

## CHAPTER FOUR

The years 730-775

### *Principal characters*

The monk Fusho

Priest Gembo

Kibi Makibi

Otomo Yakamochi, son of Tabito, now head of the Otomo family

The Emperor Shomu

His consort, Empress Kogyo

Fujiwara Hirotsugu

Fujiwara Nakamaro

Priest Ganjin, from China

Otomo Komaro, nephew of Tabito, cousin of Yakamochi

Empress Koken, daughter of Shomu and Kogyo; she reigned twice, the second time as Empress Shotoku

Priest Dokyo

Otomo Tabito was admirably suited to receive foreign dignitaries but none appeared during his term as Governor General of Dazaifu; his courtier's polish and facility in Chinese were never put to use. After he returned to the capital, the pace of diplomatic exchange quickened. In 732 Dazaifu sent off a mission to the Silla government of Korea, a gesture toward easing the usually sour relationship with that country. Tensions did lessen a bit, for shortly thereafter a delegation from Silla made a return visit. They bore the customary ceremonial gifts, which the Japanese recorded as "tribute." Each country, aping China, labeled the other a subordinate, obligated to acknowledge subservience with offerings. In their China-centered world, there was no such thing as diplomacy between equals: nations, like individuals, had to be part of a hierarchy.

Awesome though China was, it irked the Japanese to play vassal. More than a century earlier, they had attempted to assert equality by addressing a letter from the Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun to the Emperor of the Land of the Setting Sun. The unlucky envoy who delivered this letter got a severe scolding, and on his return trip found it prudent to lose the reply from the Chinese emperor rather than deliver it to his own sovereign. He was forgiven for his carelessness.

After one more try ("From the Emperor of the East to the Emperor of the West"), which the Chinese rejected with equal hauteur, the Japanese stopped

sending a letter with their ambassador and thus avoided humbling themselves in writing. The Chinese harrumphed at this, but put up with it.

In 733, the year after the exchange with Silla, Dazaifu's reception center at the port of Hakata had the much bigger job of dispatching the most impressive mission to China that Japan had ever attempted. Previously only one or two ships were sent; this time four ships were especially built for the hazardous voyage. A century earlier, the Japanese were able to cross the strait and then hug the coast of Korea and the Liaotung Peninsula to get to northeastern China; now Silla would not permit Japanese ships to enter Korean harbors, forcing them to take the longer, more dangerous route south to the Ryukyus Islands and then across the China Sea.

The ships were big, about 130 feet long, but they had just one mast amidships and were flat-bottomed, without a keel, so they could sail only before the wind. A ship could carry 150 men, about half of them crew, who had to row if the wind failed or was contrary. The crew included navigators, diviners, carpenters, physicians, archers, and interpreters.

The passengers were chosen for their potential. Painters, sculptors, musicians--all kinds of artists and artisans--were sent to polish their skills. Young scholars and Buddhist priests were dispatched to study at the fountainhead of knowledge; some of them expected that their stay in China would stretch to many years.

Inconspicuous among them were two young monks who had been chosen for a special mission by a high priest at Nara. They were to seek out in China a Buddhist priest of such eminence and character that he could impose order on Japan's unruly Buddhist establishment. Buddhism was still young in Japan--only a couple of centuries had passed since its introduction--and it was not yet properly organized. The greatest problem was with ordination. There were no standards to meet before one donned the robes, no criteria and no tests and no authority to enforce standards. One could ordain oneself by uttering a simple vow. All too often monasteries were noisy and profane, priests and nuns were licentious. The government had issued dozens of laws to no effect. The priesthood had to be reformed from within. The two monks were expected to find a priest who could do that, and somehow persuade him to emigrate to Japan. It would not be easy, but they were given time. They would remain in China until Japan sent its next envoy, whenever that might be.

To head a mission to China, to impress the Chinese, the Japanese always chose a courtier of polish and skill. In this case he was a Fujiwara. Before he left the capital, he sought out Yamanoue Okura for first-hand knowledge of China and

the difficult voyage. Okura gave him a parting poem: "Farewell, let there be no mischance. Come back quickly!"

There was always probability of mischance. Experience told the Japanese that very likely half the ships and the men they carried would never see Japan again. In the late spring of 733 Dazaifu officials saw them off with tearful farewells. The men aboard toasted each other as men did who set out to face danger, their wine cups filled with water.

At first the four vessels were able to keep together, then they lost sight of each other. They weathered a terrifying storm, fought contrary winds, walled in dead calm, but all four made port in China. Their voyage had taken more than three months.

It took more months to arrange travel to the capital and to make the long overland trek. They arrived just about a year after leaving Dazaifu.

Hoping for advice, the young monks sought out two Japanese who had been in China for the seventeen years since the last Japanese embassy, years that each had filled with accomplishment. Now they were preparing to return home, fitted for important service.

First they visited Priest Gembo. They were awed. His scholarship had won the admiration of the Chinese emperor, who had awarded him high court rank and a singular honor, the purple robe of state. No Japanese before him had been so praised. A stocky man with dark, heavy brows set in a face like a warrior's, he gave them a perfunctory audience and left them breathless. They heard that he was carrying back to Japan a number of precious Buddhist images and more than a thousand volumes of scripture.

After Gembo, his friend Makibi seemed ordinary, although his reputation was almost as great. A member of the ancient Kibi family, Makibi was a small, mild man, but the monks sensed that he was dedicated to proper form and etiquette. As a Confucian scholar preparing for government service, he had specialized in the Chinese classics, but he had also studied astronomy, divination, military strategy, and the mathematical science of making an accurate calendar. He told his two young visitors that he had learned to play the Chinese lute called the *biwa* and a challenging game called *go*, played with black and white stones on a board marked into squares; he recommended that the monks learn it--excellent mental exercise. He had come to China when he was twenty-three, he remarked, about the same age as the two before him; now he was forty. He managed to give the monks an interview without interrupting his painstaking arrangements for packing all that he

was taking home: 130 volumes on the rites of the Chinese government; the Chinese calendar and twelve volumes of studies concerning it (the Japanese would use that calendar for a century); ten volumes on music; a bronze tuning pipe; an iron sundial; twenty armor-piercing arrows; ten flat- trajectory arrows; the list went on and on. Neither Gembo nor Makibi offered the monks much guidance for their search.

It was autumn when the Japanese ambassador and his party left the capital for the long journey home--without the two monks and the others who had come to China to stay for years, but with Gembo and Makibi.

Back at Dazaifu, men waited anxiously. At last, a year and a half after the ships had sailed for China, word came by courier from the governor of Satsuma: the ambassador's ship had reached the island of Tane, about twenty miles south of Kyushu. A week later the ambassador and his aides arrived on horses provided by the governor; with them were Gembo and Makibi.

Dazaifu's officials extended themselves to make the travelers comfortable and to feed them well after the privation they had endured at sea. Outfitted with new clothing, rested and in good spirits, they set out for the capital to report to the emperor. The court was impressed by the accomplishments of Makibi and Gembo, grateful for the treasures they had brought. Gembo was promptly awarded an increase in stipend. Makibi was appointed to the faculty of the university and was made tutor to the emperor's daughter; three quick promotions in rank followed.

It was months before a second ship appeared. Much later it was learned that a third ship had been disabled and driven back to China, stranding its passengers to search for another ship to Japan. The fourth ship was less lucky: it had drifted far south to the area of Vietnam, where all but three or four of those on board were slaughtered by natives before the Chinese rescued them.

By then Dazaifu was in the grip of crisis. In the eighth month of 735 the Governor General dispatched by swift courier the first urgent message to the court. It stated that a killer disease was ravaging the population of Kyushu. Eleven days later he sent another emergency message: "A pestilence characterized by swellings has spread widely in the provinces under our jurisdiction. The whole populace is bedridden. We request exemption from the local products tax for this year." The request was granted.

The physician at Dazaifu did not feel confident enough to identify the disease but the medical officers at the court recognized the symptoms: a smallpox epidemic was raging on Kyushu.

Smallpox was not new to Japan. The history of smallpox begins in the densely populated Mediterranean area. From there nomads, traders, and invaders carried the disease east and west from one population center to another. Smallpox probably reached China by the fourth century.

Japan's isolation from the continent was a mixed blessing. It protected the islands from some of the great epidemics that swept China and Korea, but being protected meant that the Japanese did not develop the immunity that comes from continued exposure. Every new generation was vulnerable. When a disease like smallpox crossed to Japan, it was devastating. The government knew that, and standing orders directed officials in the provinces to report an epidemic by messengers speeded with the highest priority.

Epidemics hit hardest in heavily populated areas like advanced, productive northern Kyushu. The smallpox that broke out in 735 was more deadly because there had been famines in 732 and 733 and the prospects for the harvest of 735 were just as bleak: malnutrition had weakened the peasant population.

The government responded swiftly. It sent the medicines prescribed by Chinese practice. It broke precedent by authorizing the release of grain from government warehouses to the victims (previously grain had been released only in cases of famine). It ordered the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines on Kyushu to send up prayers to end the pestilence and alleviate the suffering. It directed the governors of the western provinces of Honshu to conduct purification rites to prevent the disease from jumping the strait to that island.

But by year's end it had jumped to Honshu and was spreading. The final entry in the court's chronicle for the year is grim: "In this year the harvest failed completely and from summer to winter the whole realm suffered from smallpox... Those who died were many."

Through 736 the disease moved up along the Inland Sea. By 737 it was raging in the capital. In the third month the court called for powerful Buddhist measures: each province was ordered to make statues of the Buddha and his two attendants and to copy a scripture. In the sixth month the Council of State issued a long order to all provinces except those on Kyushu; Dazaifu didn't have to be told what it was up against. At a time when in Europe smallpox was often confused with other diseases which were attributed to astrological discord, the Japanese had identified and described this killer and could provide sensible instructions concerning care.

“Without fail, keep the patient warm. Never let him become chilled. When there is no floor, do not lie directly on the earth. Spread a straw mat on the ground and lie down to rest.”

High fever will make the “victim want to drink cold water. Firmly restrain him and do not let him drink ... water or suck ice.... Do not eat raw fish or fresh vegetables.

“Distresses which occur along with the infection are of four types. In some cases there are coughs, in some vomiting, in others regurgitation of blood, and yet others nosebleeds. Of all secondary illnesses, diarrhea is the worst. Be aware of this and strive diligently in personal care.... If diarrhea should develop, boil onions and scallions well,... mix in eight or nine parts of glutinous rice flour, boil, and drink while warm. Repeat this procedure two or three times. Also, eat either glutinous or non-glutinous rice as a thick gruel.”

The order concluded: “All in the capital district have been bedridden with this disease. Many have died. We are also aware that people in the provinces have been afflicted with this distress.... Each provincial governor should send [these instructions] along to his neighbor.... The provincial office shall make a tour of its jurisdiction and announce these instructions to the people.... When this order arrives, carry it out.”

The common people of the capital, crowded together, were hard hit; the aristocracy had more knowledge of the disease and to some extent could isolate themselves, but in this dread year even an imperial prince died. The business of the court was suspended because so many officials were ill. The powerful Fujiwara family had proliferated into four major branches; the head of each was struck down (the distraught court promoted one of them to Great Minister as he lay dying). The chronicle for 737 summed it up: “Through the summer and fall, people in the realm from aristocrats on down died one after another in countless numbers. In recent times, there has been nothing like this.”

Surviving records indicate that about one-third of Japan’s population died. In northern Kyushu, which was hit first and hardest and suffered for three straight years, two-thirds or more of the people died; it had been advanced and prosperous; it was relegated to a backwater. The death toll was greatest among adults in their productive, working years. The elderly, having survived a previous epidemic, had immunity; children were able to throw off the disease. The old and the young were left without family members to provide for them; many wandered homeless. Fields lay barren because there was no one to cultivate them. Farming was really the

country's only industry, the sole source of the taxes that supported the ruling class. Taxes stopped flowing from much of the country.

It would be surprising if a disaster so great did not shake the government; It did.

The crisis in agriculture led to a fundamental shift in policy. Previously it was held that all of the country's rice land belonged to the emperor, and that the government could shift people around to get maximum productivity--and taxes. The new law gave both aristocrats and peasants perpetual right to paddy land they had themselves cleared and brought into production. This introduction of private property was a difference with far-reaching consequences.

There was a new administration. With the Fujiwara leaders wiped out, men who had been outsiders came to power. Young men like Tabito's son Otomo Yakamochi saw their friends take office, and hopes for their own careers brightened. Makibi fit smoothly into the new regime. Gembo was appointed the High Priest of Buddhism.

The emperor, Shomu by name, had not been an ardent Buddhist. He had been educated to be a Confucian ruler. Confucianism told him that if disasters fell upon a land it was because of faults in the ruler. In 732 Shomu attributed famine to "Our lack of virtue." And he shouldered the blame for the epidemic in 735: "I fear the responsibility is all mine."

Shomu's burden of guilt brought him to Buddhism, for Buddhism explains suffering, and it brought him close to Gembo, who provided solace. Under Gembo's tutelage Shomu became one of the most ardent Buddhists in the long line of Japanese emperors.

Gembo was able to comfort Shomu in another way. The emperor was tormented by family discord. From the day Shomu was born, his mother rejected him, refused even to see him. The reasons are not known today; some think she suffered from severe depression. Makibi arranged that Gembo meet her, and Gembo was able to reconcile mother and son. For that he earned the gratitude and confidence of the emperor and the Fujiwara family too, for both Shomu's mother and his consort were daughters of an eminent Fujiwara statesman.

Shomu's predecessors had used Buddhism: used its doctrines and its appeal to bolster the government, to enhance the position of the emperor, to centralize power; they saw in it a useful tool and they kept it under tight control.

Shomu and his consort surrendered to Buddhism; it may have been Gembo who suggested that the lady change her name to Komyo, “The Light of the Buddha.” With Gembo as advocate and counselor, Shomu determined to spread Buddhism throughout the realm. A stream of decrees ordered that every province make Buddhist statues, copy scriptures, and erect seven-storied pagodas.

Then in 741 came the greatest project of all: to build in every province a national temple and a national nunnery. They were not to be modest chapels. With Gembo’s guidance Shomu specified that each temple would have a main hall enshrining statues of the Buddha and his attendants surrounded by the Four Heavenly Kings; the compounds were to include pagodas, a lecture hall, a belfry, a dining hall, monks’ quarters, and a main gate facing south. Each of the temples was to be staffed by twenty monks, who were to pray for the protection of the state. The nunneries, a little smaller, were each to have ten nuns who would pray for the atonement of sins. To build them, money was provided from the national treasury, the great families were pressured to contribute, and the peasants were to be drafted for labor; lands were assigned to each new temple to provide income.

The system was to be crowned by a headquarters temple in the capital. Named the Todaiji, it would enshrine a colossal bronze Buddha more than sixty feet high. Towering over worshipers in the soft light of the great hall, shimmering in its coat of gold, it would celebrate both the power of Buddha and the parallel power of the emperor and the state.

The miracle is that these temples, all across the country and in the capital, were actually built. In 741 the governors of the provinces must have winced when they received the orders and thought of the forced labor that would have to be exacted from the peasants. At Dazaifu, where Kanzeonji--mandated more than seventy years earlier by another emperor--was still unfinished, the Governor General wondered how to place another Buddhist burden on his smallpox- devastated provinces.

Dazaifu was in a state of shock. The year before it had been involved in a major rebellion and its future was in doubt. In 739 or early in 740 a scion of the Fujiwara family named Hirotsugu, son of one of the four leaders who had been taken by smallpox, was exiled to Dazaifu. Although the court humiliated him by putting him in the number three post, Junior Assistant Governor General, in the summer of 740 the top two positions were either vacant or the men assigned to them were enjoying life in the capital. Hirotsugu was in command.

Late in the eighth month the government was startled to receive from him an angry memorial harshly criticizing the administration and demanding that High

Priest Gembo and Minister Makibi be it eliminated.” Before the court could reply, word came from other sources that Hirotsugu had raised an army and was leading almost all of Kyushu in rebellion.

The government issued a call for an army of 17,000 and appointed a general to command it. He at once dispatched a number of undercover agents, including Hayato, to infiltrate Kyushu with a call for loyalty. Fearing that they had been intercepted, he sent more agents a few days later with another imperial rescript:

“The traitor Hirotsugu was a wicked youth and came to do more and more evil as he grew up. His late father ... wanted to disinherit him, but We intervened. However, when he slandered his family, We sent him away and were awaiting his reform. Now it comes to Our ears that he has begun a ridiculous rebellion, causing suffering among the people. Because of his extreme disloyalty and lack of filial piety, the gods of heaven and earth will surely bring his destruction in a matter of days.”

The message went on to promise a tempting reward to any man who slayed Hirotsugu. It ended, “Our imperial army is advancing on Kyushu.”

Opinions of Hirotsugu differ sharply. Many believe that the rescript painted an accurate picture, that he was an irascible fellow whose own family was glad to get rid of him. Others see him as a sensitive man who was distraught by the deaths in his family and unhinged by conditions among the disease-ravaged population of Kyushu.

In the Kyushu tradition of disdain for central authority, both peasants and local magnates rallied to support him. They gave him an army of 15,000 men. He determined to use it, although his aims in going to war were vague in his own mind.

In the beginning he was only lashing out against Makibi, Gembo, and, through them, the prime minister. To him they were interlopers taking advantage of the decimated Fujiwara leadership. Gembo and Makibi seemed vulnerable. They were cohorts because of their years together in China. Their rapid rise to power had excited jealousy.

It was easy for him to dislike Makibi. He came from a provincial family-- distinguished in its own right, but provincial--and therefore he would forever be a coarse outsider. He was a formidable scholar (which did not impress Hirotsugu) but he was crusty and impatient of lesser minds. He did not cultivate the urbanity so important to a courtier.

Hirotsugu scorned Makibi but he hated Gembo. Priestly robes had not kept Gembo from womanizing. It was whispered that in ministering to the queen mother he had graduated from counselor to lover, and it was rumored that with Hirotsugu out of the way at Dazaifu, Gembo had targeted his attractive wife. Even if the lady did not complain to her husband, which some surmise that she did, the rumors would have reached Dazaifu.

Events moved quickly. With the first elements of his army the emperor's general marched swiftly to the tip of Honshu, across the strait from Kyushu. The emperor moved in the opposite direction. Shomu was not nearly as confident as he sounded in the rescript drafted for him. Fearful of Hirotsugu's friends in the capital, he fled. For four days he and his court (including young Otomo Yakamochi) slogged through rain and mud to what looked like a safer place.

Hirotsugu had devised what he regarded as a shrewd strategy. Under Dazaifu's command were three strongholds--fortified outposts with granaries and stores of weapons--one at the strait and two on Kyushu's Inland Sea coast facing Honshu. By securing them, he could add their garrisons to his force, get ample supplies, and deny those supplies to the government army. He foresaw no difficulty: those outposts were commanded by officers from the capital, like himself, he could count on them.

At Dazaifu he split his troops into three contingents and sent each marching toward one of those posts. He led the column heading for the fort close to the strait, thinking that probably the government army would cross there. Wherever it landed, his three forces would converge in attack. His own troops included Hayato warriors, and he had great faith in them. He felt confident.

A few years earlier his plan could have worked. Then the strongholds were manned by Frontier Guards; with no loyalties one way or the other, they would have fought as their officers ordered.

But the Frontier Guards had been disbanded and sent home. They were replaced by local soldiers.

At his headquarters on the strait the government general digested intelligence reports coming in from Kyushu, commandeered ships assembled for an embassy to Korea, and started moving his army across to Kyushu.

The government's undercover agents had done their work well. With a full repertory of bribes, promises, and threats, they had won over the local leaders along the coast. On their orders, their men manning the two Inland Sea strongholds

killed their Dazaifu officers and then ambushed and shattered Hirotsugu's advancing columns. The men in the outpost on the strait did not wait for Hirotsugu's arrival. When they saw the government soldiers landing they rushed to surrender.

Hirotsugu retreated with his troops to a position across a river and used Dazaifu's system of signal fires to try to raise more men. For fifteen days the opposing armies reconnoitered. The government general sent a titled emissary bearing a substantial gift of gold on a two-day journey to the eminent Shinto shrine at Usa. In the name of the emperor he asked the priests of Usa to pray for a government victory. Shrines and temples nearer at hand were of course asked to send up their prayers. Hirotsugu was doing the same thing. A number of priests had to resolve conflicts of interest, having accepted gold from both sides.

On a chilly day in late autumn the armies faced each other across the river. The government had come up with about 6,000 men of the 17,000 originally announced. Hirotsugu had them outnumbered with a force of 10,000, his trusted Hayato in the van.

In a preliminary skirmish, Hirotsugu sent some of his Hayato to cross the river on rafts. They were driven back by volleys of stone-tipped arrows. As they retreated, Hayato warriors with the government army called to their clansmen across the river: "Surrender! Surrender to the emperor's army! Save yourselves! Save your families!" Hirotsugu was dismayed to see his Hayato lower their bows.

That skirmish was a breach of decorum: the battle should not have begun without proper declamations.

Now the government's senior captain rode to the front of his troops and called to Hirotsugu. There was no answer. He called again. He called ten times before Hirotsugu rode forward.

"Hirotsugu hears the Emperor's messenger," he shouted. "Who is the messenger?"

The captain identified himself He was Saeki Tsunehito, the Saeki being a branch of the Otomo. The general and he were the Emperor's messengers, he called. They were present to hear Hirotsugu.

"Hirotsugu acknowledges the Emperor's messengers." He dismounted and bowed respectfully. "Hirotsugu does not rebel against the Emperor," he called.

“Hirotsugu dares not to defy the court. He requests only that two wicked men be expelled from the court. If Hirotsugu is a rebel may the heavenly gods strike him down!”

Saeki’s voice carried loud across the river. “Then why,” he shouted, “does Hirotsugu come with a huge army?”

There was no answer. On both sides of the river men waited, but there was no answer.

Hirotsugu rose, mounted his horse, and rode back to his army.

It was a dispiriting performance. Seeing it, Hirotsugu’s Hayato were taken aback. Suddenly three of them bolted for the river. Hayato from the government army rode forward to help them cross. Twenty more Hayato dashed to surrender, then some of Hirotsugu’s other troops. It was the beginning of a rout.

Hirotsugu escaped the battlefield and, almost alone, fled to the west, clear across the northern coast of Kyushu to its northwestern corner and to the Goto Islands that lie beyond. He did not run blindly, for that district is one where he might reasonably have hoped to get help. Its inhabitants were noted for their buccaneering spirit and truculent stance toward authority; the ancient chronicles stigmatize them as “earth-spiders” (perhaps because in prehistoric times they sensibly dwelled in caves for warmth in winter and coolness in summer) and cite victories over them by mythic emperors--empty victories if they occurred, since they changed nothing.

The fugitive did find help on one of the islands. For a price, seamen agreed to take him across to Korea. They almost made it, but then a storm rose and blew them back to where they’d started. Hirotsugu was quickly seized. Just six months after he raised his rebellion, he was executed.

That was not the end of the story, for, as a chronicle noted, “his spirit was not pacified.”

There was a powerful belief, shared by peasants and nobility alike, that the spirit of one who died in unnatural circumstances would roam the earth until it was appeased, either by taking revenge on its enemies or by the prayers and veneration of the living. The people of the district where Hirotsugu died promptly erected a temple to console his spirit with Buddhist prayer. A man who had been hunted down and executed by the government evoked sympathy among those contrary people. The temple’s name indicated that many

contributions went to build it.

In the meantime, the court, upset that its Distant Headquarters had harbored rebellion, took Draconian measures: it abolished Dazaifu and assigned its responsibilities to the governor of Chikuzen (Okura's old job). Two years later, with the realization that the governor of Chikuzen was in no position to control all Kyushu nor to handle the coming and going of diplomats, a military headquarters was set up to take over. In the next year, 745, realities were faced and Dazaifu was reestablished.

In that same year the government gave Hirotsugu's memorial temple official status by assigning a priest and setting aside rice lands to support it. This was an early sign that the Fujiwara were regaining influence. One of Hirotsugu's cousins was rising to prominence. He was Fujiwara Nakamaro and he had some scores to settle.

First he moved against Priest Gembo. Gembo and Makibi had not been dismissed as a result of Hirotsugu's charges, but his accusations cast a harsh light on them so that their standing at the court had eroded. In 745 Gembo was stripped of his title as High Priest and consigned to Dazaifu to complete the building of Kanzeonji. It was an empty assignment: the temple was all but finished. Gembo had little to do except, six months later, to preside at the dedication. When the ceremonies began and it came time for his stately entrance, his escorts found only a headless corpse.

In the minds of most people there was no question: the vengeful spirit of Hirotsugu had prevailed. The man utilized by the spirit to run the sword through Gembo was never apprehended; in the crowd gathered for the dedication ceremonies it was easy for him to slip away. It was taken for granted that he was either a loyal follower of Hirotsugu or a hired assassin sent by Nakamaro. Some say that on the day the hit man returned to the capital, Gembo's severed head was thrown over the wall into the family temple of the Fujiwara.

Behind Kanzeonji there is a solitary grave, very old, with a stone of the kind that marks a priest's grave. People say that Gembo is buried there. I stop sometimes to say a prayer.

In 750, five years after Gembo was exiled, Nakamaro managed to dislodge Kibi Makibi from the court and send him to be governor of Chikuzen. Brief service there left Makibi healthy, so Nakamaro had him shifted to Hizen, the province where Hirotsugu had met his end and where his tormented spirit was surely most potent.

It is said that Nakamaro, wanting to make doubly sure, dispatched a secret agent to eliminate Makibi as Gembo had been eliminated, but that the frustrated killer returned to report that it was hopeless: Makibi had surrounded himself with an airtight defense and to further confound his enemies he was personally offering prayers at Hirotsugu's memorial temple. To which Nakamaro replied: "That's Makibi!--very different from Gembo, who was led astray by sex.

In the next year, 751, Makibi received a new assignment, one that his friends hoped would rejuvenate his career and his enemies hoped would get rid of him permanently. Another mission was to be sent to China, the first since the one that had brought Makibi and Gembo home seventeen years earlier. Makibi was to go.

The four ships that carried the embassy reached China in the summer of 752 but it was autumn before they arrived in the capital. One of the two monks had died. The survivor, named Fusho, hurried to meet his countrymen. He first begged an audience with the ambassador, a Fujiwara with the manner and appearance of a true aristocrat, but who seemed so indifferent that Fusho cut short his story and bowed out.

He then sought out Makibi, the number two man of the mission. Makibi listened, but seemed little moved, as Fusho poured out his story. He told how, after years of effort, the two of them had been able to meet Ganjin, one of China's great masters of Buddhism, hoping that he would recommend someone to go to Japan.

Ganjin was then fifty-five, a sturdy man with a wide brow, large eyes, a prominent nose, and a generous mouth. He received them with more than thirty of his disciples ranged behind him.

He listened to their plea and then turned to face his disciples. The voyage would be dangerous, he said, but it would be for the good of Buddhism, and a Buddhist should not be reluctant to risk his life. He asked three times who would answer the call. There was no response.

"Since none of you will go, I shall," he said, and from among the disciples bowed before him he named seventeen who would accompany him.

There was still a problem, Fusho told Makibi. Ganjin was so important that the Chinese government would never authorize his leaving. However, the two Japanese monks had been able to arrange a meeting with the prime minister. Fusho chose his words carefully:

"He was a clever man. I think he enjoyed intrigue." For the first

time, Makibi showed a flicker of interest. “Though it was illegal, he secretly issued an authorization for us to depart.”

Fusho went on with his story. A ship was built, Ganjin assembled a long list of ritual items to be taken along, and they decided to sail in the spring of 743, when the seasonal winds would be favorable. They were delayed for almost two months because the coastal waters were infested with pirates; no ships could leave. Then, just before they were to sail, they were betrayed by one of the Chinese monks who thought he was going to be left behind because he had behaved deplorably in the fleshpots of the port. The police seized their ship and their cargo, and the two Japanese spent the summer in prison, until a letter from the prime minister set them free.

Ganjin took it all philosophically. He was determined to go to Japan, he told the Japanese, and he would finance the voyage. A few monks dropped out but Ganjin added artisans--painters, sculptors, jade workers, embroiderers--and he assembled all kinds of religious articles: Buddhist texts, images, paintings, banners, rugs, clerical robes, shoes, chairs, canopies, and incense, as well as medicines, perfumes, pepper, sugar, honey, and coins.

On a moonlit night in late December they sailed down the Yangtze River. Bad weather forced them to moor off a coastal island for a month. When they set out again, high waves caught them as they tried to find their way through the islands. Their ship was dashed onto rocks and broke up. Passengers and crew escaped to a sand spit but all their cargo was washed away. A week later a patrol ship picked them up. On the quiet sail back to the coast Ganjin began to plan a third attempt.

They were confined in a monastery near the port. The monks there begged Ganjin to lecture and administer the vows, and the Japanese experienced the excitement of learning from one of Buddhism's great figures. To prevent Ganjin from leaving China, the monks of the monastery instigated the arrest of Fusho's companion, whom they took to be the ringleader. He was shackled around the neck and sent off to the capital, but the prime minister, loath to see any chicanery of his go awry, intervened again. The monk was back within a month, equipped with a forged letter stating that he had fallen ill and died. He was now officially a free spirit.

Determined to make another attempt, Ganjin led his group on the long walk toward their original port of departure. They were almost there when the authorities descended upon them. One of Ganjin's senior disciples, out of concern for his master's safety, had petitioned the government to prevent his leaving China

on the grounds that he was too valuable an asset to lose. Ganjin was put in the custody of the monastery where he still held the position of chief priest, and with that their venture collapsed. Ganjin told the Japanese that he still was determined to go to Japan but it would be years before they could dare to make another attempt. As the year 744 drew to a close they said goodbye.

Four years passed before they thought it safe to visit him again. They found him as vigorous as ever. This time, he told them, they would succeed. A new ship was built and they assembled cargo like that they carried before.

On a summer night in 748 they again sailed down the Yangtze. Among the islands of the estuary they were becalmed for two months. When winds came and carried them out to sea they were hit by a tempest. They survived but drifted helpless. They finally ended on the island of Hainan, south of continental China, across Tonkin Bay from Vietnam. They were roughly two and a half times farther from Japan than when they started out.

It was more than a year before they made it back to the mainland, and another year to make the long journey up the coast, slowed everywhere by appeals for Ganjin's ministrations. Along the way, Fusho's companion died, exhausted, and Ganjin, losing his sight from cataracts, submitted to an operation by a reputedly skilled Arabian; the operation failed and Ganjin was left totally blind and exhausted. He was still set on keeping his vow to go to Japan, he told Fusho as they parted in the summer of 750, but they needed a long rest before trying again.

That was his story up till now, Fusho told Makibi, and he was disappointed. From his long years in China, Makibi must have been aware of Ganjin's eminence, but he displayed no interest in getting him to Japan. Instead he appeared to be irritated at hearing about their unsuccessful attempts. A successful voyage, he lectured sternly, depended on proper preparation and competent navigation. Fusho left disheartened. Makibi had changed, he thought. The scholar had become a starchy bureaucrat.

Third in command of the Japanese mission was Vice Ambassador Otomo Komaro, Tabito's nephew, Yakamochi's cousin, one of the two who had rushed to Dazaifu when Tabito thought he was dying. Komaro had never heard of Ganjin but he was moved by Fusho's story. Fusho had finally found an ally.

The Japanese settled in to spend the winter at the Chinese capital. Fusho was shocked to learn that at the emperor's New Year's reception the ambassador had created a rumpus. Finding that the ambassador from Silla Korea was ranked highest among the guests, he made such an unseemly display that he was granted

first place. Fusho knew that the Chinese court must have been irked. China asked little from the barbarian subject-states on its fringe except that they keep the peace among themselves. The rancor between Japan and Korea was an irritation.

When summer came the Japanese began preparations to leave. True to his word, Otomo Komaro initiated a request that Ganjin and his followers be permitted to accompany them. This time the Chinese made no objection, but then the emperor, an ardent Taoist with an antipathy toward Buddhism, insisted that if Ganjin went, Taoist priests must go too. Confucianism was already deep-rooted in Japan, Buddhism was planted, and Taoist ideas had penetrated, but the Japanese had no wish to accept the institutions of Taoism. They withdrew their petition. Once again, Ganjin, his monks, and his artisans would have to depart illegally.

At first the ambassador took them aboard his ship, but then he got cold feet and ordered them off. It was Otomo Komaro who secretly defied the ambassador and overloaded his ship by taking them all aboard.

The first leg of the journey was anticlimactic; a week of smooth sailing brought three of the four ships to Okinawa: the ambassador's, Makibi's, and Komaro's. There they were delayed two weeks, first by a storm, then by dead calm. When they set out, the ambassador's ship promptly ran aground, stuck on a reef. He signaled the other two ships to go on.

Komaro's ship with Fusho and Ganjin reached Yaku Island the next day. They were now only about fifty miles from the southern tip of Kyushu, but they had to wait ten days for favorable winds. The day after they sailed they ran into a gale and for two days were tossed about by mountainous waves. Fusho and Ganjin remained calm. They had been through much worse. On a crisp, sunny winter afternoon they sailed into the harbor of Akimeya, a fishing village in the southwestern corner of Satsuma province. Word was rushed to the governor of Satsuma, horses were provided, and Komaro and his aides set out at once for Dazaifu. The next morning the governor arrived to greet Ganjin and to provide an escort to guide the party and arrange accommodations. Five days of riding on good horses brought them to Dazaifu.

They were welcomed, congratulated, honored. The New Year was almost upon them. They were caught up in its festivities. They conducted services at Kanzeonji and, not far away, at the newly built national temple for Chikuzen Province, one of those that the Emperor Shomu had ordered to be erected in each province. Early in their stay they learned that Makibi's ship had reached Satsuma not long after theirs but had sailed on; Makibi hoped to be the first to reach Nara

and report the completion of their mission. He was disappointed to find that Komaro beat him to the capital.

Although Makibi chose not to stop at Dazaifu he laid a chore on it. Shortly after his first return from China, in 735, Dazaifu had been ordered to erect signposts on the islands stretching southward from Kyushu to Okinawa. Each sign would bear the name of its island, the location of anchorages, places to get good water, and the courses from there, with distances. Sailing through those islands this year, he was not pleased with what he found. Not long after he reached Nara, Dazaifu received an order to repair or replace those signposts. Makibi detested sloppy administration.

Dazaifu may have found out for itself about those signs. It had sent a team along the southern islands to Okinawa to inquire about the ambassador's ship. They learned that the ship had sailed from Okinawa but that nothing was known of it after that. Four months after Komaro's ship arrived with Ganjin and Fusho, the fourth ship reached the Satsuma coast, brightening hopes for the ship still missing. It was years before the Japanese learned what happened to it. Like Fusho's and Ganjin's ship in 748, it had been blown far south to Indochina, ending on the coast of Annam, today's Vietnam. There were only about a dozen survivors, including the ambassador. They made it back to the Chinese capital but none ever got home to Japan.

Meanwhile, Ganjin had been given a savior's welcome at Nara. Makibi, who in China had not seemed overly concerned about getting the master to Japan, was chosen to deliver the Retired Emperor Shomu's declaration: "You, exalted monk, came to Our nation from far across the dark green sea. Indeed, My prayers have been answered ... My heart now rejoices.... I place wholly in your trust, hereafter, the administering of vows and the regulation of monasticism."

Ganjin had brought with him an ordination platform from a prominent Buddhist monastery in China. In the Todaiji, the new national temple that Shomu and Gembo had envisioned, the craftsmen who had come with Ganjin reassembled the platform before the Great Buddha, still a somber presence, for as yet not enough gold had been found to complete the gilding (the mission to China had been asked to bring back gold to finish the job; it was on the ambassador's ship).

On this first ordination platform in Japan, Ganjin administered the vows to the Retired Emperor Shomu, his consort the Empress Dowager Kogyo, their daughter Empress Koken, whom Shomu had chosen to succeed him on the throne, and more than four hundred monks. In an aura of splendor, on a balmy spring day full of joy and promise, the prescribed rites of ordination arrived in Japan.

A temple was especially built for Ganjin. He named it the Toshodaiji. It still stands, one of Nara's great monuments. Among its treasures are superb sculptures, including a powerful statue of Ganjin done by artists who came with him from China. He is shown seated in meditation, eyes closed to denote his blindness. He lived out his life in the Toshodaiji, lecturing and administering the vows to countless monks who came to him.

Things did not go that smoothly in politics. Fujiwara Nakamaro, who had succeeded in getting Gembo out of the way though he failed with Makibi, was determined to restore Fujiwara control over the government. The Empress Koken was his aunt and a willing accomplice. She doted on him, and schemes that couldn't be aired before court officials were cozily discussed in the imperial bed.

On trumped-up charges they forced into retirement the non-Fujiwara men who had assumed power when the smallpox epidemic wiped out the Fujiwara leaders, and after Shomu died they used the same tactics to oust his choice for crown prince and then install Nakamaro's compliant young son-in-law as next in line to the throne.

The men who had enjoyed a measure of influence while Fujiwara power was in eclipse foresaw all their gains wiped out if they did not act. They plotted a military coup. Otomo Komaro was one of the leaders and most of the Otomo were involved, but not the head of the family, Tabito's son Yakamochi. He refused to join.

Within a circle as small and ingrown as the court at Nara, it was almost impossible to keep a secret. Nakamaro got wind of the plot and acted first. Komaro and twelve others were tortured to death, their immediate families were killed, and more than four hundred others were exiled. Yakamochi and the remnant of the Otomo were left to grieve.

Kibi Makibi, who might have been in the middle of the plot had he been in the capital, was saved, quite unintentionally, because Nakamaro had shunted him off to the number two spot at Dazaifu. It was a post beneath his rank, but he was actually in command because the position of Governor General was filled by an exile denied power or responsibility; that unfortunate was Nakamaro's brother, who was being insulted because he had known about the plot but had not revealed it.

At Dazaifu Makibi kept busy. Educator at heart, he revitalized the adjacent school for the young heirs of the Kyushu gentry and, to keep an eye on things, did some teaching himself.

Reports coming in to Dazaifu from China told of rebellion and warfare. Nakamaro saw this as an excuse to bolster his power with a military buildup. Makibi was ordered to prepare for the defense of Dazaifu and in 756 he was directed to build a new fort on Kyushu's northern coast as a base for an invasion of Korea. New weapons poured in to Dazaifu.

Nakamaro requisitioned five hundred warships; he ordered forty young people from areas settled by Korean immigrants to learn the Korean language so as to facilitate invasion; and he scheduled a grand military review of 40,700 troops and 394 ships. More than once Makibi was ordered to prepare for large troop movements.

It all came to nothing. Makibi's new fort was abandoned as soon as it was completed. There was no invasion of Korea.

Instead, Fujiwara Nakamaro found himself on the defensive. People who had almost forgotten Gembo were forcefully reminded of him when a mesmeric priest named Dokyo healed Empress Koken, retired and ailing, and replaced Nakamaro as her lover. Newly invigorated, she announced that she would resume control of affairs of state, relegating Nakamaro's son-in-law, who is known as the Emperor Junnin, to a figurehead.

Nakamaro now saw a use for the troops he had mobilized. He brought them into the capital to enforce his demand that Koken dismiss Dokyo and return to quiet retirement.

Koken and Dokyo moved faster. She dismissed Nakamaro, confiscated his lands, and sent imperial troops chasing after him in a strategy masterminded by Makibi, who had been recalled from Dazaifu and who must have derived great satisfaction from this assignment. Nakamaro fled to the northeast and, like a replay of his cousin Hirotsugu's demise, tried to escape in a boat across Lake Biwa, was driven back by a storm, and was captured and executed. Makibi was rewarded with the lofty position of Minister of the Right.

Dokyo persuaded Koken to mount the throne again, taking a new name: this second time around she became the Empress Shotoku. She at once put Dokyo in charge of both the government and the Buddhist hierarchy. The unfortunate Emperor Junnin, forced to abdicate, was exiled to Awaji Island, where he became a major tourist attraction until it was expedient to do him in. (It was given out that he was trying to escape.)

Plots grew like weeds and sorceresses were in great demand. In these tense times, it appears that Kibi Makibi's talents were again put to use. From Dazaifu, where Makibi had associates and influence, came a message sent by its chief priest of Shinto (who in theory outranked all other officials there): it said that the powerful Shinto Hachiman deity of Usa had in an oracle revealed that if Dokyo became emperor the country would be blessed with peace and prosperity. The empress was taken aback but agreed with Dokyo that a courtier of high rank should be dispatched to Usa to confirm this astonishing pronouncement. The delegate returned in a hurry to report that the deity had stated in no uncertain terms that in Japan from time immemorial there had been a clear distinction between ruler and subject, that never had a subject become sovereign, that only a member of the imperial family could become emperor, and that by coveting the throne Dokyo had angered the deities of the nation.

Many surmised that Makibi and a few other nobles had concocted the whole affair to tempt Dokyo into revealing his ambition, and so to get rid of him. Dokyo hung on a few months more, but when the empress died he was banished to a province in the distant north, about as far away as the courtiers of Nara could conceive of exile. The usual purpose was announced: he was to build a temple there. He died in a year or so, but unlike Gembo he died of natural causes.

A few months after Dokyo was exiled Kibi Makibi resigned his high position and retired full of honor. He was a survivor.