

Cultures Combined in the Mists of Time: Origins of the China-Japan relationship

Michael Hoffman

Cultures Combined in the Mists of Time: Origins of the China-Japan relationship

By Michael Hoffman

Adopt "a correct view of history," China and South Korea demand of Japan. Fair enough. We can all agree on the merits of a "correct view" of anything. The difficulty is to define "correct."



An artist's impression of four seventh-century Japanese Kentoshi-sen (China-voyage ships) in the East China Sea. Four ships normally set off together for China so they may be able to help each other on the perilous crossing. However, almost a third of those who departed never returned. (Illustration by Kenzo Tanii)

As the intensifying acrimony unfolds over who did what to whom and how horribly, you'd almost think historical relations between the three countries began in 1895, when newly Westernized Japan defeated China in Korea,

and ended in 1945 with Japan prostrate and guilty at the end of World War II.

That was a fateful half-century, to be sure. But among ancient nations that have known each other a very, very long time, a "correct view" cannot be a short one.

To get the true flavor of things, we must go back to the beginning. It is hard to believe now, but some day -- in 17 centuries, perhaps? -- Japan's wartime atrocities may seem as remote as, say, Empress Jingu's fourth-century, semi-mythical invasion of the Korean kingdom of Silla, whose king, surrendering in abject terror (says the Japanese version), promised, "Not allowing the helms of our ships to become dry, every spring and every autumn we will send tribute of horse-combs and whips. And, without thinking the sea-distance a trouble, we will pay annual dues of male and female slaves . . ."

The Chinese had a name for the people of Japan long before the proto-Japanese had one for themselves. It was "Wa" or "Wo," written with a character that means "dwarf."



Prince Shotoku Taishi, the sixth-century father of Japanese Buddhism brought from China, depicted as a kneeling infant in a Kamakura Period (1192-1333) lacquered wooden carving.

This hints at a perceived racial distinction, a perception supported by modern ethnology. The racial origins of the Japanese remain in dispute, but the complexity of the gene pool is generally acknowledged. Wherever their earliest ancestors may have come from, the Wa, their Chinese observers noted, "are divided into 100 countries. Each year envoys from the Wa bring tribute."

So reads the first known description of Japan in history, written by a Chinese chronicler in A.D. 82, centuries before the Japanese were literate.

The "100 countries" were apparently petty

chiefdoms in northern Kyushu, though their locations are in doubt. A century and a half later, a confederacy of some of these chiefdoms was ruled by the famous shaman-queen Himiko, or Pimiko, whose embassy to China in 238 appealed to the Wei Dynasty emperor for help against her hostile neighbor, the "country" of Kunu.



The priest Kukai (774-835), shown seated on a Chinese chair, visited China in 804 and returned to Japan two years later to propagate esoteric Shingon Buddhism.

The Wei emperor Ming responded: "Herein we address Himiko, queen of Wa, whom we now officially call a friend of Wei. . . . You live very far away across the sea; yet you have sent an embassy with tribute. Your loyalty and filial piety we appreciate exceedingly. We confer upon you, therefore, the title of 'Queen of Wa, friendly to Wei.' "

The Chinese record of the transaction proceeds with an itemized list of gifts the emperor entrusted to Himiko's returning ambassadors -- brocades, tapestries, gold and -- perhaps most precious of all -- 100 bronze mirrors. "You may exhibit them to your countrymen," the emperor

concluded, "in order to demonstrate that our country thinks so much of you as to bestow such exquisite gifts upon you."

China was already ancient long before Japan emerged from precivilized infancy. By 5000 B.C., the Chinese were organized in settled farming communities. By 1750 B.C. they had writing and bronze technology. By 700 B.C. they had iron -- iron plows, iron weapons. Japan, all this time and for centuries to come, remained a Stone Age hunting-and-gathering backwater. Pottery is the most distinctive cultural artifact, its characteristic rope-pattern design giving the name Jomon (jomon means "rope-pattern") to the vast stretch of Japanese prehistory that does not draw to a close until the third century B.C.

Similar pottery found in Korea suggests fitful Japanese contact with mainland Asia going back to around 3000 B.C.



More than any other it was Prince Shotoku Taishi (574-622) -- shown in an ink-on-paper artwork by Kogan Zenji (1748-1821) -- who brought ancient Japan into the orbit of Chinese civilization.

A more significant import was to come: rice. Rice, we learn from the "Cambridge History of Japan," does not grow wild in the archipelago. It arrived, says one theory among many, via Korea from the Yangtze River basin in central China. Though rice was grown here and there by the late Jomon people, it was in the succeeding Yayoi Period (roughly 250 B.C.-A.D. 300) that wet rice cultivation became a way of life, making for the settled communities that are the basic prerequisite for civilization.

The Yayoi Period's creative surge was launched by a wave of Korean immigration that followed Chinese invasions under the imperial Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). The newcomers brought not only advanced agricultural techniques, but metal culture. Japan's prolonged Stone Age was over at last.

Bronze mirrors such as those conferred upon Himiko, decorated with mythological beasts (azure dragons, white tigers) and inscribed with Chinese poems, fill Yayoi Period burial sites in northern Kyushu. Graves are the temples and art museums of early societies. For centuries in China, mirrors had figured in Taoist rituals to ward off evil spirits. The shaman-chiefs of Wa used them for similar purposes -- and for another as well: as symbols of recognition accorded by that inconceivably marvelous kingdom across the western sea. Chiefs who had them could overawe, overwhelm and overrule those who didn't.

Half a century after Himiko, the Wa were at least important enough to the Wei Dynasty (one of six to fill a vacuum left by the fall of the Han in A.D. 220) to figure in the late-third-century "History of Three Kingdoms," written by Wei historian Chen Shou-yu.

Deriving his information primarily from a Wei embassy to the Wa "country" of Yamatai (Yema-tai in Chinese; its location is a subject of spirited academic controversy), Chen -- in his

chapter on "Eastern Barbarians" -- describes a settled, peaceful and productive society: "They are a long-lived race, and persons who have reached 100 are very common. All men of high rank have four or five wives. . . . The women are faithful and not jealous. There is no robbery or theft, and litigation is infrequent. . . . Taxes are collected. There are markets in each province . . ."

However, the Wa had "no oxen, horses . . . or sheep."

After the Wei mission to Yamatai, communication between the two countries lapsed. When it resumed nearly two centuries later, Japan had grown. Known then as Yamato (a native Japanese name whose similarity to Yamatai is apparently coincidental), it was ready to embark on a serious apprenticeship to Chinese civilization -- a civilization that, transplanted eastward, was to attain its full Japanese flowering in eighth-century Nara.

Japan's early development was slowed by the same factor that drives its trade policies today: resource poverty.

With scarcely any iron and (until an eighth-century discovery) no copper at all, a metal culture was beyond its means before Chinese and Korean immigrants arrived to lead the way. The ensuing iron hunger brought Japan into close contact with Korea.

The Korean Peninsula then was divided chiefly among three kingdoms intermittently at war with one another: Kokuri in the north, Paikche in the southwest and Silla in the southeast. A fourth, Mimana, was a sliver of land between Paikche and Silla that may have been controlled directly by Yamato -- if it existed. Scholars are not sure. Early Japanese history is a most uncertain field.

"The country produces iron," wrote Chen, of southern Korea, "and the Wa all pursue and take it."

The official "Nihon Shoki," a Chinese-style (and in fact Chinese-language) history compiled under imperial auspices in A.D. 720, records this snatch of dialogue (dated A.D. 246, but "Nihon Shoki" chronology is notoriously unreliable) between the king of Mimana and a Paikche envoy: "I have always heard," said the king, "that there is an honorable country in the east, but I have had no communication with it, and do not know the way. There is nothing but far seas and towering billows, so that in a large ship, one can hardly communicate."

"Well, then," replied the envoy, "for the present we cannot communicate."

There the matter ended for the time, but a few years later (in 252, says the "Nihon Shoki") the same Paikche envoy is described as regaling his Yamato hosts with tales of an "Iron Mountain" in Korea. This is the prologue to the supposed victorious invasion led, under "divine" protection, by Empress Jingu -- a legendary recasting, say modern scholars, of hazy events that occurred in the late fourth century.

Though evidently powerful, Yamato in its early phase was hardly civilized. We look back at fourth-century Japan and are astonished at how little progress it had made -- and that, roughly 1,000 years after Confucius and the Buddha and the founding of Rome. There are no cities to speak of, no roads or bridges worthy of the name, no writing.

Then came the fifth and sixth centuries, and our astonishment redoubles, for they are all that stand between barbarian Japan and the splendors of the Nara Period (710-794). How did it leap so far, so fast? The answer, in three words, is: China and Korea. More accurately, perhaps: China *via* Korea.

From bronze mirrors and iron tools, the story now abruptly shifts to literature and religion. The year is 285 according to the "Nihon Shoki"; 405 by one of several modern reckonings. In

any case, it was during the reign of Jingu's son Ojin.

"The king of Paikche," says the "Nihon Shoki," "sent A-chik-ki with two quiet horses as tribute." A-chik-ki was a scholar, "able to read the [Chinese] classics."

In such casual terms is the advent of Japanese literacy recorded.

A-chik-ki was succeeded as court teacher by Wang-in, or Wani, of whom the "Nihon Shoki" says, "There was [no book] which he did not thoroughly understand." The guild of scribes he founded, staffed by immigrants, functioned as a court secretariat, keeping government records and drafting correspondence with the only foreign governments of whose existence early Japanese rulers seem aware: the Chinese and the Korean.

"Our land is remote, far across the sea," reads a memorial they wrote for Emperor Yuryaku in 478 to a Chinese court -- one of several Chinese courts, for China was still in some disarray. ". . . Generation after generation our ancestors have paid homage to your court. Your subject, ignorant though he may be, has succeeded to the throne and is fervently devoted to Your Sovereign Majesty. Everything he has is at Your Majesty's disposal . . ."

The obsequious tone is in stark contrast to what was soon to come. Momentous developments lay ahead. China, re-unified in 589 under the Sui Dynasty, regained and then surpassed its ancient Han Era splendor. And Japan's Asuka Enlightenment, occurring almost simultaneously, inspired the breathtaking confidence which emboldened the Prince Regent Shotoku, the leading spirit of the age, to address the Sui emperor as an equal -- "Child of Heaven" to "Child of Heaven."

The Asuka Enlightenment can be summed up in one word: Buddhism. Its introduction to Japan originates in an embassy from Paikche arriving

in 552 (538, say some) to request military assistance for its endless wars with Silla. The ambassadors, says the "Nihon Shoki," presented the Emperor Kimmei with "an image of [the Buddha] in gold and copper, several flags and umbrellas, and a number of volumes of sutras."

"This doctrine is amongst all doctrines the most excellent," reads the accompanying memorial. "But it is hard to explain, and hard to comprehend." Comprehended or not, though, "every prayer is fulfilled."

The emperor "leaped for joy," reports the "Nihon Shoki." Still, he hesitated to embrace the "wonderful doctrine." Court factions supported it against other factions that staunchly defended the native gods against it. A brief war settled the issue in 587. The Soga clan, of Korean origin, was victorious, and the Buddhism it patronized was officially adopted. The Asuka-dera Temple built in 596 in a village of that name in present-day Nara Prefecture, was Japan's first large Chinese-style building. Forty-five others followed, built by Korean craftsmen and staffed by Korean priests, before the Asuka Period ended in 645.

Prince Shotoku is best remembered today for his 17 "injunctions," traditionally dated 604. However bland they may sound to us ("Harmony is to be cherished. . . . When an imperial command is given, obey with reverence. . . . Punish that which is evil and encourage that which is good . . ."), their Buddhist and Confucian notions of morality and government represent innovations which the noted British diplomat-historian George Sansom goes so far as to call "revolutionary."

They owe "nothing to indigenous thought," Sansom writes (in "Japan: A Short Cultural History"). "Hidden in these apparently harmless exhortations to governors and governed," he goes on, "is a new view of the state, for while they exact obedience from inferiors to superiors, they insist equally upon

the duties of superiors to inferiors, and, what is most significant of all, they enunciate very clearly the theory of a centralized state."

The theory was within a generation to be practice -- or at least the basis for practice. A central bureaucratic, Chinese-style state, Confucian in its identification of the emperor with the Mandate of Heaven (though not in its shielding the emperor from the consequence of misrule -- namely, as Confucius taught, forfeiture of the heavenly mandate) is in fact what emerged from a movement that began in 645 under the name Great Reform.

The palace coup that launched it was a nasty affair, neither Buddhist nor Confucian in its gruesomeness, and one can only wonder what the gentle Shotoku (who died in 622) would have thought of the Soga potentate being hacked to death in the presence of the empress in the name of ideas which he, Shotoku, had propagated.

Be that as it may, the Great Reform marks the beginning of Japan as a state -- rather than a loose assemblage of rival clans.

Prominent among the officials who set it up and made it work (most imperfectly, for Japanese conditions were worlds apart from the Chinese circumstances under which it evolved) were men who had spent decades in China as students in the two missions dispatched by Shotoku in 607 and 608.

One may well imagine the astonishment of the Sui emperor Yang-ti when, in 607, Shotoku's envoy, Ono no Imoko, presented a memorial containing the words, "The Child of Heaven in the land where the sun rises addresses the Child of Heaven in the land where the sun sets."

Was Wa being deliberately insulting, or did it simply not know its place?

"If memorials from barbarian states are written

by persons who lack propriety," Yang-ti instructed his officials, "do not accept them."

Somehow the clash was smoothed over. And it was Yang-ti, not Shotoku, who was to get his comeuppance, for Yang-ti's disastrous military campaigns against Koguryo brought the Sui Dynasty to an abrupt end in 618. It was followed by the even more magnificent Tang. No nation ever set out with more eager, if patronizing, generosity than Tang China to teach the arts of civilization to its less-favored neighbors.

And no acolyte nation was ever so avid a pupil as the newly sinicized Japan of the eighth and early ninth centuries. It is a development well worth pondering in our quest for that elusive "correct view" of history.

Chang'an, capital of Tang China, was in the seventh and eighth centuries the largest city on Earth. Nara, with its rectangular layout and broad avenues, was modeled on it, but hardly measured up. Immense by Japanese standards, and three times the size of nearby Fujiwara, the capital it replaced, Nara would all the same have struck a Chinese visitor from the metropolis as paltry. It had 200,000 people; Chang'an had 1.2 million. Nara, unlike Chang'an, had no high walls, no brick and stone buildings, no soaring tile roofs; above all, perhaps, it hosted no steady stream of ambassadors, traders, monks and students from all over the world, as Chang'an did -- awestruck Japanese among them.

What Nara did have, beginning with its founding in 710, was a profusion of court officials steeped in Confucian protocol. They wore Chinese robes, wrote Chinese-language memorials, drafted Chinese-style laws and bore the Chinese ranks imported a century earlier by Prince Shotoku -- "virtue," "benevolence," "propriety," "sincerity," and so on, each rank subdivided into "greater" and "lesser." Some 6,000 of these officials governed a Japanese population of roughly 5 million.

Japan's sinicization had begun in earnest with the bloody palace coup that in 645 launched the Great Reform. The rising power of China under the Tang Dynasty was terrifying. In 660 it swallowed up the Korean kingdom of Paikche. Would Japan be next?

"Everyone here is saying that Japan will soon be faced with Heaven's retribution," a Japanese official of the time recorded in his diary.

Sinicization was inspired by much the same feeling that drove 19th-century Westernization: the enemy could only be resisted with its own techniques. As it happened, the dreaded Tang invasion never came. The relationship that developed between the two countries was not belligerent-to-belligerent, or overlord-to-vassal, but the most extraordinary one (there can be few historical parallels at the national level) of teacher-to-pupil. Japan, it might be said, attended the Chinese school of civilization in Chang'an.

Between 607 and 838, Japan sent 19 missions to China -- on average, one every 12 years. Knowledge was the principal goal. Priests studied Buddhism; officials, government; doctors, medicine; painters, painting; and so on. To gauge the eagerness with which the wisdom China symbolized was pursued, one need only consider the hazards of the sea crossing. Nearly a third of those who set out never returned.

China-bound fleets were called "the Four Boats." Four boats departed together; it was a rare and lucky voyage that brought all four safely to their destination at the mouth of the Yangtze River. The East China Sea is stormy, and Japanese shipbuilding and navigation were hopelessly inadequate for the 800-km crossing. It is surprising that Japan, a maritime nation after all, was so far behind contemporary Chinese, Koreans, Arabs and Vikings in this regard. The sea is one challenge the early Japanese never rose to.

And so in flat-bottomed boats caulked with seaweed -- "a mere assembly of planks and poles," as 20th-century historical novelist Ryotaro Shiba puts it -- with primitive sails that stood little chance against the brisk breezes and storm winds of the open sea, trusting navigation that owed nothing to astronomy and much to Chinese yin-yang divination, the acolytes and envoys and crew (including large numbers of oarsmen for when the sails gave out) set forth, about 100 men in each boat, grimly resigned to the fact that their chances of surviving were not high.

Shiba gives us a graphic description of one such voyage in his book "Kukai the Universal," a biography of the priest Kukai (774-835).

Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi) traveled to Chang'an in 804 to study the esoteric Buddhist doctrine known in Japanese as Shingon (True Word). Its outstanding features are dramatic ritual and an optimistic belief that men and women in this life, in this world, in the flesh, are capable of attaining Buddhahood.

The fleet with which Kukai sailed left the port of Naniwa-zu, near present-day Osaka, on May 14. (Had Japanese sea captains mastered the winds, they would have known that spring was no time to sail; the autumn winds are more favorable.) On Kukai's boat was the government envoy, Fujiwara no Kadonomaro, who, in keeping with the custom among envoys, changed his name to the more Chinese-sounding Kano. There was a stop at Kyushu to pick up additional passengers, among them the monk Saicho, with Kukai one of the most innovative and influential clerics of the time.

Then the Four Boats headed west into the East China Sea. At the sight of the Goto Islands, the westernmost extremity of Japanese territory, some passengers were driven mad with anguish, says Shiba, citing contemporary annals.

In good weather, a crossing would take 10

days. Kukai's boat took 34. There was a storm. The four boats soon lost sight of each other. Conditions on board were miserable -- short rations, dysentery, depression. The priests chanted sutras day and night. The tempest blew them far off course. They landed at last in Fuzhou in today's Fujian Province, a good 500 km south of the Yangtze.

It was semi-barbarous country; no one was on hand to receive them. They made their exhausted way to the provincial capital, only to be taken for smugglers. Kano came forward.

"I am the envoy representing the Japanese government," Shiba has him announcing. But his Chinese failed to pass muster; typically, he owed his post not to ability but to birth and connections. Compelled to state his case in writing, he presented document after document -- in language so coarse, alas, that he might well have been a smuggler.

Fortunately, Kukai, a graduate of the Nara university and one of Japan's best sinologists, was at hand. He knew how to indite a Chinese diplomatic missive.

"Lofty mountains, though mute," he wrote, "are so attractive to beasts and birds that they endeavor to reach them even from afar with indefatigable eagerness. . . . Likewise, even savages beyond the borders, enticed by the virtuous illumination upheld by the Chinese Emperor, are intent on reaching his land in defiance of all the dangers they must encounter on their way."

That was what the Chinese wanted to hear. The strangers were admitted without further ado. Ahead of them lay an arduous 2,700-km trek -- by boat, on foot, on horseback, in carts, through mountains, along canals whose engineering was a marvel but whose filth left the fastidious Japanese aghast -- to Chang'an. Arriving at last, the travelers were overjoyed to hear that another of the four boats had preceded them. Of the remaining two there was

no word. Later, it was learned that one of them had run aground, without loss of life, on a South Sea island. The other was never heard of again.

Most acolytes remained in China 20 years. Kukai stayed two. Far more advanced to begin with than the average student, and a far quicker learner, he not only mastered with astonishing speed the subtleties of the doctrine he had made up his mind to introduce to his countrymen, but he seems also to have had ample time for sightseeing.

His curiosity was boundless, and Chang'an -- "a world exposition of thought," Shiba calls it -- could not fail to stoke it. Studying, preaching, writing and praying in Chang'an were Muslims, Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrians and Manicheans from all over western and central Asia. Kukai wandered the city, seeking out the new and the strange. From Indian monks he learned Sanskrit -- he was the first Japanese to master the language. Truly, one breathed a more expansive air here than in Japan.

Chang'an offered, and Kukai was open to, experiences of all kinds, not only religious. "One of the places he enjoyed visiting," writes Shiba, "was the West Market . . . It was interesting to see how a caravan that had been traveling all the way from the lands unknown to him removed the bundles from the camels' backs. Another attraction was an open-air show

of Persian girls dancing . . . "

All this must have astonished Kukai -- not because he was a monk, but because he was from remote, insular Japan.

He returned home in 806 to found a Shingon temple complex on Mount Koya, in today's Wakayama Prefecture. In 838, the missions to China abruptly ceased. The Tang empire was crumbling, piracy was rising, and in any case the time had come for Japan to withdraw and assimilate the vast amount it had learned.

Withdrawal and assimilation are the themes of the Heian Period, a 400-year surge of cultural creativity that began with the relocation of the capital to Kyoto in 794. Assimilating, Japan diverged. Heian was in a sense Japan's cultural declaration of independence from China, the first instance of an often-remarked genius for borrowing foreign forms and making something totally unique out of them. The 11th-century "Tale of Genji," literary climax of the age, has no Chinese prototype. Many call it the world's first novel.

Official relations with China would not resume for 500 years.

This article appeared in the Japan Times : Jan. 29, 2006. Writer Michael Hoffman is the author most recently of [The Coat That Covered Him--and Other Stories](#). Posted at Japan Focus on February 3, 2006.