

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE TACHIBANA NARAMARO CONSPIRACY

This is a translation of the material in *Shoku Nihongi* concerning the abortive plot of Tachibana Naramaro 橘奈良麻呂 in 757. The chronicle records the rapid suppression of the attempt, the interrogation and punishment of the plotters, and the change of the era name to Tempyō Hōji. (Although the events in question are dated Tempyō Hōji 1 in the chronicle, this dating is retroactive, the era name not changing from Tempyō Shōhō 9 until the eighth month.) To facilitate reading, court ranks and *kabane* are usually dropped from names, except in those sections where the conferral of promotions is significant. Editions of *Shoku Nihongi* consulted are listed at the end of the translation.

Much of the narrative comprises a series of imperial edicts. The reigning emperor is Kōken Tennō, the “Last Empress”. The Dowager Empress is Kōmyō Kōgō, the widow of the retired Emperor Shōmu, who died the previous year. At the opening of the narrative, both Kōken and Kōmyō are in residence at the mansion of Fujiwara Nakamaro, the Tamuradai, due to repairs at the Heijō Palace.

Victor Mair very kindly read and suggested improvements to the manuscript. Errors of course are my own.

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757 – 6.28

Two years ago, in the eleventh month, the Retired Emperor Shōmu was ill. At that time a close retainer of the Sadaijin Tachibana Moroe [[Naramaro's father](#)] reported:

“When Lord Tachibana Moroe was drinking in the garden he made some ill-advised comments and treasonous remarks.”

The Retired Emperor magnanimously forebore to punish him. Moroe, being sensible of this, resigned the following year. Then an edict [*choku* - 勅] was issued summoning the Governor of Echizen, who was asked what he knew of this. The Governor replied that he had not heard of the matter, but that Saeki Matanari might know about it. When Matanari was questioned, the Dowager Empress interrogated him closely, but the matter was finally dropped. (The details are in the *Tamuraki*.)

Then today (6.28) Prince Yamashiro reported:

“Tachibana Naramaro is planning treason and gathering soldiers – he intends to surround the Tamura no Miya [[Fujiwara Nakamaro’s mansion, where Kōken Tennō and the Dowager Empress Kōmyō were in residence](#)]. Ōtomo Komaro also knows of this matter.”

757 – 7.2

An edict [*shō* 詔 – *Senmyō 16*] of Emperor Kōken was read:

“Recently it has come to Our attention that among the princes and nobles there are those with treacherous and treasonous hearts. They have plotted saying ‘Let us surround the palace’, and have secretly prepared their own private forces. And although We are gravely concerned, wondering how there can be even one such wretch who would harbor treason against Our court, these conspirators have not been dealt with according to the law. Since these rebellious intentions have been reported to us by several people, should they not have been censured? Should not compassionate governance have been carried

out and the insubordination pacified? As there is this troublesome affair in the empire, the stubborn hearts of these deluded and misguided servants should with graciousness be corrected – thus We decree. Subjects should be investigated and questioned. Those who do not submit to this decree, although We cherish them, should be dealt with according to the laws of the land. Let everyone receive the edict of the Sovereign, and strive not to bring shame upon the reputation of their ancestral families and households.”

After the reading of the edict was finished, officials from the Udaijin on down were summoned again, and the Dowager Empress gave another edict [*shō – Senmyō 17*]:

“You are all Our close relatives, our nephews. Furthermore, all you high officials frequently received the late Retired Emperor Shōmu’s edicts commanding: ‘After Our death, serve the Dowager Empress and aid her well.’ Moreover, Lords Ōtomo and Saeki have from distant antiquity served as the close military retainers and guards of the Emperors, and you, the Ōtomo, are indeed of our own family. When all of you serve the Emperor with one heart such rebellious intentions are unheard of. It is only due to your inner weakness that such things can occur. We command that all of you serve your Emperor and aid Her with pure and bright hearts.”

That evening Hidatsu of the palace guard reported to the Naishō Fujiwara Nakamaro:

“Today at the hour of the ram the former Governor of Bizen Ono Azumahito said to me, ‘The princes are plotting to kill the Crown Prince and the Naishō – you should join us.’”

I, Hidatsu, asked, ‘Who are the princes?’ Azumahito replied, ‘Prince Kibumi, Prince Asukabe, Tachibana Naramaro, Ōtomo Komaro, and a very great number of their companions.’

I, Hidatsu, inquired further, ‘How do they plan to accomplish it?’

Azumahito replied, ‘In two stages. The first is to lead 400 horsemen to surround the Tamura Mansion. The second part is for the Shogun Ōtomo Komaro, who is now proceeding to his post, to halt when he arrives at the Mino Barrier. There he will feign illness, summon his kinsmen, bribe the officials, and close the Barrier.’

I, Hidatsu, after hesitating for some time, said ‘I would not dare to join this plot.’ “

Before this, in the sixth month, the Udaiben Kose Sakaimaro secretly reported:

“I went to the residence of Taho Chūsetsu to inquire about medical treatment. At that time Chūsetsu told me, ‘Ōtomo Komaro spoke to Ono Azumahito of a plan to overthrow the Naishō and asked if he wanted to join. Azumahito said yes. I informed the Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari of this matter, and he replied ‘I will exhort them not to kill the young Dainagon Nakamaro.’ “

On this day Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari reported these matters in detail to Fujiwara Nakamaro. Nakamaro had the inner and outer gates of the palace [[the Tamura Mansion](#)] put under close guard. He dispatched Koma Fukushin and others to lead troops to pursue and capture Ono Azumahito and Taho Chūsetsu. They were arrested and confined in the Left Guard headquarters. Nakamaro also sent troops to surround the mansion of Prince Funado.

757 – 7.3

An edict [*choku*] was issued to the Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari, the Chūnagon Fujiwara Nagate, and eight others to proceed to the Left Guard headquarters and interrogate Azumahito and the others. Azumahito firmly stated that he had nothing to say. That evening the Naishō Nakamaro went to the Palace and summoned Prince Shioyaki, Prince Asukabe, Prince Kibumi, Tachibana Naramaro, and Ōtomo Komaro. An edict [*shō – Senmyō 18*] from the Dowager Empress was read:

“It has been reported that Shioyaki and the others are plotting treason. You are all my close relatives, and it is inconceivable that even one of you would turn against me. We have treated you with high regard – how can you harbor any resentment toward us? Such a thing cannot be! Therefore I pardon your crimes. Let things be as formerly – so I decree.”

When the rescript was finished, the five persons retired through the southern gate. They bowed their heads to the floor in gratitude for the merciful edict.

757 – 7.4

There was an edict [*shō*] summoning the Dainagon Fujiwara Nagate to interrogate Azumahito and others. Azumahito confessed:

“It is all true. It is just as Hidatsu says. During the sixth month of this year we met and conspired three times. The first occasion was at the home of Tachibana Naramaro, the second in the garden of the library storehouse in the Palace, the third in the garden of the Dajōkan no In. The conspirators were Prince Asukabe, Prince Kibumi, Tachibana

Naramaro, Ōtomo Komaro, Tajihi Kōshikai, Tajihi Iyamaro, Ōtomo Ikenushi, Tajihi Takanushi, and Ōtomo Ehito. As for the others, it was dark and I could not see their faces. In the garden, we bowed to Heaven and Earth and the Four Directions, drank salt water, and swore: ‘On the second day of the seventh month, at dusk, we will dispatch troops and surround the Naishō Fujiwara Nakamaro’s mansion, kill him, then surround the Palace and do away with Crown Prince Ōi. Then we will go to the Dowager Empress’ palace and seize the bells and seals. We will summon the Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari and instruct him to depose the Emperor Kōken and choose among the four princes and enthrone one as Emperor.’

Then the persons named in Azumahito’s confession were rounded up and imprisoned, and each was interrogated separately. The first to be questioned was Prince Asukabe, and he confessed:

“This year, on the evening of the twenty-ninth of the sixth month, Prince Kibumi came to see me and said that Tachibana Naramaro wished to speak with me. I followed Prince Kibumi and went to the garden of the Dajōkan no In. There were already about twenty people. One of them came and greeted me formally. When he approached, I could see his face – it was Naramaro. There was also someone dressed in white; I saw that it was Azumahito. People said, ‘The hour is already late – let us stand and swear.’ I said, ‘I don’t understand. What are they swearing?’ Someone replied, ‘We are taking an oath to Heaven and Earth.’ I still did not understand, but I stood and swore with the rest. I was deceived.’ “

Then Kibumi, Naramaro, Komaro and Tajihi Kōshikai were questioned. Although their accounts varied somewhat, the substance was the same. Then the interrogators questioned Naramaro and asked him, “Why did you plot treason?”

Naramaro replied, “The Naishō Fujiwara Nakamaro’s government policies were exceedingly wicked. Therefore I planned to first raise troops and then, on behalf of the Emperor, to state our concerns.”

He was asked, “When you criticize his policies, what exactly are you referring to?”

Naramaro answered, “In constructing the Tōdaiji he caused the people great suffering. Also, various of the great families were made to suffer. Barriers were erected to collect tolls on the roads to the capital, thereby inflicting great hardship.”

Then they asked him, “Which of the great families do you mean? Also, the plan to construct the temple dates to your father’s time and was your own father’s policy – how can you now say it is causing hardship?”

To this Naramaro had no answer, and he was silent.

Next the interrogators questioned Saeki Kohina. He said:

“Kamo Tsunotari invited Koma Fukushin, Nakai Ōkimi, Sakanoue Karitamaro, Kose Nahemaro, and Oshika Shimatari to drink sake at the Nukatabe Mansion south of Nara. His intention was to plan a specific time for the uprising. They plotted together and drew up a map of the Tamura Palace, indicating which road’s led to Nakamaro’s mansion.”

Following this the various plotters were all confined to jail, and the guard units were dispatched to arrest other conspirators. The Governor of Izumo, the Assistant Governor of Dazaifu, and five

others were sent out leading the soldiers of the guard. They went to the prisons and conducted severe interrogations with beatings. Prince Kibumi, Prince Funado, Ōtomo Komaro, Tajihi Kōshikai, Ono Azumahito, and Kamo Tsunotari were beaten to death with the heavy stick. Since they were imperial princes, Kibumi's name was first changed to "Tabure" ("lunatic") and Funado's to "Matohi" ("misguided"). Kamo's surname was changed to "Noroshi" ("foolish"). Prince Asukabe with his women and children were sent to distant exile on Sado Island. The Governor of Shinano, Saeki Ōnari, and the Governor of Tosa, Ōtomo Koshihi, were sent down to take their offices in the respective provinces [Shinano = medium exile; Tosa = distant exile]. Of the group of conspirators, some died in prison and the others were exiled according to the law.

A messenger was sent to summon the Governor of Ōmi, Tajihi Kunihiro, and he was interrogated. What he said was in accord with the testimony of the others. He was sent to distant exile in Izu.

Then an edict [*choku*] was sent to Mutsu to have the governor, Saeki Matanari, interrogated. He said:

“In Tempyō 17 (745) when the former Emperor Shōmu visited Naniwa, he was taken ill and was sick for some time. At that point Tachibana Naramaro spoke to me and said, ‘His Majesty is quite ill and may not recover at all. Moreover, he has not designated a successor [in fact he had named Kōken as Crown Prince in 738]. I am afraid this will lead to disorder. I propose that you and I, with Tajihi Kunihiro, Tajihi Kōshikai, and Ono Azumahito, set up Prince Kibumi as Emperor, thus responding to the wishes of the people. If the Ōtomo and Saeki families will lead this coup, no enemy can stand before us. Now the empire is troubled, people's dwellings are unsettled, and on the roads people are crying out and lamenting in great numbers [likely due to construction of the new capital

at Kuni]. Thus if we plan carefully, the thing can be accomplished. Are you with me or against me?’ I replied, ‘My ancestors have always served the sovereign purely and brightly. Although I am but a humble fool, how can I abandon the conduct of my forebears? Even though you attempt and accomplish your plan, I don’t think I can be a part of it.’ Naramaro replied, ‘I can only state frankly what I think when I see the lamentable condition of the empire. Do not tell others about this.’ When our conversation was over, I returned home. Later, on the occasion of the *Ōnamesai* after the coronation of Kōken (749), Naramaro again spoke to me:

‘I am planning to do the thing we spoke of previously. What do you think?’

I replied, ‘The court has just honored me with a promotion in rank. How then would I dare to turn against Heaven and undertake a wicked and rebellious course of action? I have already declined your suggestion on a previous occasion. How could I join you now?’ Naramaro said, ‘You and I are close friends, and so I have spoken to you about it. I beg that you do not tell others.’

Then last year, in the fourth month [two months before Shōmu’s death] I brought a shipment of gold to the capital. At that time Naramaro spoke to me again: ‘Have you spoken with Ōtomo Komaro?’ I replied that I had not been able to. Then Naramaro asked me to accompany him to speak with Komaro. We went together to the the Benkan on the Palace grounds and met with him. At length Naramaro said, ‘Shōmu is in ill health and this has continued for almost half a year. It does not seem that he will hold out much longer. The empire is in disorder and people’s hearts are greatly disturbed. If with the other great families the Tachibana cannot set up a prince as sovereign, we will perish. I

beg you to lead the Ōtomo and Saeki and set up Prince Kibumi as Emperor. If you take the lead, the other families will follow, and this will be the foundation of stability for many generations.’ Komaro said, ‘The Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari and the Dainagon Fujiwara Nakamaro are only two men, but they hold the reigns of power firmly in their grasp. If you set up Kibumi as Emperor, I doubt that the other families will follow. I advise you not to speak further of it.’ I, Matanari, said, ‘This is in fact an evil plan. Even if it could be done successfully, how could we retain our good names?’ After saying this I returned home. Naramaro and Komaro remained in the Benkan. I heard nothing further of their discussions.’

After the interrogation Matanari strangled himself.

757 – 7.5

Junior 4th Upper Rank Yamashiro no Ōkimi and Kose Sakaimaro were both awarded the Junior 3rd Rank. Junior 8th Upper Rank Kamitisumichi Hidatsu was awarded Junior 4th Lower Rank. Senior 7th Lower Rank Agata Inukai Samimaro and Junior 8th Upper Rank Sami Miyamori were both awarded the Junior 5th Lower Rank. This was due to their secret reports concerning Naramaro’s conspiracy. Also, Kamitsumichi Hidatsu was awarded the *kabane* of Ason.

757 – 7.8

Senior 6th Upper Rank Fujiwara Asakari was awarded the Junior 5th Lower Rank. Junior 5th Lower Rank Imbe Torimaro was appointed the Governor of Shinano. Junior 5th Lower Rank Fujiwara Asakari was appointed Governor of Mutsu [in place of Saeki Matanari].

An edict [*choku*] was pronounced:

“Recently the obstinate and rebellious subjects secretly plotted treason. But the heavenly *kami* did not overlook their offence – they were snared in the Sovereign’s heavenly net, and they were punished for their crimes. Now if there are any who, pretending to communicate with the dead spirits of those punished, report false rumors in the towns and villages and stir up disturbances among the people, they should all be punished for the same offense as the conspirators, regardless of the severity of their own crimes. Let this be promulgated over all the country, so that the root of the troubles be eradicated.”

Then another edict [*choku*] was proclaimed:

“If there are any other traitors among the people, let them give themselves up. Those in the Kinai have ten days to surrender, and those in further areas have thirty days. If they surrender themselves within this time, they shall be pardoned. If they do not surrender and are reported, their punishment shall be the same as for the original crime of treason. They should turn themselves in to the appropriate authorities of their areas. If the officials have knowledge of such persons, they should report it to the Court.”

757 – 7.9

The Chūnagon Fujiawara Nagate and the Captain of the Left Guards Sakanoue Inukai were dispatched to the mansion of the Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari, where they read the following rescript [*choku*]:

“Your son Otonawa was involved in the conspiracy. Kindly arrest him and present him to the Court.”

Then Otonawa, his arms bound, was presented to the Chokushi [[Nagate and Inukai](#)]. The Shibi Shohitsu Junior 3rd Rank Kose Sakahimaro was given a dual appointment of Sadaiben [[he had already been given Ōtomo Komaro's office](#)]. Junior 4th Upper Rank Kiasou Ihimaro was appointed Udaiben. The Shungū Daibu Junior 4th Rank Saeki Emishi was given a dual appointment as Commander of the Right Capital. Junior 4th Lower Rank Kamitsumichi Hidatsu was made Lesser Commander of the Central Guards.

757 – 7.12

Junior 5th Lower Rank Ono Tamori was appointed Gyōbushōfu. Senior 6th Upper Rank Fujiwara Otomaro was appointed Lieutenant Deputy of Hyuga. Junior 5th Lower Rank Naka Ōkimi was made Governor of Sanuki.

An edict [*choku*] was read:

“The Udaijin Fujiwara Toyonari was not loyal and upright in serving the Sovereign as an official. He privately associated himself with the traitorous party and secretly cursed the Naishō Nakamaro. He had some inkling of the plans for the conspiracy, yet he did not report it to the Emperor. Even when the plot was exposed he did not thoroughly investigate. If through his lack of responsibility things had continued for a few more days the Court would have been destroyed. Ah, how can the position of Chief Minister be handled thus? He is to be stripped of his office of Udaijin and sent to be the Lieutenant Deputy of Dazaifu.”

On this day Kōken Tennō went to the Nan'in in the southern part of the palace grounds. All the officials, from the village heads of the capital region and the Kinai on up were summoned and an edict [*shō – Senmyō 19*] was proclaimed:

“Let the words of the Manifest Deity, Yamato Neko Sumera, ruling the Great Land of the Eight Islands, be proclaimed and let all pay heed – all the Imperial Princes, Princes, the Ōmi, the Hundred Officials and Lesser Officials of all under Heaven – let all give ear, thus I proclaim. The Throne of Heavenly Sun Succession, established and ruled over by the August Imperial Male and Female Deities seated in the High Plain of Heaven has been attacked by evil and treacherous slaves seeking to wrest the Succession away by force. These evildoers – Kuna Tabure, Matohi, Naramaro, Komaro and others – leading a party of traitors sought to 1) surround the mansion of the Naishō and kill him; 2) surround the palace of the Crown Prince and set him aside; 3) descend on the palace of the Empress Dowager and steal the bells, seals and tokens; 4) and summon the Udaijin and put the rulership into his hands. Next they planned to depose the Mikado [Kōken] and to put one of the four princes on the throne.

On the night of the 29th of the sixth month, they met in the garden of the Dajōkan, drank salt water and swore an oath, and bowed to Heaven and Earth and the Four Corners, concluding their plot to raise troops and attack on the second day of the seventh month. On the afternoon of the second day, at the hour of the ram, Ono Azumahito called upon the Governor of Hizen and Official of the Palace Guard Kamitsumichi Hidatsu and invited him to join the attack. Hidatsu dissembled, pretending to agree, but at the hour of the boar reported all the details to the Court. Thus the conspirators were interrogated and all the details of Hidatus’s report proving to be true, the guilty were punished.

Now according to the law all were guilty of high treason and deserved death. However, We in Our mercy lightened the sentence and merely changed the *kabane* of some or sentenced them to distant exile. That the filthy and detestable wretches have been swept

away is indeed due to the compassion and protection of the *kami* of Heaven and Earth and the awesome and majestic *mitama* of the Imperial Sovereigns who have ruled from the Creation. Further is this due to the incredible power of the Rushana Nyōrai, Kanzeon Bodhisattva, and the Protectors of the Law – Brahma, Indra, and the Four Great Heavenly Kings. Thus the plotters have all been completely punished. These are the divine words of the Sumera who reigns and pronounces even as a god – let all hear these words, I the herald proclaim.

Finally, the common people who were deceived by Kuna Tabure (the former Prince Funado) are not fit to besmirch the soil of the Capital. Therefore let them be moved to Okachi Village in Dewa Province to farm the land. These are the divine words of the Sovereign. Let all hear them – thus I the herald proclaim.”

757 – 7.16

An edict [*choku*] was issued:

“The party of wicked traitors secretly conspired to violate the law. The plot was discovered and many were exiled to farm in Dewa to provide support for the army there. However, weapons intended for the uprising have been concealed among the people and all have not yet been found by the officials. All officials in the capital should look into this matter and within ten days of this edict the investigation should be conclusively completed. If after that time people are reported to be harboring weapons, they should receive exactly the same punishment as the traitors.

757 – 7.24

A meal was prepared for priests within the palace and the *Ninnōkyō* was to be expounded.

757 – 7.27

An edict [*shō – Senmyō 20*] was proclaimed:

“Although Prince Shioyaki was numbered among the four princes who were to be candidates for Emperor, he did not himself attend the conspiratorial meetings in the palace, and he had no knowledge of the plot. However, since he is the older brother of Prince Funado, he was sentenced to distant exile. Nevertheless, his father Imperial Prince Niitabe served the Court loyally with a clear and bright heart. Now we pardon Prince Shioyaki so that his father’s house should not come to an end. From now on let him also serve the Court loyally with a pure and regenerated heart – thus We proclaim.

757 – 8.2

There was an edict [*choku*]:

“Due to her faithful service as Our wet nurse, We bestowed the *kabane* of *Sukune* on Junior 5th Lower Rank Yamada Mii Himeshima. So deep was Our favor that it overflowed, and this *kabane* was also given to her family. Regretfully, she heeded the words of Naramaro and failed to serve Us truthfully. She associated with the evildoers and, in particular, concealed their plans. When We heard of this, Our hair stood on end. Our heart was deeply wounded and We wondered what could be the reason for such despicable behavior. Thus We can no longer call her “mother”, and We strip her of the title *Sukune* – she shall revert to her former name of Yamada Fuhito.”

757 – 8.4

An edict [*shō – Senmyō 21*] was proclaimed:

“The Hata who were approached by Naramaro when he sought to raise an army have been sent into distant exile. Let those Hata who remain serve the Court with clear and bright hearts, renouncing all evil. Thus I the herald proclaim.”

A further edict [*shō – Senmyō 22*] was proclaimed:

“During the recent crisis, there were those who served the Court loyally with clear and bright hearts and thus We were able to govern and suppress the conspiracy. These are to be commended and a number of them shall be rewarded with Court rank. Thus I the herald proclaim.”

[lengthy list of promotions and appointments]

An edict [*choku*] was issued:

“The Chunagon Tajihi Hirotari has become weak due to his age, and thus he was not able to properly control his nephews who joined the rebellion. Such a person is not fit for high office. He is stripped of office and rank and should return to his home.”

757 – 8.13

Kanasashi Toneri Maji, a person of Yakizu District in Suruga Province, presented a cocoon on which characters had been woven by a silkworm.

An edict [*choku*] was issued:

“We, though of little virtue, have with gratitude inherited the throne, and have now for nine years reigned over the eight directions. But We have grieved day and night that we are not adequate to the task of good government. It is as though We are treading on thin ice, anxiously standing at the edge of the depths.¹

However, on the twentieth day of the third month Heaven bestowed the omen of the four characters – “Tenka Taihei” 天下太平 – as a sign of peace in the land, indicating that the Court will long continue to be strong. [These characters appeared miraculously on the tapestries of the Imperial bedchamber.] But the traitorous deposed Crown Prince [Funado], Prince Asukabe, Prince Kibumi, Tachibana Naramaro, Ōtomo Komaro, Ōtomo Koshihi, Tajihiko Kunihito, Kamo Tsunotari, Tajihiko Kōshikai, Saeki Matanari, Ono Azumahito, Ōtomo Surugamaro, Taho Chūsetsu and others, with their obstinate and rebellious natures and dark deplorable hearts turned away from the proper Way of lord and subject. Fearing not even the evil deities, they secretly formed a group of traitors and plotted to overthrow the ancestral deities. They received Heaven’s chastisement and all

¹*Shoku Nihongi*: 危若臨淵.慎如履冰. Compare:

戰戰兢兢、如臨深淵、如履薄冰 *Book of Odes* 195 (SKT 111: 334)

戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰 *Analects* 8:3 (SKT 1: 177)

戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰 *Filial Piety* 諸侯 - *Filial Piety in the Princes of States* (SKT 35:111)

were subjected to punishment. It is just as when those two younger brothers spread false rumors² to stir up internal dissension³ but were punished by the Duke of Chou. It is like the time when the four evildoers in the time of Shun were banished to the furthest corners of the realm.⁴ Now the Court officials have rectified matters; there are no more foolish courtiers; order has been established and wise officials again hold sway. Secretly We feared that Our virtue was not like that of Shun and Our fortune was to live in disordered times. We feared that Our military skill was clumsier than that of Yin Tou [[who overthrew the Hsia dynasty](#)], and that Our reign would encounter the outbreak of chaos. Day and night We were consumed with apprehension, and We could neither eat nor sleep. We were deeply worried that We could not bring virtue or long life nor extend civilization among the people.

Then a person of Yakizu District in Suruga province presented the silkworm cocoon on which letters had formed. The characters were:

五月八日開下帝稷標和天皇命百年息

Now although the country was astonished and overjoyed at receiving this marvelous omen yet We were fearful and uncertain as to its meaning. Therefore we commanded the officials to interpret it. They reported, saying:

² *Book of History*, (SKT 25: 171)

³ *Analects*, (SKT 1:) *Ji Shi* 吾恐季孫之憂，不在_與，而在蕭牆之內也 “I am afraid that the sorrow of the Ji Sun family will not be on account of Zhuan Yu, but will be found within the screen of their own court.”

⁴ *Book of History*, (SKT 25:35)

‘This means the eighth day of the fifth month of Tempyō Shōhō 9, the current year. It refers to the feast for the Buddhist priests upon the conclusion of the *Keka* ritual, on the occasion of the late Retired Emperor Shōmu’s death anniversary ceremonies. [Shōmu died on 5.8 of the previous year.] It means that Taishaku Ten [Indra] has been moved by the faith of Kōken Tennō and the Dowager Empress, has opened the gate to the heavenly world and looked down on the accomplishments of their Majesties in the earthly world below, and has granted that the Imperial reign shall continue for a hundred years. Everywhere that the sun and moon shine down will reflect the prosperity of the Imperial descendants, and all on earth will understand that their reign shall be long. This omen is a sign that virtue will be diffused afar, that the realm will be peaceful, that compassion will be spread abroad, and that the state will be completely in order. We reflect gratefully that although the silkworm has markings like a tiger, it periodically sheds its skin to provide silk. Although it has a mouth resembling that of a horse it does not strive furiously. It dwells long in its cocoon and provides clothing to all under heaven. From its threads are made magnificent brocades and embroidered cloth, and the splendid clothing for court ritual and festivals. That this divine insect has produced words on its cocoon reveals a divine mystery. These divine characters, referring to the eighth day of the fifth month have been spontaneously generated at a time of uncertainty and offered up to the court. This is indeed a sign of aid from Heaven, an extraordinarily lucky omen. The numbers ‘five’ and ‘eight’ indicated that the Emperor’s years will be beyond forty. [Kōken was born

in 718] The characters ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ together form the word ‘bright’ and indicate that the imperial palace will endure forever.’

“With great joy and gratefulness We received this good omen, and We reflect fearfully that Our own virtue is insubstantial. We consider that this sign has not been manifested due to Our own strength alone, but because of the meritorious assistance of Our wise counselors. Sovereign and officials together are grateful for this blessing. Now the providential command has been vouchsafed, and this is the beginning of a tremendous celebration. We should like to extend this good fortune over all the realm, and thus on this day, the 18th day of the eighth month of Tempyō Shōhō 9, we proclaim the change of the year to Tempyō Hōji 1.

In a previous edict it was proclaimed ‘Let there be an exemption for one year from tax in kind and corvée in one district of each province throughout the land!’ Now let that same exemption apply for one year in the other districts of each province. Let the confiscated property of the rebellious brigands be distributed widely and equally among the officials and the people.

Furthermore, according to the law the general corvée should be sixty days or less. Recently the provincial and district officials have not been abiding by the law’s intention, and have been stretching it to the limit. This has become a cause of great suffering to the people. From this day forward the number of days should be reduced by half.

The people have become overburdened with public and private debt, and that they have not been able to repay it is due to their poverty, and truly not to their

attempting to cheat. The ancients had a saying – ‘Take from the place that has plenty and give to that which has not enough – that is the Way of Heaven.’⁵ Thus the interest on private seed rice loans from before last year is forgiven.

This year the late crop has been damaged by drought. Therefore half the rice tax throughout the realm is forgiven. Only the sustenance lands for the temples and shrines [*literally* ‘*kami*’] are excepted.

The person who presented the omen – the commoner Kanakishi Toneri Maji – is granted the Lower 6th Rank, Upper Grade, and presented with 20 bolts of silk cloth, 40 pieces of silk wadding, 80 pieces of cotton cloth, and 2000 bushels [*koku*] of tax grain. The messenger who delivered the omen – Lesser Captain of the Middle Guard Kamo Kimi Tsugite – is granted the Junior 8th Rank, Lower Grade, and presented with 10 bolts of silk cloth, 20 pieces of silk wadding, and 20 pieces of cotton cloth. Those provincial and district officials who failed to notify the Court of this omen are given no reward. However, the peasants of the district are exempted from one year of corvée labor.”

⁵ *Shoku Nihongi*: 損有餘補不足。天之道也。 Compare: 天之道，損有餘而補不足。 *Tao Te Ching* 77 (SKT 7:125)

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