# Ono no Takamura Refuses to Board Ship



## Rowed Away Past Many Islets

Just before the voyage to Tang China, there was one man who refused to board ship and dispensed with his high-level position of vice-ambassador of the embassy. This was the court noble (*ason* 朝臣) Ono no Takamura. In the first month of Jōwa 6 (839), Takamura was exiled to the province of Oki 隱岐 (present-day Oki District in Shimane Prefecture) for the crime of not obeying an imperial order.

> When exiled to the province of Oki, sent to report to those in the capital that he had boarded a boat and set sail.
>
> Fishing boats upon the sea! Tell whoever asks that I am being rowed away to exile out past the many islets to the vast ocean beyond.

This famous poem by Takamura is included in the *Kokin waka shū* 古今和歌集 (Collection of Japanese poems, ancient and modern) as well as in the *Hyakunin isshu* 百人一首 (One hundred persons, one poem each). In thirty-two syllables, one more than the standard *waka* poem, he skillfully sings of his pathos as he is about to be taken into exile.

Oddly, in explicating this poem, all of the commentators to date claim that without a doubt this records the impressions of Takamura boarding a ship from Nanba 難波 (Ōsaka) and sailing to the Inland Sea with its numerous small

islands. The navigational route to Oki at that time, however, did not involve setting sail from Nanba and travelling through the Inland Sea. It was first to travel by land through various provinces along the San'in Route 山陰道; in other words, from the capital, one would pass through Tanba 丹波 (Kyoto Prefecture), Tajima 但馬 (Hyōgo Prefecture), Inaba 因幡 (Tottori Prefecture), and Hōki 伯耆 (also Tottori), before arriving at Izumo 出雲 (Shimane Prefecture). From Izumo's Kuroda 黒田 post station (near Kuroda, Ōba-chō, Matsue City), one would take a branch road to reach the Chikumi 千酌 post station (Chikumi, Mionoseki-chō, Yatsuka-gun, Shimane Prefecture). From there, one would travel by ship to Oki. The route for those banished to Oki was no different.

Accordingly, the poetic phrase "I am being rowed away to exile out past the many islets to the vast ocean beyond" cannot conceivably be a poetic line that Takamura composed when he set sail from Nanba. We need to reexamine this poem by replacing Nanba with Chikumi in Izumo.



## Winds of the Northern Country and the Sea

I think that the error in the identified site of departure here is based on a poem that appears in a tale from the collection *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (Anthology of tales from the past) headed "When Ono no Takamura recites a poem as he is banished to Oki Province." It explains in part: "They went to a place called Akashi 明石 and anchored there that night. It was just the [lunar] ninth month of the year, and they could not sleep until dawn, staring out over the sea. He watched as a ship in the offing gradually disappeared into the silhouette of an island. Struck by melancholy, he recited this piece." This is, of course, a made-up tale. There is no evidence that Takamura ever docked at Akashi facing the Inland Sea. "It was just the ninth month" contradicts the facts, for as noted earlier, Takamura was exiled to Oki in the first month of Jōwa 6.

The "first month" (正月) would correspond now to February, the dead of winter. The wind at the Chikumi landing would have been frigid. This was Takamura in a gloomy mood as he faced the distress of banishment. The cold wind from the north and the lead-colored sea together seemed to have darkened his heart. A feeling of anger must have grown more intense.

The vehemence of the words, "Tell whoever asks," were as if spouted from Takamura's mouth.

One famous poem that remains with us today depicts Takamura's deep emotion on his way into exile. It can be found in the *Wa-Kan rōeishū* 和漢朗詠集 (Collection of Japanese and Chinese poems for recitation):

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|---|---|
| The mailboat at the ferry crossing set out as the wind calmed down, | 渡口郵船風定出 |
| Upon the wave crest, my place of exile comes into view as the weather clears. | 波頭謫處日晴看 |

This heptasyllabic Sinitic couplet was presumably one of ten such rhymed couplets in Takamura's "Takukōgin" 謫行吟 (Poem of going into exile), which he composed en route to his place of banishment. The writing in "Takukōgin" was said to be extraordinarily beautiful, uncommonly interesting, and indeed profound. The poem was apparently recited by virtually all who were familiar with literature at the time. The first two graphs, *tokō* 渡口 (ferry crossing), found in this poem undoubtedly refer to the Chikumi landing. Takamura's wretchedness as he waits for the ferocious winds of the north country to calm down, so that he can proceed to his exile in Oki, is vividly described here.



## Takamura's Anger

Why, then, did Ono no Takamura renounce his position as vice-ambassador of the mission to China?

The chief ambassador of this mission was Fujiwara no Tsunetsugu. When construction of the embassy vessels was completed, Tsunetsugu decided on his own which vessel he would board and furthermore named it *Taiheirō* 大平良. The ship's name was perhaps meant to convey the idea that being "greatly calm" (大平) was "good" (良), or that the final graph 良 was meant to stand in for the similar graph *lang* 浪 "wave" and thus mean "great and calm waves." Takamura was dissatisfied that this act on Tsunetsugu's part had no traditional precedent, and this was the reason he gave for not boarding ship.

As we shall describe in detail later, Tsunetsugu and Takamura, among others on this voyage overseas, were set to confront headwinds and fail twice in their efforts to make the crossing. With the third attempt at passage before him, Ambassador Tsunetsugu received an imperial edict reached on the basis of divination and thus changed the number two vessel which Takamura was due to board, to the number one vessel and boarded. Takamura's anger exploded.

Ambassador Tsunetsugu had selected the best ship, made it the number one vessel, and boarded it himself. This time, when the number one vessel appeared unsafe, he abandoned it immediately and switched to board vessel number two; he then dubbed the ship he now boarded as number one—as such he was calmly compelling others to board the defective ship into which seawater would seep through its holes. Planning solely for his own safety, he gave no thought to the fact that he was harming others. From the perspective of human kindness, this was unfathomable, and surely he would be ashamed before others. How could he lead subordinates on a sea crossing? As vice-ambassador, Takamura could not carry out his responsibilities. Such was Takamura's explanation as he vented his anger to Chief Ambassador Tsunetsugu.

With this anger, Takamura refused to board ship and publicly cited illness as his reason. Obviously, illness was simply an excuse. Yet, Takamura's action did not emerge solely from his displeasure with Tsunetsugu's improper behavior. In the account of Takamura's death, we read: "The privy council was undecided about two or three matters." Not only did Takamura attack Chief Ambassador Tsunetsugu's inhumane behavior, he also focused severe criticism on the privy council's indecisiveness regarding the embassy to China.

In an entry in the *Shoku Nihon kōki*, for the day that Takamura's banishment was set, we read: "After all, he felt indignant and composed a song of the western route to disparage the matter of the embassy to China. This song followed a rhythm in the violation of many taboos." According to this song, the idea especially weighing on Takamura's mind was a critique of the policy itself to send the embassy to China. It became the "Song of the Western Route" in which he entrusted what he was then feeling.

Where did Takamura's criticism of dispatching the embassy to China come from? In pondering this, we must consider the movement surrounding

the embassy to China from the time that Takamura was assigned to be its vice-ambassador in line with domestic and foreign historical developments. This embassy to China would prove to be the final one, and there was a reason for this. Together with the movements of the people who formed the embassy, we shall pursue all leads as far as possible to place this event in the history of that time.

CHAPTER ONE

# The Jōwa Embassy



## Embassy Appointment

### Change of Reign Names in the Year Kōin 甲寅 (834)

On 1/3 in the eleventh year of the Tenchō 天長 reign (February 14, 834), the later retired Emperor Junna 淳和 (786–840, r. 823–833) paid a visit to the former retired Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (786–840, r. 809–823) at the Reizenin 冷然院 [1] to celebrate the New Year. Emperor Saga was stunned by Junna's sudden presence and received him in the middle court. On that day an edict declaring a change in reign titles was sent down. It was the first Kōin day of the Kōin year. The edict noted that it was the beginning of the year of the tiger (*tora* 寅), and heaven's path corresponded to a time of change. The first month marked the start of spring, and all of nature looked forward to a day of restoration. A time for beginnings to be launched, it continued, and reflections would need to be focused on ancient laws. Tenchō 11 then changed to Jōwa 1.

Shortly thereafter, there was report from Dazaifu 太宰府, the seat of the regional capital in Kyushu, that an auspicious cloud had appeared over Chikuzen 筑前 Province (present-day Fukuoka Prefecture). On the sixteenth day of that

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[1] Translator's note: The *Reizenin* was a palace for emperors who had abdicated, founded in the early ninth century.

first month (February 27), thirteen high officials, including Minister of the Left Fujiwara no Otsugu 藤原緒嗣 (773–843), submitted to Emperor Ninmyō 仁明 (r. 833–850, b. 808) a memorial claiming that the auspicious cloud was a sign of peace, for when governance is peaceful auspicious clouds appear. Citing phrases from the Five Elements texts, *Sunshi ruiying tu* 孫氏瑞應圖 (Master Sun's chart of auspicious responses) and *Lidou weiyi* 禮斗威儀 (Magnificent ceremonial rites of the Northern Dipper), the memorial offered congratulations for the appearance of such a cloud. Ninmyō, who had only just acceded to the throne in the third month of the previous year, assumed an unusual attitude by closing the memorial the officials had presented to him and asking nothing.

While they had tried to dress up the change of reign title in the Kōin year with the emergence of such a propitious sign from above, why did Emperor Ninmyō not express his joy? In the sixth month of Jōwa 5 (June–July 838), the reign title changed to Kashō 嘉祥, and at that time the appearance of a white tortoise was arranged in Bungo 豐後 Province (present-day Ōita). At this time as well, it was reported that "the joy of the imperial house is logical, not due to the gods. The continued peace of the realm remains in the hands of one man only, and that is indeed auspicious"—indicating a lack of joy over the appearance of an auspicious tortoise. The happiness of the emperor was a matter of logic, not the gods. It was Emperor Ninmyō's view that peace in the realm was wholly dependent on human capacity. For that matter, in the imperial decree replying to the memorial of the officials' congratulations for the auspicious cloud, he emphasized that the people's contentment and a moderation of wind and rain were propitious signs and that the welfare of the state was based on human affairs.

Emperor Ninmyō loved scholarship. He immersed himself in the Chinese classics and histories. He read through works from the Daoist theories of Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 to the school of *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要 (Instructions for a good government). Thus, rather than joy at the appearance of auspicious clouds, he was much more concerned with the well-being of living people. This was in large part due to his concern about the instability in actual governance at the time. When a political disturbance did eventually arise, as it did roughly nine years later with the Jōwa Incident, it would appear that the expectation in Emperor Ninmyō's mind was well-placed.

## Tsunetsugu and Takamura

Shortly after this change in reign names and the uproar over the appearance of the auspicious cloud, the embassy to China was appointed— Jōwa 1/1/19 (March 2, 834). The previous embassy had been named in Enryaku 20 (801), meaning that thirty-three years had passed between them. The official announcement is recorded in the *Shoku Nihon kōki* for that day, as follows:

> On this day appointment of the embassy to the Tang is proclaimed. The chief ambassador is to be Lord Fujiwara no Tsunetsugu, privy councilor junior fourth rank upper, head of the clerical office of the right, and governor of Sagami Province. The vice-ambassador is to be Lord Ono no Takamura, junior fifth rank lower, judge (彈正少弼), and minister of Mimasaka. There are to be four embassy counselors (判官) and three secretaries (錄事).



Chief Ambassador Tsunetsugu was the seventh son of Fujiwara no Kadonomaro 藤原葛野麻呂 (755–818), senior third rank vice-councilor of state and principal ambassador on the Enryaku 20 mission. As a young man, he had studied at the Daigakuryō 大學寮 (Imperial university), read through the *Shi ji* 史記 (Historical records [of Sima Qian 司馬遷]) and the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the [Former] Han dynasty [of Ban Gu 班固]), recited the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of refined literature), much enjoyed composing prose, and additionally was quite talented at calligraphy in the clerical script. He was intelligent with a stunning power of comprehension; his stern, awe-inspiring bearing was said to be worthy of admiration. When he was appointed chief ambassador, Tsunetsugu was thirty-nine years of age (by East Asian counting).

Vice-Ambassador Takamura was the eldest son of Ono no Minemori 小野岑守 (778–830), privy councilor senior fourth rank lower. When Takamura was fourteen, his father became governor of Mutsu 陸奥Province, and as a result he proceeded with his father to the remote region of Mutsu. Takamura was drawn to the heroism of racing his horse around the wastelands of the northeast, and after returning to the capital he did not return to his studies but devoted all of his time to riding his horse. Upon hearing of this, Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (r. 809–823) regretted Takamura's talents and lamented that he had