

Origins of expressing ranked status in medieval Japan:
The case of *yomei-kokushi*

by WATANABE Shigeru

This article examines the early stages of the widespread acceptance and use in Japan of a new indicator of ranked status in the attachment of the prefix “*yomei*” 揚名 to the names of bureaucratic posts, a practice that is first seen in 10th century. The author takes up the actual case of attaching the prefix *yomei* to the post of provincial governor (*kokushi* 国司), clarifying its origins and historical development.

Yomei-kokushi was used in the case of appointees who were considered to be of equal rank to a provincial governor, but were not entrusted with the actual duties of the post. Beginning with their appearance in the mid-Heian period, there is no doubt that the earliest *yomei*-prefixed appointments included neither official duties nor salaries. However, concerning the situation from the late Heian period on, the research to date diverges in opinion, leaving no solid conclusions. This state of affairs is what prompts the author to reexamine the related source materials from the period and in so doing finding three different definitions of “*yomei*”, one of which consists of the prefix attached to the name of office and meaning, “an official title with no actual authority”.

The custom of attempting to obtain such a title began in the capital (Kinai 畿内) region during the 10th century, then spread to the outer provinces during the 11th century. The motives by which such a title was obtained were not only pecuniary through outright sale of the office, but also the desire on the part of patrons to bestow titles upon their subordinates for the purpose of strengthening ties of clientship. Up through the 11th century, the number of available *yomei* appointments was limited to less than the number of qualified applicants and involved a continuous turnover rate of from several months to a year. Later on, the title gradually decreased in value, until even *yomei* titles of low level local administrators became viewed as worthless.

That being said, titles based on the bureaucracy defined by the ancient Ritsuryo legal codes, which by the beginning of the medieval period had long been empty of meaning, now became worth obtaining as expressions of ranked status throughout medieval society. The appearance of the title *yomei-kokushi* in the 10th century can therefore be placed within the context of symbols determining ways of thinking about how medieval Japanese society was supposed to function.