The Status of Descendants of the Baekje Kingdom during Emperor Kanmu’s Reign

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Abstract

This article examines the status of kinship groups claiming to be of Baekje descent during the reign of the Japanese Emperor Kanmu (b.737, r.781-806). Being a maternal descendant of the Baekje royal house himself, Kanmu extended some unprecedented favours to various immigrant clans. However, the bestowed rewards and privileges varied greatly depending on the individual family. In an attempt to provide an explanation for this difference in treatment, the role of the immigrant clans, or members thereof, is first discussed in terms of Kanmu’s philosophical beliefs, his bureaucracy, and his Hinder Palace. Then, the difference in status between the immigrant kinship groups is analyzed, and a possible explanation for the difference in treatment is suggested.

Keywords: ancient Japan, Yamato, Kudara, Sugano, Koma, hereditary title, konikishi, naturalization, assimilation

Kanmu’s Baekje Origins

As a descendant of the Tenji line,¹ the non-ruling branch of the Japanese imperial family since the Jinshin war of 672, nothing during Kanmu’s youth indicated that one day he would become sovereign. However, when the ruling Empress Shōtoku passed away in 770, no suitable heirs were found in the Tenmu line,² and Prince Shirakabe, a grandson of Great King Tenji, assumed the throne as Emperor Kōnin. Most likely, the enthronement of the 61-year-old Kōnin was a transitional measure until his 9-year-old son, Imperial Prince Osabe, was old enough to rule. Despite his young age, Osabe was favoured above all other children of Kōnin and appointed crown prince because his mother was an imperial princess of the Tenmu line, and thus Osabe represented the merging of the two imperial lineages (see fig. 1).

It was not until 773, after Osabe and his mother were accused of sorcery and removed from the capital that Yamabe, the later Emperor Kanmu, was appointed crown prince.³ Even at this point, Yamabe’s selection was met with opposition. Although he was probably the eldest legitimate son, his father and some government officials originally proposed other members of the imperial family as heir to the throne. It is now commonly accepted that Yamabe was initially left out of consideration for the position of heir apparent due to his maternal descent.

As was customary for aristocratic males in eighth-century Japan, Yamabe’s father had several consorts and concubines, and most of these women outranked Yamabe’s mother, Takano no ason Niigasa. Until the mid-770s, Niigasa’s surname and hereditary title (kabane)⁴ had been Yamato no fuhito. Various sources testify to the fact that

¹. Members of the imperial family descending from Great King Tenji. On the usage of “Great King” (ökimi) rather than “Emperor” (tenno) for Japan’s pre-8th century rulers, see Piggott (1997).
². Members of the imperial family descending from Great King Tenmu.
⁴. Niigasa and her father Yamato no fuhito Ototsugu received the name Takano no ason during the reign of Kōnin. Although no mention is made of this bestowment.
this kinship group claimed descent from the royal house of Baekje. Already in 505, this bond between the Yamato family and Baekje royalty was mentioned in the Nihon shoki (The Chronicles of Japan):5

The King of Baekje [Muryeong] sent Lord Sa-a. He eventually had a son named Lord Beopsa. He was the ancestor of the Kimi of Yamato.6

Almost three centuries later, Niigasa’s biography as recorded in the Shoku nihongi (Chronicles of Japan, Continued) also stresses her family’s relationship with the Baekje royal family since the entries around the time of her death in 790 state that her ancestors were the “descendants of Crown Prince Sunta, son of King Muryeong.”7 Furthermore, according to the early ninth-century Shinsen shōjiroku (A Record of Titles and Surnames Newly Selected), a genealogy of the clans inhabiting Helan and the Five Inner Provinces, the Yamato family were “the offspring of King Muryeong, a descendant in the 18th generation of King Dongmyeong of the kingdom of Baekje.”8

The fact that both historical records refer to Dongmyeong as the ancestor of the Baekje kings shows that their compilers had some understanding of Korean history and mythology. Muryeong was the 25th king of Baekje and, indeed, a descendant in the 18th generation when counted from Dongmyeong. However, Dongmyeong was not a Baekje sovereign; he has to be identified with Ko Jumong or King Dongmyeong of the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo. He was the father of Onjo, who according to the Samguk sagi (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms) was the actual founder of Baekje.9

in the court annals of that era, Niigasa was referred to as Takano no ason for the first time in 778. Shoku nihongi, Hōki 9/1/29. It is likely that she was given this name around the time of Yamabe’s appointment to crown prince.

5. Nihon shoki, Muretsu tennō 7/summer, 4th month.
7. Shoku nihongi, Enryaku (hereafter abbreviated as E) 8 following year/1/15; Shoku nihongi, E 9/12/1.
Kanmu also seems to have been deeply aware of his mother’s roots and when her posthumous name was decided upon, the foundation myth of Goguryeo as recorded in the Samguk sagi, in which reference is made to the solar origins of the royal families of Goguryeo and Baekje, was taken into consideration.10 “Her Highness, Princess Child of the Sun, Heavenly Ruler” clearly refers to the fact that, as a descendant of Domō, Niigasa was a “child of the sun.”11 One day later, another reference is made to the tale of Dongmyeong’s birth as preserved in Korean records as it is stated that he was born from a daughter of a river god who had been impregnated by the sun.12

Once enthroned, this maternal consanguinity with the royal house of the former Baekje kingdom caused Kanmu to rely on members of immigrant kinship groups for various reasons and purposes, thus raising their political and social importance.

Philosophical Beliefs

A first element in terms of Kanmu’s actions towards immigrant clans are his philosophical beliefs and the importance of the Kudara no Konikishi family in this matter. Possibly owing to his partial descent from Baekje immigrants, Kanmu was deeply affected by such continental concepts as the Mandate of Heaven, yin-yang, and the Five Elements. Because his father’s succession to the throne meant a shift back towards the Tenji line of sovereigns, Kanmu firmly believed his rule marked the accession of a new dynasty. Thus, in line with the above-mentioned philosophical concepts, the establishment of a new capital was required, and Kanmu twice observed a sacrifice to the Lord on High (kōten jōtei; ch.: haotian)

13. Shoku nihongi, E 4/11/10; E 6/11/5. Since two references are made to the winter solstice, and the text of the incantations uttered during the second ceremony is to a large extent identical to the Datang jiaosilu (Records of the Suburban Sacrifice of the Great Tang), it is believed that Kanmu carried out the suburban round altar sacrifice (kōshi; ch.: jiaosi). This sacrifice was a Chinese Confucian ritual intended to legitimize the position and actions of an emperor. Datang jiaosilu, 4. Takikawa (1967, 484-495) provides a comparison of the proclamations of the Tang, Kanmu, and emperor Montoku, who also carried out the ceremony in 856. Nihon montoku tennō jitsuroku, Saikō 3/11/22-25.


15. Shoku nihongi, E 9/2/27. To explain Kanmu’s claim that they were his maternal relatives, Tsunoda (1976, 38-39) has suggested that a daughter of Kudara no Ōshei may have married someone of the Yamato family and that their son was Yamato no Otsutsugu, Kanmu’s maternal grandfather (see fig. 2). However, it is also possible that Kanmu was merely referring to the fact that Uija was a descendant of Muryeong and that as such the Yamato and Kudara families were related. For a survey of other explanations, see Tanaka (1997, 82-83) and Ōtsubo (2003, 129-131).


17. Nihon shoki, Jomei tennō 3/3/1. In fact, because Uija did not succeed to the throne until 641, Pung was probably sent by King Mu, Uija’s father. Although the Chinese character wū i.e. “hostage” or “pawn” is used in the court records, Song (2006) has suggested that Pung and his relatives came to Japan following the first envoy to the Tang (kentōshi) since their experience in diplomacy would be useful for the Japanese when dealing with the Tang empire and the Silla kingdom.
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Boksin, another member of the Baekje royal family, and the Buddhist monk Dochim in an attempt to restore the Baekje kingdom. However, their plan failed and one of Pung’s brothers, known in Japan as Zenkō, fled to Japan where he and his people were given land in 664.

Several elements indicate that Zenkō’s clan was certainly held in high esteem by the central government in the late seventh century. For example, when Zenkō’s son, Shōsei, passed away in 674, his death was recorded in the official records with the verb 

(“mimakaru”), a term usually reserved for high-ranking aristocrats, and he was posthumously bestowed the rank of Lesser Purple (“shōshi”), the 6th highest rank within the 26-grade cap rank system established in 664. Furthermore, during the reign of Empress Jitō, Zenkō was given the surname and hereditary title of Kudara no Konikishi and the family was included in the Japanese bureaucratic system.

Over the following decades, the family continued to prosper, and during the mid-eighth century, the clan’s most prominent male member was Kudara no Konikishi Kyōfuku, Shōsei’s grandson. Kyōfuku was greatly favoured by Emperor Shōmu because of his contribution to the completion of the Great Buddha of the Tōdaiji temple. At the beginning of 749, a few months before the casting of this huge statue of Rushana Buddha was completed, gold was discovered in the Ōda district of Mutsu province, at that time administered by Kyōfuku. Consequently, Kyōfuku offered 900 ryō (approximately 12.5 kg) of this gold to the throne. The discovery was reported to the major shrines in the realm and during a ceremony at Tōdaiji, Shōmu had his Minister of the Left read the following statement:

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18. Nihon shoki, Saimei tennō 6/Winter, 10th month; Nihon shoki, 8th month, before the enthronement of Tenji tennō.
23. Shoku hihongi, Tenpyō 21/2/22; Shoku nihongi, Tenpyō shōhō 1/4/1.
Irrespective of whether or not these two had a love affair, Kanmu greatly favoured Myōshin and frequently visited her husband’s residences. As a result, several favours and rewards were extended to Myōshin and her relatives. When Kanmu went on a hunting trip in Katano in late 783, the district was exempted from paying that year’s rice-paddy taxes (denso); the Kudaradera, the clan temple of the Kudara family, received part of the tax grain (shōzei) of two provinces; and several members of the family were granted court ranks. On that occasion, Myōshin received the highest awarded rank.27 The following month, Myōshin’s court rank was raised again to Senior Fourth Rank Upper Grade.28 In 787, when Kanmu visited another villa of Tsugutada in the vicinity of the Nagaoka capital, he bestowed the Junior Third Rank upon Myōshin and, in 794, when it was decided that a new capital (Heian) would be built in Uda, 11,000 sheaves of rice were given to Myōshin and fourteen other women for the construction of new residences.29

Around her husband’s death in 796, Myōshin’s influence at court was extended even further as she was appointed director of the Palace Retainers’ Office (naishi no kami), the principal administrative office of the Hinder Palace.30 Apparently, she concurrently held the post of director of the Table Office (kashiwade no kami).31 In 797, Myōshin again received an extraordinary favour when she was granted an area of no less than 77 chō (approximately 76.3 ha) in Noto province.32 And, two years later, she was awarded the Senior Third Rank one day before Kanmu again journeyed to the Katano district.33

Unquestionably, Myōshin was also the most important woman of the clan during Kanmu’s reign. Based on the biography of Fujiwara no ason Takatoshi (Myōshin’s son), recorded in the Kugyō bunin (Directory of Nobles), which states that his mother “received the emperor’s affection” and two poems composed by Kanmu during a winding waters party (gokusui no en) held in 795, several scholars assume Kanmu and Myōshin were romantically involved.26

24. Translated by Sansom (1931, 125-126), modified.
26. Kugyō bunin, Daidō 3; Ruiju kokushi, 75 E 14/4/11. See for example Murao (1963, 231); Tsunoda (1976, 33-34, 39) and Murai (1997, 30).
In all likelihood, the rewards given to the various members of the Kudara no Konikishi family were connected to rituals carried out on the winter solstice. During his first hunting trip to Katano in 783, Kanmu may have inspected the area for the erection of a round mound to hold the previously mentioned sacrifice to the Lord on High. Furthermore, it is clear from the historical records that in 787 Myōshin’s husband, Tsugutada, carried out the ritual in Kanmu’s name. It is not surprising that an emperor who was deeply aware of his consanguinity with the royal house of Baekje selected the homeland of an immigrant kinship group from that same kingdom in which to construct a round mound, since the custom was practiced in Baekje, too, and the proceedings of the ritual itself might even have been based upon a version of the ritual carried out by the Baekje kings.  

Government Administration

A second element requiring attention in order to establish the status of immigrant clans is the role their members played in the bureaucratic system.

As far as the Kudara no Konikishi are concerned, they retained their influence to a certain extent after Kanmu’s enthronement due to their intermarriage with the Southern Fujiwara. However, the Kudara could only aspire to provincial and mid-level appointments, and none of the clan’s male members attained Kyōfuku’s Junior Third Rank.  

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the central government. During Kanmu’s reign, some families traditionally represented in the State Council (daijōkan), the highest legislative and policy-making office in the ritsuryō state, were replaced by a number of previously insignificant families of immigrant origin. As a result, clans with a hitherto rather low social and political position were drawn into the core of politics.

The first person of Baekje origin to be given a seat on the State Council was Yamato no ason Iemaro, a maternal relative of Kanmu. Over the course of a decade, Iemaro had made a noteworthy climb up the bureaucratic ladder. His name appears for the first time in the historical records in 786 when he was promoted from the lowly Junior Seventh Rank Upper Grade to the Junior Fifth Rank Lower Grade. Two weeks later, Iemaro’s newly acquired status as a member of the middle nobility already paid off as he was appointed executive secretary of Ise province (Ise daijō). From that moment, Iemaro continued to receive promotions and appointments, serving in ever closer proximity to his cousin Kanmu. In 788, he became director of the Wine-Making Office (zōshū no kami) in the Imperial Household Ministry (kunai). In 789, he was appointed director of the Arsenal Office (zōheishi no kami) and in 791, associate director of the Palace Stables Bureau (naikyū no suke). By 796, Iemaro held the Senior Fourth Rank Lower Grade and was admitted into the top stratum of Japanese aristocracy through his appointment to the office of imperial advisor (sangi), the lowest position within the State Council. The following year he was also given the responsibility of guarding the palace enclosure as director of the Imperial Gate Guards’ Headquarters (emon no kami). In 798, he was promoted to the office of middle counsellor (chūnagon) in the State Council and was awarded the Junior Third Rank. He was then appointed to the office of Regulatory Minister (jibu no kami) and in mid-799 he became Mediate Affairs Minister (nakatsukasa no kami), upon which we are informed that he also held the office of governor of Sagami province (Sagami no kami).

These numerous appointments create the impression that Iemaro was an able politician whose advice and experience were greatly appreciated. However, his biography as preserved in the Nihon kōki seems to suggest the opposite:

He was unsophisticated and lacked talent and education. Because he was a maternal relative of the emperor, he [enjoyed] special preference and promotion. [The fact] that people from a foreign [clan] enter [the ranks of] the highest officials, originates here. One can say his rank was too [high] and his true merit was insufficient. Although he held highly respected offices, he did not shy away from the vulgarity of meeting with old friends.

Although the biographies recorded in the Nihon kōki tend to be “unrelentingly critical,” it is possible that the compilers of this record, members of the Fujiwara family, one of the families traditionally represented in the State Council, were envious of Iemaro’s achievements and attempted to discredit him. Another possible explanation could be the fact that Kanmu, being a strong ruler, preferred people who could be easily dominated in top-level positions, thus keeping most power for himself.

At the beginning of 805, another member of a clan claiming Baekje descent was given a seat on the State Council when the aged and ill Kanmu announced the appointment of Sugano no ason Mamichi to the office of imperial advisor. Before 790, Mamichi held the surname and hereditary title of Tsu no Muraji. He thus belonged

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38. Shoku nihongi, E 5/1/7.
40. Shoku nihongi, E 7/2/28.
41. Shoku nihongi, E 8/5/28; E 10/1/28.
42. Nihon kōki, E 15/7/28; Kugyō bunin, E 15.
43. Nihon kōki, E 16/3/11.
44. Kugyō bunin, E 17.
45. Nihon kōki, E 18/2/20; E 18/6/16.
to a kinship group that claimed to be in the lineage of King Geungusu, the 14th king of Baekje. Although Mamichi served as director of the Left Palace Guards (sae no kami) and of the Military Guards’ Headquarters of the Left (sahyo no kami) early in his political career, Kanmu probably held Mamichi in high esteem because of his scholarly abilities. In 785, Mamichi became scholar in Crown Prince Ate’s Eastern Palace Agency (toga gakushu) and combined this appointment with several other offices such as that of associate director and, later, director of the Manuscripts and Books Bureau (zusho no suke and zusho no kami). In addition, Mamichi was involved in writing the final draft of the Shoku nihongi, which was presented to Kanmu in 797. He also headed the Board of Discharge Examiners (kageyushi), and as such, he was responsible for the compilation of the Enryaku kotaishiki (Enryaku Regulations on the Transfer of Office) along with Fujiwara no ason Uchimaro.

Although not of Baekje descent, two other men belonging to an immigrant kinship group deserve to be mentioned in this context since they too held high government posts during Kanmu’s reign.

The first is extra-codal imperial advisor Koma no ason Fukushin. Fukushin’s original surname and hereditary title was Sena no kimi. His biography as recorded in the Shoku nihongi claims he was a descendant of a man who fled from the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo to Japan after Tang General Li Chi occupied Pyeongyang in 668. In fact, Fukushin had been appointed extra-codal imperial advisor by Shoto in 765 and had served in this function ever since. By the time Kanmu came to the throne, Fukushin was already in his seventies and entitled to retirement. However, he remained in office until 785. Because he had served as Palace Construction Minister (zogu no kami) in 767 and 768, he may have advised Kanmu on the construction of Nagaokakyō.

The second person deserving special mention is Sakanoue no osukune Tamuramaro who entered the State Council as imperial advisor in mid-805. The Sakanoue clan also claimed to have continental origins. In 785, Tamuramaro’s father had petitioned the throne to have his hereditary title changed from imiki into suke. In this petition, he claimed descent from Achi no Omi, a great-grandson of Emperor Lingdi of the Later Han Dynasty. Tradition has it that when the Later Han Dynasty fell in 220, Achi no Omi first fled to Korea and then to Japan. Tamuramaro had served in various construction agencies, and his family was traditionally involved in military affairs. Tamuramaro’s father had been involved in the suppression of the rebellion of Fujiwara no Nakamaro in 764; and Tamuramaro himself fought the emishi in northern Japan on several occasions. During his last campaign in 801-802, he was finally successful in suppressing the rebellion, and most likely these military successes led to Tamuramaro’s inclusion in the State Council.

The Hinder Palace

The increased social and political importance of people from immigrant descent described above was also reflected in the composition of Kanmu’s Hinder Palace.

49. Shoku nihongi, E 9/7/17. While the entry announcing Mamichi’s name change claims Geungusu was the 16th ruler of the kingdom, reference is once more made to the solar origins of King Dongmyeong and Baekje.
50. Between 747 and 750, Fukushin and seven relatives held the hereditary title of konikishi before being given the surname and title Koma no ason. Shoku nihongi, Tenpyo 19/6/7; Tenpyo shoho 2/1/27.
51. Shoku nihongi, E 8/10/17.
52. Shoku nihongi, Tenpyo jingo 1/1/7.
The women of the Kudara no konikishi family benefited greatly from Myōshin and Tsugutada’s influence as several of them were in attendance at court and they attained a higher rank than many of their male relatives during Kanmu’s and following reigns. Four women were appointed female officials: Keishin, Myōhon, Shintoku, and Shinzen, and at least four other relatives of Myōshin were selected for an even more coveted position as one of Kanmu’s consorts: Kyōnin, Kyōhō, Jōkyō and Fujiwara no ason Minamiko, a granddaughter of Tsugutada and Myōshin.

In addition to the Kudara no konikishi women, other females of immigrant descent were also selected as imperial consorts and concubines.

During the first decade of his reign, Kanmu had a relationship with Kudara no sukune Nagatsugu, a woman belonging to the Asukabe no kimi family. Several Asukabe families are recorded in the Shinsen shōjiroku, and they all claimed descent from Baekje kings. Nagatsugu was originally a secondary consort of Fujiwara no Uchimaro with whom she had several children. However, in the early 780s she became a serving girl (nyōju) in the palace, and in 785 she gave birth to Yasuyo, one of Kanmu’s sons. Although Yasuyo was never recognized as an imperial prince (shinnō) he did receive the family name and hereditary title of Yoshimine no ason in 802.

In 793, Nishigoribe no muraji Manu gave birth to Imperial Prince Sakamoto. Manu, too, who was descended from Baekje royalty as the Shinsen shōjiroku, mentions two Nishigoribe no muraji branches, both claiming descent from King Chogo.

Finally, Kanmu had two consorts who belonged to the Sakanoue clan. The first, Sakanoue no ōsukune Matakō, was the sister of Tamuramaro. From the entry upon her death in 790, it is clear she already became one of Kanmu’s consorts before his enthronement. The second was Sakanoue no ōsukune Haruko, a daughter of Tamuramaro. She probably became a consort around 800, the birth year of her son with Kanmu.

This selection of women belonging to immigrant kinship groups as consorts was in fact a precedent. Although Kōnin also had a...
spouse of immigrant origin, this marriage had taken place decades before he became emperor during a time when nobody could foresee he would one day be enthroned. This in fact made Kanmu the first reigning emperor who created marital ties with immigrant kinship groups.66

The Kudara no Konikishi versus Other Immigrant Kinship Groups

All the above clearly shows that for some reason the Kudara no konikishi were treated differently from the other immigrant kinship groups. Although Kanmu relied upon the clan to legitimize his rule and they were intermarried with one of the most powerful aristocratic families at that time, the clan failed to see this translated into political power. Even though several of the clan’s daughters became either government officials or Kanmu’s consorts, none of the male members were admitted into the top stratum of Japanese aristocracy, although this was achieved by descendants of other immigrant clans.

Both Sugano no Mamichi and Sakanoue no Tamuramaro had probably been appointed due to their meritorious deeds in terms of scholarship and military affairs respectively, and Yamato no Iemaro due to the fact that he was a relative of the emperor. However, the Kudara no konikishi, too, were maternally related to Kanmu, moreover, a significant number of Kudara women became part of the Hinder Palace, and the clan certainly served Kanmu well in terms of religious affairs and lower level administration. Kanmu’s appreciation of the clan is further exemplified by the eternal exemption from corvée labour granted to them, a privilege not even given to the Yamato, Kanmu’s closest relatives.

This makes one suspect that the Kudara no konikishi clan occupied a unique position resulting from a different level of assimilation into Japanese society.

Analysis of the Kugyō bunin shows that membership of the State Council was restricted to men holding one of three possible hereditary titles: mahito, ason, and sukune.67 These titles were the three highest in the eight kabane system (yakusa no kabane) proclaimed by Tenmu in 684 and were not available for immigrants.68 This Kudara lineage, on the other hand, held the title of konikishi, a title given only to the descendants of the royal families of the former Baekje and Goguryeo kingdoms.69 However, by the late eighth century only one clan, the descendants of the last king of Baekje, still carried the title konikishi. The other families had been assimilated into Japanese society by applying for new surnames and accepting new hereditary titles. This naturalization by name-changing was a practice that “came to be permitted on a truly wholesale basis” in the mid-eighth century:70

Whereas there are people from Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla who have long yearned after assimilation to the sacred [i.e., naturalization], have adopted our ways and earnestly pray to be granted surnames, and it is to be permitted in every case.

However, this opportunity was never seized by the Kudara no konikishi, nor did any Japanese sovereign offer them a new name and title.

66. For several years scholars have been debating whether or not the Soga family was an immigrant family. If they were a foreign clan, Kōnin was not the first sovereign to marry a woman of immigrant descent and Kanmu was not the first sovereign to have foreign blood.

67. In a few cases, members of the imperial family also held a regular seat on the council, and for obvious reasons, they did not have a hereditary title. Another exception in hereditary titles can be found in the office of extra-codal advisor. In the mid-8th century both Kyōfuku and his brother Nanten had been appointed extra-codal advisors despite having the title konikishi. However, this office was an honorary appointment not provided for in the codes and assigned to any official holding the Third Rank who did not have a regular seat on the council (Miller 1980, 181).


69. See Tanaka (1994, 62) for a list of families receiving the title of konikishi.

70. Shoku nihongi, 20 Tenpyō hōji 1/4/4. See also Kiley (1969, 184).
Thus, not only did the clan retain their surname, explicitly referring to the former Baekje kingdom, they also retained their title, a clear reference to their royal origins. As a result, they may have been considered to be a special class of citizens, who were not fully naturalized, nor fully assimilated into Japanese society.

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**GLOSSARY**

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(Ch.: Chinese; J.: Japanese)