

THE REIGN OF THE RETIRED EMPEROR

A few years ago I went to Japan to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in Yokohama, and, on the same trip, visiting a museum in Kyoto, I came upon a collection of artifacts that were described as dating “from the time of the reign of the retired Emperor Go-Saga.”

Dating an era from the time of a *retired* emperor seemed to me an odd thing to do, and I filed the notion away in my mind as one of the many unusual aspects of the culture of that far-off island nation. Last month I was reminded of it while writing a new short story—more about that below—and I consulted Sir George Sansom’s classic and estimable three-volume history of Japan to see if I could find out what was so important about the Emperor Go-Saga that caused such chronological emphasis to be placed on him, thus discovering one of the most curious monarchical systems human beings have ever devised. It was a system, I learned, in which the emperor became more important by retiring from the throne than he had ever been while possessing it.

This had its origin, Sir George tells us, in a long-standing tradition among medieval Japanese nobility, the retirement of the head of a great house at an early age so that he could spend his later years free from the heavy demands of ritual and ceremony. The emperor, of course, was the highest figure of all. Since earliest times the title of emperor had always gone to the eldest son of a single family that claimed to be able to trace its ancestry back to the primordial gods. In theory the emperor held the powers of government in his own hands.

By the year 1000 or so, though, even the Japanese emperor found himself so burdened by his ceremonial duties that he had little time for anything else—and, in fact, the main executive responsibili-

ties of the throne had been taken over by a powerful aristocratic family, the Fujiwara. For two centuries from 858 onward the Fujiwara regents exercised the real imperial power in the name of the emperor, though they did not hold the imperial title itself. Thus the emperor was a mere figurehead while the house of Fujiwara ran the country.

When the Emperor Go-Sanjo came to the throne in 1068, he was determined to break the power of the Fujiwara, and bit by bit he reclaimed imperial authority from them. But his administrative tasks were complicated by the immense weight of ceremonial functions that an emperor was called upon to perform, and in the third year of his reign he hit upon an ingenious solution. He would abdicate in favor of his son Shirikawa and retire to a monastic cloister, ostensibly to devote his life to religious contemplation. But in fact he would continue to govern from the cloister, while the boy-emperor Shirikawa performed all the ceremonial duties of a monarch.

The Japanese word for such a cloister is “In,” and Go-Sanjo’s name now became Go-Sanjo In, “the cloistered Emperor Go-Sanjo.” (The prefix “Go” means that he was the second monarch of that name.) He died, however, only a year after his retirement, leaving young Shirikawa as emperor in fact as well as name.

The new emperor quickly came to see that the system of imperial retirement was the best way to hold the Fujiwara regents at bay. He ruled as sovereign until 1086, and then, at the age of thirty-three, took holy orders and entered a cloister, leaving his seven-year-old son Horikawa to hold the empty title of emperor. For the next forty-three years the cloistered Shirikawa, now called Shirikawa In, ruled the country from his monastic

seclusion while three different figure-head emperors came and went.

This strange arrangement developed serious complications when some of the figureheads began to crave royal power themselves. Toba, who had become emperor in 1107 at the age of four after the death of his father Horikawa, abdicated to the cloister when he was twenty, putting his own four-year-old son Sutoko on the throne. But now there were *two* cloistered emperors, Shirikawa In and Toba In. Conflicts developed between the retired imperial father and his retired imperial son over the next two years, until old Shirikawa's death in 1129.

The problem arose once more when Sutoko chose to retire in 1141, so that two retired emperors again vied for power. Both Toba In and Sutoko In outlived the next titular emperor, Konoye, whose place was taken in 1155 by Konoye's twenty-eight-year-old son, Go-Shirakawa, a shrewd and agile figure who made a fine art out of the cloistering system.

Within three years the retired emperors Toba and Sutoko both were dead, and Go-Shirikawa quickly took himself off to the cloister himself, where between 1158 and 1192 he maintained his imperial standing through the reigns of no less than five younger emperors. During this period, also, he deftly handled challenges from various warlord families seeking to attain the sort of power the Fujiwara family had had, playing one faction off against another to keep them at bay.

By the time of Go-Shirakawa's death in 1192 new clans—the Minamoto and the Taira—were contending for the old Fujiwara powers, and the incumbent emperor, Go-Toba, who had succeeded to the imperial title in 1184 at the age of four, was still too young to abdicate and try to rule from the cloister as Go-Shirikawa had done. Skillfully and courageously he contrived to govern without the support of a senior emperor until 1198, when, still only eighteen, he did finally withdraw to cloistered life. But the system of imperial retirement was breaking down under pressure from the Minamoto family, and

when Go-Toba In launched civil war against the current head of the Minamoto clan he was defeated and banished. He was replaced by his more cooperative brother, and the emperors once again became subordinate to one of the great warrior families, who now even took upon themselves the right to determine the succession to the throne.

This was not the last of the system of abdication, though. Control of the government had now fallen to the Hojo family, but there still were advantages to being a cloistered emperor. The actual emperor had neither power nor wealth: he was, as Sansom puts it, "a mere prisoner of ceremonial." It was the *retired* emperor who retained control of the imperial estates, which provided him with a vast income that caused the great nobles and high officials to cluster about him, eager to perform services for him. And so each new emperor, upon inheriting the imperial property at the death of the previous retired emperor, would retire as quickly as possible himself, handing the wearisome ceremonial duties off to his hapless successor and withdrawing from the court to enjoy the benefits of his riches.

This practice created difficulties when the Emperor Go-Saga retired after a reign of only four years, 1242-1246, leaving the throne to his young son Go-Fukusaka. But Go-Saga actually preferred his second son, Kameyama, and in 1259 the retired emperor forced Go-Fukasaka to abdicate in Kameyama's favor. Go-Fukusaka thus became the junior retired emperor, without power or wealth, and his younger brother Kameyama, as titular emperor, now stood to inherit the imperial estates upon Go-Saga's death, which occurred in 1272.

Alas, Kameyama found the imperial duties very little to his liking, and in 1274, at the age of twenty-six, he abdicated in favor of his son Go-Uda. This angered his older brother Go-Fukusaka, who had expected to place his own son on the throne once Kameyama was out of the way. War threatened between the two

branches of the imperial family. The Hojo regents managed to work out a bizarre compromise in which the succession to the throne would alternate between the two sets of claimants, and in the next thirty years five boy-emperors took their turns, each one quickly abdicating, until at last, in 1313, the throne came to Go-Uda's son Go-Daigo, who was, unlike his recent predecessors, not a child at all—he was past thirty and wanted not only the imperial title but also the governing power that once had gone with it. This, of course, wrecked the whole system: civil war broke out, Go-Daigo was forced to flee from the capital, the regents named their own emperor, and for the next fifty years Japan had two royal courts and two emperors until the war of succession was eventually resolved by the advent of new warlords who forced a unification of the imperial courts in 1392.

A strange system indeed, this business of the holding of power by retired emperors, but it did have a curious logic of its own.

And I seem to have invented a somewhat similar system myself for use in the books and stories I've written over the past thirty years that are set on the giant planet of Majipoor—beginning with the novel *Lord Valentine's Castle*, which was published in 1980, and continuing most recently with the short story "The End of the Line" written last month for *Asimov's Science Fiction*.*

I postulated a dual monarchy for Majipoor: a senior monarch whom I called the Pontifex (the Latin word for "bridge-builder") who formulated policy, and a junior one, the Coronal Lord, or, simply, the Coronal (because his symbol of office was the coronet that he wore), whose responsibility it was to execute that policy. Each Pontifex chose his own Coronal. When a Pontifex died, the Coronal would succeed to his title and choose a Coronal of his own.

The resemblance to the Japanese system, about which I knew nothing at

all when I wrote the first Majipoor book, emerges from the fact that the Pontifex lives in retirement, dwelling in a huge subterranean city known as the Labyrinth. He is rarely if ever seen in the world above; it is the Coronal, the younger monarch, who is the public face of the regime, constantly traveling to and fro across gigantic Majipoor to take part in endless formal ceremonies. From time to time he visits the Labyrinth to consult the older man on matters of policy; and whenever war breaks out, it is the Coronal who commands the troops, though the Pontifex dictates tactics from his hidden underground lair.

One consequence of the Majipoor system was that the Coronal often did not want to give up his active life and disappear into the gloomy retirement of the Labyrinth, and I told of at least one instance in which an aged and senile Pontifex is kept on life support for decades so that his Coronal can avoid succession to the senior title. (Eventually he is unable to stave off the inevitable, though, because the world needs two functional monarchs.) On another occasion, a Pontifex who has come to hate life in the Labyrinth feigns insanity, abdicates, and touches off a weird constitutional crisis. That story, "Calintane Explains," was published in *Asimov's* in 1982.

I wish I had known something about Japanese imperial history when I was writing the Majipoor stories. I might have tried a story about two rival lines of succession such as came into being as a result of Go-Daigo's rebellion against the system. (I did do a novel about a civil war between rival Coronals—*Sorcerers of Majipoor*—but it simply involved the standard sort of usurpation of the throne.) But it's too late for that now. Now that I've written this column, everyone will know where I got the idea, and I can't have that. I want you all to believe that I just make those stories up, after all. ○

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* And published in our August 2011 issue.—Ed.