

# Silkworms and Babies to the Emperor

## An Episode in *Nihon Shoki*

天皇所欲者，蠶兒乎？嬰兒乎？— 『日本書紀』幽默小品

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In the otherwise official and formal history of early Japan, it is entertaining to enjoy a humorous episode in Chapter 14 of *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), generally known as the Chronicle of Japan. This episode in the chapter on Emperor Yūryaku is therefore presented here in the original classical Chinese together with an English translation.

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Completed in 720 CE under royal auspices, *Nihon Shoki* tells the development of Japan from the beginning of heaven and earth, through the Eastern Expedition of Emperor Jinmu, to the time of Empress Jitō (持統天皇, Jitō Tennō) who reigned until 697 CE. Principally a year-by-year record of each emperor's or empress' reign, the 30-chapter text describes the emperors' spouses and offspring, major events, minor anecdotes, battles, conspiracies, diplomatic and cultural relations with the kingdoms in the Korean peninsula and with China, as well as myths and religion.

Except for the transcription of songs or verses with the use of the so-called *Man'yōgana* (万葉仮名, that is, transliteration of spoken Japanese pronunciation in Chinese characters), the entire text of *Nihon Shoki* is in classical Chinese, then the common written language of East Asia. Thus, to Chinese people with the ability to read and understand classical Chinese, the original text of *Nihon Shoki* would not pose too much difficulty in comprehension.

The English translation in the following is based directly on the original text in the 5-volume pocket edition published by Iwanami Shoten in Tokyo (『日本書紀』, 岩波文庫 (東京: 岩波書店, 1994-1995)).\* The detailed notes in the Iwanami edition are very helpful.

**Nihon Shoki** Chapter Fourteen

Yūryaku Tennō

**Collecting Babies Instead of Silkworms for the Emperor**

On Day Seven in the Third Month of Year Six, the emperor intended to let his queen and consorts perform the ceremony of picking mulberry leaves in order to promote sericulture.<sup>8</sup> He ordered Sugaru<sup>9</sup> to collect silkworms throughout the state. Then, Sugaru mistakenly gathered babies<sup>10</sup> and presented them to the emperor. The emperor broke into big laughter. He bestowed the babies to Sugaru, saying, “It is better that you rear them.” Thus Sugaru reared the babies by the palace walls, and the emperor conferred on him the hereditary kabane title<sup>11</sup> of Chiisakobe no Muraji.<sup>12</sup> In the Fourth Month in summer, the Kingdom of Wu sent an envoy to pay tributary gifts.<sup>13</sup> (volume 3, page 420)

**日本書紀** 卷第十四

大泊瀨幼武天皇 雄略天皇

六年……、三月辛巳朔丁亥、天皇欲使后妃親桑<sup>1</sup>、以勸蠶事。爰命螺贏<sup>2</sup>聚國內蠶、於是螺贏誤聚嬰兒<sup>3</sup>、奉獻天皇。々々大咲<sup>4</sup>、賜嬰兒於螺贏曰、汝宜自養。螺贏即養嬰兒於宮墻之下、仍賜姓<sup>5</sup>為少子部連<sup>6</sup>。夏四月、吳國遣使貢獻也<sup>7</sup>。(第三冊 四二〇ページ)

## Silkworms and Babies to the Emperor

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This term “親桑” probably refers to the picking of mulberry leaves by the queen and other consorts of the emperor. This was an annual ceremonial gesture in spring to show the people the importance of sericulture. Sericulture has a history of some 5,000 or 6,000 years in China. In Japan, it probably began in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Japan probably also adopted the Chinese court ceremonies for sericulture promotion.

<sup>2</sup>The name 螺贏 (Sugaru), pronounced as 果螺 in Cantonese, is here used as the name of a person. It is actually the name of a kind of wasps, commonly known as potter wasps. In China, before the fact was clarified around the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, the belief had been that potter wasps, which were supposedly all males, caught the larvae of other insects or caterpillars and brought them back to their nests to rear them into mature insects. The fact is that potter wasps catch other insects or larvae to use as food for their own offspring. In this episode of Emperor Yūryaku, his official Sugaru (螺贏), mistakenly gathering babies instead of silkworms for the emperor, acted like a potter wasp which collects young insects, and subsequently would rear them by royal decree. Perhaps at the time of compiling *Nihon Shoki*, the compilers were not yet aware of the real life cycle of the potter wasp. The potter wasp however is regarded as a beneficial insect that feeds on harmful insects.

<sup>3</sup>The Japanese reading of the character 蠶 (蚕 is the modern form) usually is “kaiko”, but “ko” is another reading of the same character. Emperor Yūryaku must have given a verbal order to Sugaru, who misunderstood that the emperor wanted babies since babies are “ko” (子) too. Therefore he gathered babies in the state and presented them to the court. This is a humorous episode in the otherwise formal history of Japan.

<sup>4</sup>The character 咲 is the old form of the character 笑 and is pronounced the same in Cantonese.

<sup>5</sup>Kabane (姓) is “[a] hereditary title indicating the social rank and specific duty of the *uji no kami*, the chieftain of a lineage group (*uji*) who served the Yamato Court from the late 5<sup>th</sup> through the late 7<sup>th</sup> century.” (*Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993) 1:701). The top three ranks – omi (臣), muraji (連) and miyatsuko (造) – were traditionally granted to chieftains serving at the court.

<sup>6</sup>The kabane rank of 少子部連 (Chiisakobe no Muraji) indicates that Sugaru was appointed, with the rank of Muraji (連), as head of the group of young or teenage children who were attendants to the royalty at the court. The term “be” (部) refers to “hereditary occupational groups that supplied labor, goods, and other economic services to the Yamato Court and to powerful lineage groups (*uji*) from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.” (*Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993) 1:102).

<sup>7</sup>This is another instance of mentioning the paying of tribute to Japan by the Kingdom of Wu in China. This is simply unimaginable. Perhaps Japan, in its official history, endeavoured to reverse the tributary relationship between Japan and China in an effort to unilaterally bolster its status internationally. Diplomatic relationship between China and Japan during the 5<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century was recorded in official Chinese historical texts of the Northern and Southern Dynasties Period of China. In Japan, this period is known as the time of the Five Kings of Wa (倭の五王, Wa no Goō). From 413 CE to 502 CE, Japan’s envoys came to China over ten times, mainly to ask for investiture of official titles and recognition of the overlord status of Japan in the Korean peninsula.

<sup>8</sup>See note 1 above.

<sup>9</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>10</sup>See note 3 above.

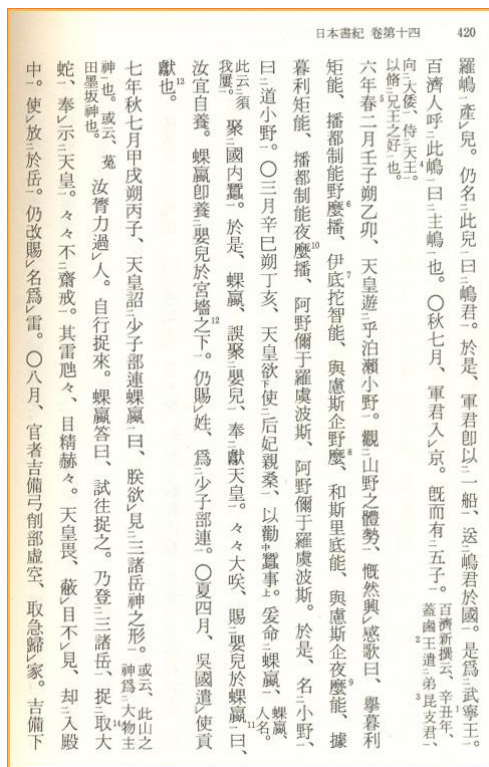
<sup>11</sup>See note 5 above.

<sup>12</sup>See note 6 above.

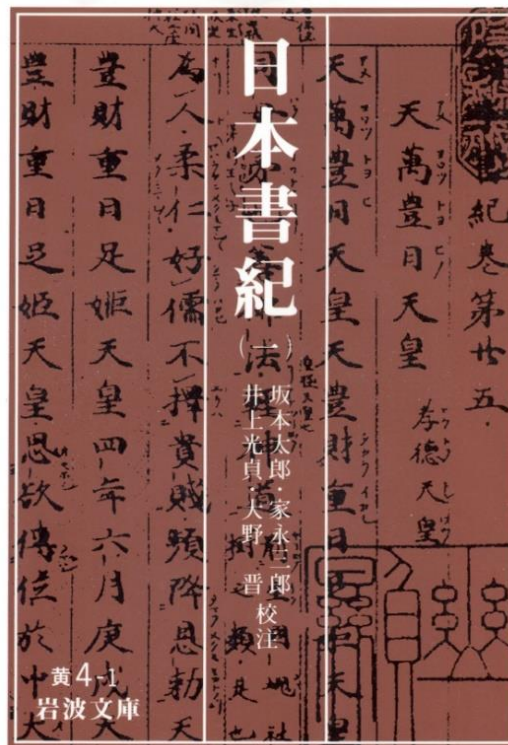
<sup>13</sup>See note 7 above.

## Silkworms and Babies to the Emperor

4



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Book jacket of volume 1 of *Nihon Shoki*  
(Iwanami Shoten pocket edition, 1994-1995, 5 volumes)

\*The publisher consulted regarding using the original text in the *Iwanami Bunko* edition for this translation.

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