji, it continues the motif of polygyny relationships being a bad form of political marriage practice. It reads as an inherited conflict shared between politics, Heian court rankings, and marital relationships, all of which revolve around the character of Genji. Genji, throughout the story, fixates on his relationship with a girl named Murasaki, who holds some similarities to the situation of Lady Ochikubo. More intently from The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo, however, Genji is a representation of the consequences present in the practice of polygyny and as a result, brings punishment to the women around him. The creator of The Tale of Genji is the infamous lady-in-waiting covered earlier in this essay, named Murasaki Shikibu (who does share the same first name as the character of Murasaki in the story). She created Genji to resemble the perfect Heian courtier; his beauty, calligraphy, and all other manners of being a part of the high court nobility set him high and above other men. Genji is never seen to be directly punished due to his actions throughout the story, rather the focus is placed on the individual husband’s role to be both a good lover and fair partner to the women seen in the story. While The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo follows the
hard-working, well-cultured mannerisms of Michiyori to be a good husband, *The Tale of Genji* seeks to counteract these ideals by showing not following proper etiquette resulting in disciples being given out.

Although Genji takes elements from the character of Michiyori, Genji remains in a position that significantly differs from *The Tale of The Lady Ochikubo*. Michiyori’s relationship with Ochikubo is unrelated to the politics of the Heian court. Both he and his father stand at such an influential position of power in the court that marriage wasn’t to be reliant on social and political standing. Genji, however, was born into a different situation. He was the son of Emperor Kiritsubo, but his mother was a common woman at the lowest Ninth rank of the Heian court. Genji was stripped of his imperial titles thanks to the backing of the emperor’s primary wife, Lady Kokiden, despite Kiritsubo having an affinity for him, and forced to marry into the family of the Third rank. The difference stems from the emperors’ abilities throughout either of the stories. In Michiyori’s case, the emperor can enact his abilities as he sees fit, mostly granting Michiyori and his father any ranking position or marriage proposal that they wish to have. In a more realistic case, however, the emperor of *The Tale of Genji* is much more restricted because of his difficulty in balancing his polygamy relationship with Lady Kokiden and Genji’s mother. Despite Kiritsubo’s position, the ensuing scandal of the emperor having a relationship with women as lowly as those in the ninth rank is seen as an insult to the high court nobility that Lady Kokiden is meant to be a part of.\(^{38}\) The status of the emperor stands in a similar position to how the emperor functioned during the Fujiwara regency. The overseeing power of the regent heavily restricted emperors of this time to only have a select few wives, let alone spending the vast majority of their effort to appease their primary wives. Otherwise, as demonstrated in *The Tale of*

Genji, scandals of the court could occur and the authority of the Fujiwara hanging over the emperor’s seat of power could easily be changed if Fujiwara's daughters weren’t appeased.

The character of Genji follows suit by showing off the harsh implications of polygyny relationships. Much of the story of The Tale of Genji follows the relationship shared between Genji and the young Murasaki. After having been married for fifteen years, Genji is allowed to progress in rank by marrying the Third Princess, the favored daughter of Emperor Suzaku. Though Genji loved Murasaki, whom he raised himself from childhood to be his ideal wife, the Heian world still saw Murasaki to be a low-ranking court that did nothing to help Genji’s social and political position. Although related to an imperial prince, her mother died early on in her life and the prince’s primary wife refused Murasaki any positions above her current rank throughout her life. Genji saw the opportunity of the Third Princess as a trophy wife, one who would greatly benefit his court position. However, it resulted in Genji needing to give her more attention and care as opposed to Murasaki to avoid further courtly scandals of Genji neglecting Murasaki’s status. Murasaki, however, falls ill and Genji can’t resist aiding her in her time of need. A young courtier, seeing his opportunity, is quick to exchange poems and enact the practices of yobai with the Third Princess, whom she becomes seduced by Genji. Upon realizing what has happened, Emperor Suzaku is quick to curse Genji for his actions and strips him and Murasaki of all of their courtly titles.

There remains a constant theme of the struggle of polygyny that occurs throughout The Tale of Genji. First, Kiritsubo’s struggle to balance the relationship between his primary and secondary wives results in the harsh life of Genji. Secondly, Genji himself fell victim to heighten his prestige, resulting in not only his own downfall but Murasaki’s as well. The constant appearance of polygyny relationships to be harmful in large narratives such as The Tale of The
Lady Ochikubo and The Tale of Genji remained as prominent remarks of how the Heian court functioned during the Fujiwara regency. The rising influence of monogamous relationships upon the later emperors of the Fujiwara regency was a result of the strict educational purposes brought forward by the popularity of epic narratives. The story of Michiyori remaining dedicated to Lady Ochikubo throughout his political career and the story of Genji and other males of the story being punished for their ability to be a part of polygyny relationships represent the actual conditions of how the Heian court functioned during this time. Both of these fictional stories, in turn, created influential material that was taught to members of the imperial family to lean towards a monogamous marriage style, leading to the Fujiwara’s application of marrying their daughters into the wife positions of future emperors and princes during their regency.

Conclusion

This essay works to create a framework contextualizing the romantic relationship process the Japanese Fujiwara clan needed to undergo to rise to the position of regency between the mid-9th to 11th centuries in terms of poetic expression and writing, as well as the formal practices of Heian marriage. Many of the poems and fictional literary works of the Heian period stand as a testament to how romance worked and functioned at the aristocratic level, showing the importance of relationships as a key to the process of a person moving up in Heian society. The Heian court members’ abilities to dictate the customary practices as the primary marriage system became legal codes that all aristocratic people needed to follow, a common theme carried over from the Fujiwara’s bid for power. The value of poetry pushed the recruitment of aristocratic females into the Heian court to directly serve the Fujiwara as ladies-in-waiting. It pushed Fujiwara's daughters to learn proper etiquette techniques to maintain relationships with the
imperial family. Particularly interesting is the importance of the duolocal and uxorilocal tendencies that the Fujiwara created to maintain their control over the imperial family; mostly through the Fujiwara’s ability to raise the young princes and emperors under the eyes of the Fujiwara household. It also gave power to the ruling females of the clan, elevating themselves as a critical part of the Fujiwara’s rule. The existence of polygyny relationships in Heian society was important to restrict the imperial family lineage in line during the Fujiwara’s regency. The Fujiwara, able to rise to a position of extensive political power, established their system of regency to move away from the practice of polygyny. The choice of a primary wife became the tool for men to rank up in the Heian court, and in the case of the Fujiwara, became the critical idea behind their rise to the regent role.
Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


