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Wang Zhenping/Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals

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Introduction

This book is an “inner history” of official relations between Japan and China from the second century B.C. to the tenth century A.D. In it I use archaeological findings and accounts in Chinese and Japanese official chronicles to build a body of knowledge about ancient Japan, which was evolving from a loose confederation of tribes into a centralized state modeled on Chinese institutions. In this process toward political unification, competing Japanese tribal leaders actively sought Chinese support and recognition to strengthen their positions at home and to exert military influence on southern Korea. They dispatched ambassadors to China and requested the bestowal of such Chinese insignia as official titles, gold seals, and bronze mirrors. To handle these requests, successive Chinese courts employed an investiture system. The system managed temporary bestowal, formal confirmation, and, when necessary, denial or deprivation of Chinese official titles for foreign rulers. Although it was designed as a control mechanism for China to conduct geopolitics in East Asia, in reality the system did not function as a unilateral tool of Chinese hegemony. The investiture system in Japan-China relations displayed a bipolar structure, with the rulers of China and Japan as the center of their respective domains. In this system, the Japanese rulers were active players, who decided whether or when they would enter or withdraw from the system. And their decision was based on careful calculation of self-interest, not on passive acceptance of China’s superiority. Instead of being “Chinese-dominated,” the system was flexible and responsive to the changing balance of power between China and Japan.

When a centralized power had been finally established in Japan, Japanese diplomats sent to China in the early seventh century stopped requesting Chinese official titles as a source of prestige and for domestic system-building. The investiture system ceased to be the norm of bilateral relations and was replaced by a tributary system. Although the new system defined Japan as a “tribute-paying” country (for which read “gift-presenting” country) to China, the relationship between the two

countries was no longer one of “sovereign and vassal.” The Tang court, however, continued to treat Japanese diplomats as subjects of China and unilaterally granted them honorary official titles in order to maintain at the ceremonial level the prestige of Tang emperors. And for the sake of successfully completing their mission, Japanese visitors accepted these titles. Both the investiture and the tributary systems were thus reciprocal in nature. They were able to benefit both China and Japan in quite different ways and under changing circumstances.

Official contacts between China and Japan before the tenth century were conducted through “ambassador diplomacy.” Both countries made meticulous preparations for their missions abroad. And both carefully chose their diplomats according to rigorous criteria and through a competitive procedure. Only people of high caliber were eligible for diplomatic positions. Japanese ambassadors sent to Tang China were not only highly educated, they also had colorful personalities. Some were men of great literary talent; others were passionate lovers. After a heart-breaking parting from their loved ones at the port of departure, Japanese diplomats embarked on a dangerous journey to China. They often encountered unimaginable hardships and dangers when sailing on the high seas. And they would eventually arrive at the Tang capital only after a long and punishing journey in China by using the relay station system and the Grand Canal. Once in the capital, a series of elaborate court receptions awaited them.

Meticulous over details of ritual, the Tang court receptions were a mode of behavioral communication between the host and the guest. Ceremonial arrangements were designed in a way that allowed the Tang court to indicate its assessment of a foreign country’s relationship with China. When a foreign ambassador acted on these arrangements, the court would interpret his behavior as acceptance of China’s suzerainty. A foreign ambassador, however, might choose to object to certain ceremonial arrangements when he believed that conformity to them would be demeaning and would distort the bilateral relationship. The Tang court sometimes received Japanese ambassadors together with diplomats from other countries. On these occasions, arrangements for the court reception, such as the sequence in which foreign diplomats were received, the positions where they stood during an audience, and the seating arrangements for the imperial banquet held in their honor, pro-

vided a public statement of Japan's standing relative to that of other countries in the Chinese world. These arrangements sometimes became contentious issues. Making, accepting, adjusting, or rejecting ceremonial arrangements at the Tang court were thus a means for the involved parties to convey diplomatic messages and to negotiate.

Presentation and acceptance of diplomatic correspondence was another major mode of diplomatic communication between China and Japan. Most of the correspondence consisted of state letters. For its acceptance by the Tang court, a Japanese state letter had to be composed according to a set Chinese verbal etiquette. The essence of such etiquette was for all the incoming as well as the outgoing state letters to properly embody a hierarchical world order centered on China. Complex and detailed, Tang verbal etiquette stipulated the wording, the format, the type of paper, and the enclosing case commensurate to the political purpose of an outgoing Tang state letter. However, the Japanese courtiers managed to pay only lip service to these regulations. Their state letters, while superficially recognizing China's superiority, not only offered a Tang emperor no real political submission, but also dignified the Japanese ruler. This seemingly unattainable goal was achieved by an ingenious manipulation of language.

When adapting literary Chinese for use as their own written language, the Japanese adopted the *kanji* characters. Some of them, while identical in form with the Chinese characters, also had distinctive Japanese connotations and pronunciations. A number of the key diplomatic terms used in Japanese state letters to China were such *kanji* characters. Careful examinations of their pronunciations and usage in the Japanese context reveal that these *kanji* either diluted or concentrated the original meanings of their Chinese counterparts. The diluting effect weakens or cancels the honorific or the China-centered connotation of a Chinese word, converting the word in question into a less status-sensitive or a status-neutral *kanji*. The concentrating effect, in contrast, adds a tone of respect to a status-neutral Chinese word, transforming the word into an honorific. Employment of these *kanji* therefore enabled a Japanese state letter to conform to Tang verbal requirements for diplomatic correspondence and, at the same time, protected the dignity of the Japanese rulers. This understanding of the nuances of *kanji* diplomatic terms contributes to research into such controversial scholarly issues as whether

Japanese ambassadors brought state letters to Tang China and the tactics that Japanese courtiers employed in writing them.

Japanese state letters to Tang China were in fact not meant to express explicitly the changed stance of Japan toward the Chinese world order. They were merely instruments for Japanese ambassadors to activate official relations with China so that they could successfully perform their main tasks: collecting information on and siphoning knowledge from Tang, and procuring for Japan as much cultural and material benefit as possible during their visits to China. Japanese diplomats showed keen interest in many aspects of life in China, from court politics, prices for goods, natural disasters, and unrest in the provinces to new trends in the arts and recent political developments in neighboring countries of Tang. To better perform their task of introducing Chinese culture to Japan, some Japanese diplomats tried to further their knowledge of Chinese culture by studying Chinese classics under Tang instructors, some went on a shopping spree to purchase Chinese books and luxuries, and some persuaded established Tang scholars and monks to come to Japan in order to speed up the dissemination of Chinese learning at home. Japanese diplomats showed interest in all important branches of Chinese learning. They were, however, not indiscriminate borrowers of Chinese culture. The emphasis of their cultural importations was on such practical knowledge as philology, medicine, astrology, and matters relating to the calendar.

The analysis of China-Japan relations presented in this book is built on a key concept of mutual self-interest. A sustainable bilateral relationship had to have a core of overlapping self-interest of involved parties, and at the same time the official contacts between the parties had to be conducted according to mutually acceptable rules. I argue that the main objective of Japan's diplomacy toward the Sui and Tang courts was obtaining cultural and material benefits, not establishing a relationship of equality with China. The book criticizes the western tributary theory, which sees the world only from the viewpoint of the Chinese and overly simplifies the intricate domestic and international situations in which China and Japan interacted with one another. It also challenges the theory of equality, which fails to note that even though China-Japan relations during Sui-Tang times were not those between superior and inferior, bilateral relations continued to be conducted in

the traditional norm of investiture and tribute. Far from forming a rigid political framework, both the investiture and the tributary systems were flexible games of interest and power between China and its neighbors. Multiple partners in these games modified the rules by which they played, or chose not to play, depending on the changing historical circumstances in which they found themselves.