Government Offices and Ranks in Japan

When we read Japanese history and classical Japanese literature, we read of emperors, retired emperors, empresses, ministers, regents, lords, etc. Sometimes there are multiple empresses, and certainly multiple ministers. Later on, during the medieval and Tokugawa periods, we read of shōgun, daimyō, and various ranking samurai. What do all these ranks mean? Without an appreciation of who stands where, it is hard to understand the gravity of any situation (those of you who have spent any time in a Japanese environment know that this is true even today). There is a very detailed description of ranks in Miner’s Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature, which you are encouraged to read, although it is easy to get lost in the explanations. There is also a bilingual chart available from the course web site at http://www.albany.edu/eas/205/rank%20chart.htm. This is a quick-and-dirty summary of that information:

There was a formal system of ranking in the government, designated in a series of promulgations beginning with the Taihō Code in 701. The men who held these positions were usually members of the nobility. There were some positions integral to the function of the nobility that were NOT part of this system, though, so although the two systems overlap, they are not concentric.

Nobility

- Emperors/Sovereigns (tennō 天皇): This is the person who was actually “on the throne” at any given time. This rank was NOT obtained through primogeniture, it was appointed. That said, often it was the son of the emperor who followed in the imperial line. The emperor was also a shintō shaman, so his position was both political and religious.
- Cloistered Emperors (insei 院政): this is the general term which refers to the retired emperors. There were, however, categories of retired emperors. Abdicated emperors were called daijō tennō 太上天皇 or daijōkō 太上皇 or jōkō 上皇. If an emperor abdicated to take religious vows, he would be called daijōhōō (太上法皇 or 太上法王).
- Empresses/consorts (kōgō 后 or chūgū 中宮): As Miner notes, “Marriage customs were extraordinarily complex and varied over the centuries,” so you have to be careful about what you’re reading and when it was written when making judgment calls on empresses or consorts. There could be more than one empress at a time, but they would be ranked nonetheless (often by seniority). There could also be more than one consort. Both empresses and consorts would produce children for the emperor. Empresses of retired emperors (often called “empress dowagers” in English) had the title kōtaigō 皇太后 or taikōtaigō 大皇太后.
- Regents (sesshō 摂政): the regent tutored, advised, and administered for a child emperor/empress. The regent was usually a relative of the emperor/empress.
- Chancellors (kampaku 関白): the chancellor was similar to the regent, but usually was not related.
• Princes (shinnō 親王)/princesses (naishinnō 内親王): Not all children of the emperor were given this title. A child of the emperor could be designated a member of the Minamoto 源 family, or the Taira 平 family instead. These clans were created as spin-offs, if you will, of the imperial line. More on the creation and use of surnames will be covered in the unit on names.

• High Nobility (kugyō 公卿 or kuge 公家): a small group of men (less than 30). These men attended the emperor. They held the top governmental ranks (see below).

• Attendant Nobility (tenjōbito 殿上人): a larger group (between 25 and 100) who were attendants or courtiers to the emperor. They held the lower governmental ranks.

• Lesser Nobility (jige 地下): They held the lowest governmental ranks (see figures 9-1 and 9-2 in the Companion). There were hundreds of these, and they really did the bureaucratic work of the government.

**Governmental Ranks**

There was a ranking system in place before the one described below: first there was the Kan’I jūnikai system 冠位十二階 (603), then the Yakusa no kabane 八色の姓 “System of eight cognomens” (684), but these were short-lived. These ranks described below were determined for the most part by the Taihō Code 大寶律令 (701) and the Yōrō Code 養老律令 (718). Overall, the system is categorized under the Ritsuryō system (律令制), i.e., if you want to research it further, that is where you would begin. The Ritsuryō was more than just the divisions of ranks, though—it was Japan’s attempt to organize the country and emulate Tang China, and included a tax structure based on geopolitical units determined by the system.

Unfortunately, Japan did not have the infrastructure and political organization to maintain this system past the mid-Heian period. So, although the ranks discussed below still existed, the real people in charge after 1185 are either the regents or the samurai (the shogunate).

*Maj or ranks in court, in descending order, are:*

- Emperor (tennō 天皇)
- Prime Minister (daijōdaijin 太政大臣)
- Major Counsellor (dainagon 大納言)
- Middle Counsellor (chūnagon 中納言)
- Lesser Counsellor (shōnagon 小納言)
- Senior Secretary (daigeki 大外記)
- Junior Secretary (shōgeki 少外記)

There are often divisions within these ranks, designated “left,” “right,” and “center” in that order. For example, in the Prime Minister’s office, there was a Great Minister of the Left 左大臣, a Great Minister of the Right 右大臣, and a Great Minister of the Center 内大臣.
There were eight general rank divisions, with further sub-divisions (see chart). The top three divisions were held by members of the upper aristocracy (*kuge*), and those positions were coveted.

Ranks were not gained through the sort of extensive examination system promulgated by the Chinese and Koreans. Members of the aristocracy could be “promoted” for any number of reasons (but usually meritorious deeds). Promotions were generally signed off on by the emperor or regent.

**Ministries (shō 省)**
There were eight ministries, four on the “right” and four on the “left,” each of which had subdivisions of bureaus (*ryō 寮*) or offices (*tsukasa 司*). These covered both issues dealing with the care and management of the imperial family, and also governmental/academic concerns.

**Military Ranks**
After the Heian period, the samurai class became much more prominent, eventually eclipsing the power of the imperial family. The samurai, being a military organization, naturally had ranks. The top rank was the *shōgun* 将軍, under whom served many *daimyō* 大名. The power wielded by the shōgun over the centuries varied widely, and cannot be dealt with here. See the *Companion* pp. 471-473 for details.

Eventually, the samurai class infiltrated even the top three tiers of ranks, thus effectively taking over the power structure of the country. The ranking system, along with the class divisions of the Tokugawa period (samurai, peasant, artisans, and merchants) were abolished in the Meiji Restoration.

**Resources**
One can find charts of the Ritsuryō ranks in the *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese literature* along with an accompanying prose explanation. However, putting the two together in your mind can be quite difficult. There are also charts in most dictionaries of classical Japanese (*kogo jiten* 古語辞典), but they are not bilingual. There is no equivalent in Japanese studies to Hucker’s work on ranks in China. The online course chart (see above) is the only bilingual chart I know of.