Childbirth and the arts of judgment in medieval Japan

The organization of childbirth in elite households of medieval Japan (1185–1336) required serious planning and decisive orchestration. Although the initial preparations for an imperial consort’s labour could take several months, what was to unfold inside the secluded birth chamber could easily escalate into both medical and ritual emergencies and necessitate a swift response from the consort’s female and male relatives, ritual specialists, physicians, and midwives. One of the most pertinent issues to contend with was how to select and ensure the most auspicious conditions for an imperial consort to safely give birth. This included prognosticating auspicious times and places, divining the gender of a soon-to-be born infant, and dealing with physical and spiritual threats as well as ritual pollution incurred by childbirth (and often, a consort’s or infant’s death). Based on recently discovered medieval Buddhist manuscripts, visual sources, diaries, and court protocols, this talk will offer a journey through the social landscape of childbirth in the elite households of medieval Japan. It will focus on the actions of medieval expert knowledge-holders, particularly those specializing in quelling ritual uncertainty and pollution: Buddhist monks, yin-yang diviners, and Shinto priests.

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