Site of the Kujo Residence

The Kujo family is one of five houses whose members served time and again as regent or chancellor to the emperor, two of the most important positions in the Imperial Court from the late Heian period onwards. The influence these families wielded was such that their daughters often provided the wife of the emperor, as was the case when Empress Sadako (1884–1912) married Emperor Taisho (1879–1927).

One of the most famous members of the Kujo family was Fujiwara Ryokei (1169–1206), who lived at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Ryokei served the emperor as prime minister but was also famous for his poetry. He used his position to act as a patron of other poets and to institute a renowned poetry salon. Here is one of his poems:

As far as the eye can see

on the plain of Musashino

the earth and the sky are one

and the moon peeps out

from among the grasses.

(Yukusue wa / sora mo hitotsu no / Musashino ni / kusa no hara yori / izuru tsukikage)

(*Shinkokin wakashu (early 13th century),* (No.422)

Classical Japanese literature is centered around the capital city of Kyoto, which is surrounded by mountains. There are countless poems that celebrate the rising and the setting of the moon over these mountains; in this poem Ryokei subverts this expectation and expresses delight instead at the imagined scene of the moon rising over the entirely flat plain of Musashino.

Towards the end of the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate began to favor accepting the demands of US Consul General Townsend Harris (1804-1878) that Japan should sign the proposed Treaty of Peace and Commerce (the so-called Harris Treaty). However, Emperor Komei (1831-1867) strongly objected to this plan. Negotiations between the Imperial Court and the Tokugawa shogunate over

this issue took place, in part, at the Kujo residence. All that remains of this once vast dwelling is the Shusuitei Teahouse by the pond and the Itsukushima Shrine, the guardian shrine for the Kujo family, which is located on the finger of land that extends into the pond.