Preface

IT WAS early in 1968 that I first determined to study retired sovereigns in Heian Japan. That year, as a graduate student in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University, I submitted a dissertation proposal to work on the *insei*. This book is an outgrowth of that proposal, but it has undergone several changes since then. I originally planned to write a detailed political history of the so-called *insei* period (1086–1185), encompassing essentially chapters 4 through 7 of the present work. By mid-1968 I had read virtually all the Japanese secondary materials covering the period; accepting rather uncritically the approaches, generalizations, and categorizations of Japanese historians, I intended to handle the phenomenon of the insei, or "cloister government," in a manner similar to theirs.

It was only after I became more familiar with the primary materials for late Heian Japan that I began to question Japanese approaches to the study of Heian political history in general and the insei in particular. I discovered what appeared to me to be an overreliance upon questionable materials. Moreover, I found numerous unanswered questions, as I point out in chapter 1, which forced me to go back to the earliest periods of Japanese history for explanations. An inquiry into these unanswered, indeed frequently not even posed, questions yielded a great amount of information that

Japanese scholars had ignored and forced me to alter the scope of my study.

The result of this inquiry is that I have attempted to deal with the insei on two different levels. On the basic level, I have been concerned with attempting to explain how and why abdicated sovereigns emerged as important political figures in the late Heian period. On another level, I have attempted to reevaluate the manner in which Japanese scholars have treated the abdicated sovereign in the politics of the period. Here I have been concerned largely with the concept of the insei in Japanese history: has this concept, created by later historians, been a useful one for explaining the admittedly confusing political events of late Heian Japan; or has it, on the other hand, oversimplified matters to the extent that it has confused rather than clarified the events?

For purposes of organization and analysis, the book is divided into two parts. Part one, chapters 1 through 7, is essentially a narrative discussion of the origins and development of abdication in Japan and the rise of abdicated sovereigns to political power. Having traced this development rather fully, I then turn in part two to an analysis of the structure and function of the *in no chō*, or ex-sovereign's office, which, according to Japanese scholars, functioned essentially as a separate government.

One note concerning terminology is necessary. I dislike the usual English translation of insei as "cloister government" for two reasons. First, the word "cloister" suggests a religious element which was sometimes, but not always, present. While most abdicated sovereigns eventually took the tonsure, their actions before and after taking Buddhist vows seem not to have differed significantly. Second, I do not feel that the abdicated sovereigns organized and conducted a "government," as many others state or imply. I avoid, then, the term "cloister government" and use the word insei in appropriate contexts or simply refer to the political activities of the retired sovereigns. Likewise, I do not refer to the abdicated sovereign as the "cloister"; throughout I employ interchangeably the terms abdicated sovereign, abdicated emperor, retired sovereign, retired emperor, ex-sovereign, and ex-emperor.

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While acknowledging my debt to these various scholars and teachers, I must, of course, absolve them from any responsibility for errors in fact or judgment. These remain my own special contribution.

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* Personal names are given in the Japanese order, i.e., surname first.