

The Kikuchi Clan

The Kikuchi clan was an influential samurai group that played a prominent political role in Kyushu throughout Japan's medieval period. At one point the Kikuchi rose to hold sway over events with countrywide consequences. The clan's headquarters was the castle town of Waifu, today the city of Kikuchi, where the legacy of their 500-year history remains evident even now, centuries after the Kikuchi were vanquished by rival warlords.

Where did the Kikuchi come from?

Many details of how and when the Kikuchi clan was established have been lost to history, but its founding has traditionally been dated to 1070. In that year, Noritaka, a high-ranking court official who held a post at Dazaifu, the administrative center of Kyushu near the present-day city of Fukuoka, is thought to have arrived in what is now the Kikuchi district. Noritaka adopted the surname of Kikuchi and built a fortified compound on the river that was later given the same name, laying the foundations for the castle town of Waifu.

The Kikuchi district was a remote but thriving agricultural region, where rice cultivation flourished. Noritaka and his descendants acquired great wealth by monopolizing trade on the Kikuchi River and selling crops grown on the surrounding plains, which they developed into some of the most productive farmland in the country.

Out of favor

In the late twelfth century, some 100 years after Noritaka's time, the Kikuchi were drawn into a conflict that ushered in a new era in Japanese history. In the Genpei War (1180–1185), the Taira and Minamoto warrior clans, which had long vied for dominance over the imperial court, fought for control over Japan. Samurai families throughout the country were compelled to choose sides. The Kikuchi initially favored the Minamoto, but in the final stages of the war allied themselves with the beleaguered Taira, whose forces were composed mainly of warriors from Kyushu.

The Genpei War was won by the Minamoto, who subsequently established the Kamakura shogunate, the first warrior-controlled government to rule Japan. Based in the eastern part of the country and backed by forces from the same area, the new shogunate regarded the Kikuchi and other Kyushu-based clans, its former enemies, with suspicion.

The distrust between the Kikuchi and the shogunate lingered, and was exacerbated in the

late thirteenth century. After subjugating Korea, the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan launched invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281. The samurai set factional loyalties aside to repel the attackers, and the Kikuchi fought for the shogunate in several battles that helped the Japanese defeat the Mongols. Kikuchi Takefusa (1245–1285), the head of the clan at the time, was recognized for his battlefield heroics. After their victory over the invaders, the Kikuchi felt slighted by the shogunate's failure to reward them with the spoils of war, something expected by warriors who had served with distinction.

Into the spotlight

In the early fourteenth century, the Kamakura shogunate's hold on the country grew tenuous. While the shogunate expended resources on defending Japan against foreign foes, it faced difficulties controlling local warlords and the court. The most serious challenge to the shogunate came from the latter, as Emperor Godaigo (1288–1339) sensed an opportunity to wrest power from the warrior class.

Godaigo allied himself with warrior families discontented with Kamakura, including the Kikuchi, and in 1331 initiated a rebellion against the shogunate. In 1333, the Kikuchi banded together with several other Kyushu-based warrior groups to attack Hakata (present-day Fukuoka), the shogunate's main stronghold on the island. Just as the assault was to go ahead, however, the Kikuchi were betrayed by local warriors in the alliance. Outnumbered and facing certain death, the clan's leader, Kikuchi Taketoki (1292–1333), ordered his son Takeshige (1307–1341) to return to Kikuchi before staging a desperate charge on the shogunate's forces.

Taketoki and his men were killed, but their cause prevailed. Mere months after the failed Kikuchi attack on Hakata, Kamakura fell to forces loyal to Godaigo and the shogunate was abolished. The victorious emperor rewarded the Kikuchi for their loyal service by making Takeshige governor (*shugo*) of Higo Province (present-day Kumamoto Prefecture), a prestigious post the Kikuchi would hold for nearly two centuries.

Loyalists of the Southern Court

Emperor Godaigo's efforts to restore direct rule by the court proved short-lived. His reforms sought a return to the aristocratic social and political system of the pre-Kamakura period, but this policy antagonized large swathes of the warrior class. In 1336, only three years after the fall of the Kamakura shogunate, former Kamakura general and one-time Godaigo ally Ashikaga Takauji (1305–1358) seized Kyoto and founded a warrior

government of his own, the Ashikaga shogunate.

Takauji installed a new emperor to do his bidding and Godaigo fled the capital, setting up a rival court in Yoshino near present-day Nara, south of Kyoto. These events initiated the Nanbokuchō or Northern and Southern Courts period, when the rival courts fought for control of the country.

The Kikuchi clan, like many other warrior families in Kyushu, remained loyal to the Southern Court. Emperor Godaigo viewed his supporters in Kyushu as key to retaking the country, and sent his young son, Prince Kanenaga (1329–1383; known as Kaneyoshi outside of Kikuchi), to the island to strengthen existing alliances and cultivate new ones.

Kanenaga arrived in Waifu in 1348 and met with the castle lord, Kikuchi Takemitsu (1319–1373). Their encounter marked the beginning of a partnership that ushered in the Kikuchi clan's greatest period of prosperity. Over the following decade, Kanenaga and Takemitsu built up a formidable alliance of Kyushu-based warrior families that pushed back Northern Court loyalists throughout the island. These gains culminated in the famous Battle of Chikugo River in 1359, in which the Kikuchi decisively defeated a larger Northern force. By the end of the next year, Southern Court supporters led by the Kikuchi controlled all of Kyushu, and the alliance's headquarters was moved to Dazaifu, from where the Kikuchi patriarch Noritaka had set out some 300 years earlier.

In the years following their victory, the Kikuchi set out to fortify their positions; however, a request from the Southern Court that the victorious Kyushu samurai visit the emperor in Yoshino ended in disaster. A fleet commanded by Kikuchi Takemitsu set sail from Kyushu but was intercepted and routed by a Northern force, forcing Takemitsu to retreat to Dazaifu. The Ashikaga shogunate then dispatched a new general, the renowned strategist Imagawa Ryoshun (1326–1420), to deal with the threat in Kyushu.

Ryoshun drove the Kikuchi-led Southern force out of Dazaifu in 1372, and Takemitsu's death the following year dealt the Kikuchi another blow. Left without its greatest general, the Southern force led by Prince Kanenaga was pushed ever deeper into Kyushu. Kanenaga's death in 1383 ended their resistance for good, and the Kikuchi were again confined to ancestral lands around Waifu.

A cultural turn

The struggling Southern Court was defeated for good in 1392. Confident in victory, the Ashikaga shogunate allowed the weakened Kikuchi to retain control of Higo Province, but the clan's days of conquest and glory were over.

The lords of Waifu managed to improve their relationship with the shogunate, at one point winning favor to the extent that the head of the Kikuchi clan was appointed governor of both Higo and the adjacent Chikugo Province (the southern part of today's Fukuoka Prefecture). But rather than harbor any political ambitions, the Kikuchi turned their attention to cultural goals. Kikuchi Tamekuni (1430–1488), the twentieth head of the clan, and his son Shigetomo (1449–1493) expanded educational opportunities for samurai and townspeople and encouraged their intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Under their leadership, Kikuchi became a regional center for Buddhist and Confucian scholarship.

Decline and fall

The Kikuchi clan's peaceful pursuits were upended by the country's slide into widespread regional conflict among rival warlords. By the late fifteenth century the Ashikaga shogunate, weakened by the rise of local warlord-led families, was losing control. The same dynamic, albeit on a smaller scale, was at work in Kikuchi. Retainer families that had long served the Kikuchi clan outgrew their masters and challenged their authority.

In 1504, these rebellious samurai overthrew the Kikuchi lord and replaced him with the head of one of the retainer families. In the mid-1500s, the Kikuchi lost their remaining lands to the rival Otomo clan. In 1554, the death of Kikuchi Yoshitake, the last head of the clan, ended the Kikuchi lineage.

New appreciation

In the 1800s, rising interest in local history and past glories returned the Kikuchi clan to the spotlight. Merchants, landowners, and other wealthy residents of Kikuchi financed the restoration and rebuilding of monuments and tombs with a connection to the clan.

New appreciation of the Kikuchi legacy on a national scale followed the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which returned political control to the emperor, ending almost seven centuries of warrior rule. The new government under Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) maintained that the emperors of the fourteenth-century Southern Court had been the legitimate holders of the court titles, and the Kikuchi clan, allies of the Southern Court, were held up as an example of the kind of loyalty to the sovereign expected under the new regime. Prominent

Kikuchi lords were enshrined as deities at the newly established Kikuchi Shrine, built on the site of the clan's castle in Waifu.