

## Regent Redux

### *A Life of the Statesman-Scholar Ichijō Kaneyoshi*

BY STEVEN D. CARTER  
ANN ARBOR: CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, 1996  
278 PAGES

In *Regent Redux*, Steven D. Carter takes us inside the life of a fifteenth-century aristocratic figure who was widely celebrated in both literary and political circles. Carter's life of Ichijō Kaneyoshi opens a fascinating window for exploring a feudal society at a time of great stress.

Carter had at his disposal a wealth of literary handbooks, treatises, travel diaries, poems, and memoranda of advice to a series of shoguns and emperors. To bear on these materials Carter brings an extraordinarily sophisticated command of the period during which the Ashikaga Shogunate was in danger of collapse. Carter pays a great deal of attention to Kaneyoshi's literary works, and provides us with translations of numerous of Kaneyoshi's poems, and also with some of Kaneyoshi's prose. Since Kaneyoshi was a dominant literary figure, Carter's attention to literary analysis provides the reader with numerous insights into his subject and into the powerful place of literature in the power politics of feudal Japan.

Kaneyoshi was so important a figure as to have been Regent, a position to which only the high-born could aspire, three times during his life. Also, he gained renown through editing official literary anthologies and through his matchless command of the "establishment" style of poetry writing. As the leader of a branch of the old Fujiwara clan, Kaneyoshi sought to preserve the family's role as keeper of the literary tradition and as principal advisors to both emperors and shoguns. Since the source of the authority of old aristocratic families, such as Kaneyoshi's, lay in tradition and ceremonial matters, their status became threatened during the Ōnin War, a period characterized by marauding feudal warlords. Carter presents a vivid portrait of Kaneyoshi's struggle to maintain his ceremonial authority and later, his financial position.

Carter's study opens the door to the people, cultural traditions, and political system of fifteenth-century Japan because his characters and analysis have the "ring of truth." For the university student studying medieval Japan, Carter's book is invaluable. However, *Regent Redux* is probably not the place to begin a study of the period. Rather, it makes a superlative supplement to a general history, and presents some real people facing real dilemmas. The novice at studying the period may not understand how a political system could have an emperor, a shogun, a regent, a principal advisor, and a collection of senior clan officials, all of political import at the same time. Also, the student of European feudalism unfamiliar with feudal Japan might not make the distinction between families of military significance and old aristocratic families who traded on their own birth and prestige as "keepers of the tradition." The Marxist might not be happy with Carter's focus on the aristocratic class in a class-dominated society; Carter is not concerned with possible exploitation of "common folk" on the estates of aristocrats, but rather with the hardships caused the

latter when revenues from their estates were threatened by clan warfare. For his literary discussions Carter also assumes his readers know the *Tale of Genji* and the connection between literary and political life in medieval Japan. Carter doesn't introduce these salient features of Japanese feudalism; he assumes the readers knows these things. Rather, Carter's work provides a new layer of understanding to the person already at least partially familiar with the period.

The inquisitive high school student engaged on a project on this period of Japanese history could also make good use of *Regent Redux*. Again, however, familiarity with the basic parameters of the society would be necessary to make full sense of Carter's biography. A secondary student taking a four-week survey of Japanese history and culture, such as that experienced by ninth-graders in New York, might be served better by something more general.

*Regent Redux* is a superb piece of scholarship and makes fascinating reading. For the person with more than a passing interest in feudal Japan, it is indispensable. ▯

Donald Jones

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## Japanese Lessons

### *A Year in a Japanese School through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children*

BY GAIL R. BENJAMIN  
NEW YORK AND LONDON: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997  
241 PAGES + APPENDIX + INDEX

This wonderful new study of Japan's elementary school system is valuable for us in three distinct ways: as required student reading, in part or in its entirety, within high school or college classes; as teachers trying to understand how Japanese culture works; and as American adults, teachers, and often parents, concerned about the American educational system. I find Benjamin's approach a welcome complement to earlier analyses.

In my own high school Japanese history classes I have typically focused on Japanese education for at least a week. Sources from which I have used selections are the following: Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools*; White, *The Educational System in Japan*; Peak, *Learning to Go to School in Japan*; and the book and accompanying film *Preschool in Three Cultures*. Benjamin's anthropological study is unique for her intensely personal tone. She is reporting on her involvement in the education of her first- and fifth-grade children in Urawa City during the years 1989–90. She attempts to adopt the