Classical Japan and the continent

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This chapter reviews historiographical trends regarding Japan’s contact with the continent during its classical age—dated from the late sixth or early seventh centuries to the twelfth-century commencement of the medieval era. Most early research on this period focused on Sino-Japanese diplomatic and trade relations, but in the last several decades, more consideration has been given to aspects of Japan’s relations with the states on and around the Korean peninsula, as well as to defining Japan’s place in the geopolitical, premodern East Asian community.

Japan’s classical period corresponded to an age of political change and turmoil in East Asia. The Yamato dynasty began adopting continental practices and institutions to transform itself into a centralized state at the time of Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) reunification of China. The Tang, in decline by the mid- to late-ninth century, was replaced by small regional kingdoms for much of the tenth century, until the country was reunited once again by the comparatively weak Song dynasty (960–1279). Closer to home, the Korean peninsula—hitherto divided into the kingdoms of Silla, Paekche, and Koguryō—was united for the first time under Silla control in 668 (668–935). Silla was replaced after two and a half centuries by Koryō (918–1392), while the kingdom of Parhae (698–926), located to the north of Silla/Koryō, suffered defeat at the hands of the Khitan Liao dynasty (907–1125) in 926.

The selective borrowing of continental culture—critical to the development of the early Japanese state and society during the classical age—has been central to the study of continental relations. Immigration and trade with the states of the Korean peninsula accounted for much of this cultural transmission, but the Japanese also conducted diplomatic missions to China, and it is these missions that have received detailed attention from modern Japanese scholars.

The Yamato court began formal dispatch of Chinese missions with the appointment of kenzuishi (missions to Sui) from the beginning of the seventh century, followed by kentōshi (missions to Tang) from 630 until 838, when the last mission departed from Japan. These missions served an important diplomatic role, providing the means by which the Japanese maintained formal relations with China in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. They also retrieved elements of Sui and Tang civilization that affected Japan’s culture and religion and inspired state centralization and such watershed events as the Taika Reforms and the Taihō ritsuryō code.

Scholars working in the late nineteenth century—when Japan faced the threat of Western imperialism—found a historical precedent to the adoption of Western science, technology, and
government institutions in the cultural borrowing of the archaic and classical periods. They focused particular attention on the kentōshi missions, which, they posited, were dispatched to a large extent to counter a perceived menace of Tang China, and the argument that Japan had successfully borrowed from an alien culture (i.e., Tang), and did so without losing its identity.4 This Sino-Japanese focus shaped subsequent study of early Japan’s foreign relations.5

In the early twentieth century, Kimiya Yasuhiko, Akiyama Kenzō, and Mori Katsumi conducted definitive work on Japan’s classical relations with China.6 Continuing the emphasis on Sino-Japanese relations, these scholars tended to minimize relations with the Korean peninsula. Each produced ground-breaking studies of such issues as the politics involved in planning the kentōshi missions, the selection of envoys, and the ships, routes, and maritime technology utilized in making the journeys to and from the continent. They also addressed aspects of trade, including the delivery of official tributary items, goods privately exchanged by mission members, and the beginnings of East Asian merchant activity.7

Discussions of Japan’s early relations with the continent in early English-language scholarship were, for the most part, broad in scope and located in general historical surveys. Focus was on the transmission of continental (primarily Chinese) culture into Japan and the way in which adoption of continental systems, culture, learning, and religion shaped the first unified Japanese state. Scholars differed, however, in their interpretation of Japan’s outreach to the mainland. George Sansom, for instance, saw the borrowing of Chinese culture as a reaction to Chinese superiority, while John Whitney Hall viewed indigenous Yamato culture and its sixth-century social base as fundamental to the way in which Japanese leaders dealt with the continent. Hall contended that Japanese leaders, after witnessing the success of the Sui and Tang in reuniting China, chose to emulate the Chinese model to extend their hegemony and reduce the threat of rival clans. Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig, on the other hand, inspired by Modernization theory, set out to discover the historical and cultural conditions that laid the foundation to Japan’s successful, twentieth-century modernization. Like Hall, they emphasized Japan’s active and voluntary adoption of mainland culture, but stressed that the Japanese uniquely and independently developed their culture due to geographic remoteness, and did so without threat to their own traditions. Reischauer and Craig argued that the Japanese systematically chose institutional base elements, thereby refining a central government that was more streamlined and logical than its Chinese counterpart. They went beyond Sansom and Hall in emphasizing the Korean role in the transportation of mainland influences, pointing to the acceptance of Buddhism from Korea as having ushered in a new age of borrowing.8

Reischauer was the first Western scholar to contribute more focused studies that addressed, at least in part, the kentōshi and Tang diplomatic and cultural exchange with two publications on Ennin, a Tendai monk who accompanied the 838 kentōshi to China and then returned to Japan on a Korean vessel after nearly a decade of study. Reischauer’s work included background information about Ennin, travel in Tang China, and the protocol of contemporary East Asian diplomatic relations. He described the kentōshi as a means by which the Japanese “civilized” themselves. Envoys brought knowledge that, in Reischauer’s words, “rapidly [changed] Japan from a remote barbarian land into an integral part of the civilized world.”9

Reischauer’s translation of Ennin’s diary and his accompanying scholarship was praised for explicating ninth-century Japanese attitudes toward the Chinese and their culture. He redefined the historiographical approach to classical Japan by encouraging the use of journals and personal accounts in historical examination. His work was, however, criticized for his use of the comparative method of historical analysis, such as comparisons between Ennin and Marco Polo.10

Another quarter century passed before notable Western-language contributions by Robert Borgen, Inoue Mitsusada, and Charlotte von Verschuer were added to the field of Sino-Japanese
relations. Inspired by the research of Kimiya Yasuhiko and Mori Katsumi, Borgen’s “The Japanese Mission to China, 801–806,” detailed the penultimate Japanese kentonshi embassy, which counted among its members the Buddhist priests Kūkai and Saichō. Borgen described preparations for the send-off, difficulties of the voyages, the journey to Chang’an, and the subsequent audience with the Chinese emperor. Inoue recounted a 632 Tang mission to Japan, which came by way of Silla and included among its members several Japanese who had studied culture and bureaucratic structure in China for decades, and Verschuer provided the first comprehensive Western-language study of the kentonshi diplomatic exchange—a review of not one, but all key eighth- and ninth-century missions. Significantly, Verschuer concluded that the kentonshi made possible the acquisition of Chinese knowledge by transporting Chinese books. This was in contrast to the findings of others, who emphasized the contributions of individuals—craftsmen, artisans, scholars, and monks—who accompanied the missions and brought back new expertise to Japan.

**Missions to China**

The kenzuishi era was short, comprising less than two decades, and these missions have not received the focus given the kentonshi missions, which were dispatched over a period of two centuries. Most historians divide the kentonshi age into three periods—Early, Middle, and Late—which they base on changes in sea routes and the size of the missions dispatched. The Early period (630–669) comprises missions of one or two vessels that followed a northern route along the western coast of the Korean peninsula—the same route followed by the preceding kenzuishi vessels. The Middle (702–759) and Late (777–838) periods were characterized by the dispatch of larger missions—usually comprising four vessels—which transported as many as 500–650 individuals. Middle-period missions followed a “southern island route”—first described by Mori and Kimiya—that ran from Hakata Bay, to Hiradō island, and then to the south along the shores of Satsuma and numerous southern islands before turning east across the East China Sea toward the Yangzi River delta. Late kentonshi period voyages sailed along what is referred to as a “southern route,” running from Hakata Bay to the Gotō islands, where ships awaited winds that carried them directly across open sea toward China. A few scholars reject a maritime route-defined periodization for the kentonshi age, and have proposed a two-part periodization, one that comprises only Early and Late periods. Ishii Masatoshi suggested these periods be distinguished by primary objectives. His first coincides with an era of disorder and upheaval on the Korean peninsula. He posits these missions were political in purpose. In contrast, his Late period, dated from 702, is characterized by relative East Asian stability, suggesting importation of culture as the primary mission goal. Wang Yong also argues for a two-part division, albeit one based on mission scale—smaller two-vessel, Early (630–669) missions followed by larger four-vessel, Late (702–838) missions.

There is still no consensus regarding the number of formal diplomatic missions conducted, or even how an official mission should be defined. The Nihon shoki records three kenzuishi missions for 607, 608, and 614, while Chinese sources describe a fourth for 600 and possibly two more, one dispatched in 608 (the second for that year), and the other in 610. And in the case of the kentonshi, while most scholars generally acknowledge eighteen or nineteen missions, some have accepted as few as twelve or thirteen, while others, especially within the last three decades, have added a 667 mission that was originally omitted from consideration because it was sent to accompany the Tang envoy, Sima Fating, back to China, and only traveled as far as Paekche. Of greater consequence has been a scholarly debate regarding why Japan ended its missions to China in the ninth century without establishing relations with Song China in the tenth. The last
mission was planned in 894, but the ambassador, Sugawara Michizane (845–903), petitioned the court to cancel the mission due to unsafe travel conditions in China. The Japanese planned no further missions, even after the establishment of the Song dynasty.

While it is true that Tang was in decline (it fell in 907), most scholars have found Michizane’s petition insufficient for explaining why the kentōshi were ended and never resumed. Other factors must have played a role in the decision.

Early twentieth-century scholars argued, for instance, that the ninth-century court had learned all it needed from China, rendering continued diplomacy unnecessary. This explanation served, perhaps, as an edifying historical lesson for modern Japan as it turned from the West before World War II. Even after the war, however, Japanese scholars continued insisting that Japan purposefully freed itself from Chinese influences in the ninth century and chose to enter a period of relative isolation.20

In recent decades some historians have suggested that tensions between Japan and the peninsula dissipated for the most part by the first half of the ninth century, rendering official kentōshi diplomacy unnecessary. Others point to increasing ill ease on the part of the court in taking a subordinate position to China as a tributary state (see the tributary discussion below). They note that the time passed between the dispatching of missions increased after the turn of the ninth century. Between 630 and 752, nine of eleven kentōshi were appointed within fifteen years or less after the preceding mission, but more than thirty years passed between the departures of the last two kentōshi missions (803/804 and 836), and nearly sixty years passed before the last mission (Sugawara Michizane’s canceled mission) was appointed in 894.

Interestingly, Japan was not the only country tapering off and eventually ending its diplomatic missions to Tang during this period. During the 137-year span between 619 and 756, 125 tributary missions were dispatched to Tang from kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Over the next 150 years, however, only twenty missions were sent from these same kingdoms—despite the fact that trade with Southeast Asia steadily increased.21

Borgen summarized the most prominent reasons for the abandonment of missions to China proffered by historians in the postwar era as: (1) the exorbitant expenditures paid out by the court to dispatch these missions; (2) safety concerns in the wake of Tang’s decline; and (3) the growth of an East Asian trade, which made exotic goods available and kentōshi trade unnecessary, and facilitated an alternative means of transport of Buddhist monks to China. Borgen also posited that the Japanese became increasingly uncomfortable assuming a subservient position to China, and therefore found it fortuitous when their relationship with Parhae rendered direct exchange with Tang China unnecessary. Maintaining the Parhae relationship meant the Japanese could remain a part of the East Asian diplomatic community and stay abreast of Chinese political and intellectual developments without need for diplomatic contact with Tang.22

Any of the factors above could have contributed to the cancelation of official kentōshi missions at the end of the ninth century. Interestingly, a number of scholars now suggest the court canceled the 894 mission without intending to end the missions permanently. In this scenario, semi-isolationism only became de facto policy in the tenth century because of fear of foreign and pirate attacks, as well as out of economic concerns.23

Diplomatic status with China

Another important topic, undertaken by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars alike, concerns the diplomatic stance the Japanese court took in its official dealings with Sui and Tang, and in particular, whether Japanese leaders acknowledged that they were in a tributary—and therefore submissive—relationship to the Chinese court. Scholars have made much of correspondence the
Yamato court sent to the Sui emperor in the first decade of the seventh century—a famous letter from the Japanese monarch, Suiko (r. 592–628), to the Sui emperor, Yangdi (r. 604–618), which began with the phrase, “The Child of Heaven of the land where the sun rises sends a message to the Child of Heaven of the land where the sun sets.” Yangdi found the letter lacking in propriety, and expressed great displeasure at Suiko’s use of a title seemingly equivalent to his own.

Japanese researchers have cited the Suiko letter to conclude that Japan was asserting equality in its dealings with Tang. Accordingly, historians argue the Japanese court and their envoys avoided the appearance of submission to the Chinese by eschewing tributary protocol. The court either sent no further state letters to avoid expressions of obsequiousness toward the Chinese emperor, or it prepared and sent subsequent letters—now lost to history—that were intentionally ambiguous, avoiding both language offensive to the Chinese and demeaning to the standing of their own sovereign. Only in recent decades has anyone considered the possibility that the Japanese leadership knowingly, if not reluctantly, accepted a subordinate, tributary position vis-à-vis the Chinese.

Western scholars tend to concur with their Japanese colleagues that the Japanese court resisted oaths of fealty to Chinese regimes. As evidence, Borgen cites the mission of 801–806, which refused to acknowledge subservience to the Chinese officials when it landed on Chinese shores. He speculated, however, that the Japanese envoys probably assumed a more humble stance in China than the one authorized by the Japanese court—not to do so would have impeded retrieval of Chinese knowledge and material goods. Verschuer also believes that Japanese sovereigns saw themselves as equal in status to Chinese emperors, but has argued that Japan nevertheless accepted tributary status, creating a paradox wherein the Japanese did not always follow accepted Chinese protocol. Wang Zhenping has reinvigorated this discussion by encouraging us to question common assumptions regarding the kentōshi exchange. He asks us to reconsider the nature of the sakuhō taisei (investiture) and the tributary systems. The traditional sakuhō taisei theory, which gained popularity in Japan in the 1960s, viewed classical Japan’s international relations in terms of a China-centered world order in which the Japanese sought recognition and titles from the Chinese court. This paradigm, however, pertains to the period before the establishment of the centralized Japanese state. By the turn of the seventh-century, kenzuishi were dispatched as part of the tributary system; and while most scholars place China at the summit of this system as well, Wang contends that conceptualizing China at the apex of the tributary order is simplistic. He posits tributary relations between China and Japan were, in fact, mutually beneficial, and describes Japan/Tang relations as part of a multi-polar international system, wherein Tang was less than the dominant power it (or we) imagined itself to be. Wang concludes that the Japanese manipulated state letters that superficially acknowledged Chinese superiority, and did so without demeaning their own sovereign. The ambiguity of these letters satisfied both courts; and the kentōshi provided only lip service to necessary tributary etiquette. While Wang does not offer a new perspective on how the Japanese court perceived its own status vis-à-vis China, his research has encouraged scholars to rethink the nature of Sino-Japanese exchange.

Beyond Sino-Japanese relations

As discussed above, a paradigm developed that encouraged historians to focus on Sino-Japanese relations and give secondary consideration to relations with non-Chinese states. Prior to World War II, Japanese scholars understood early relations with the Korean states and Parhae in terms of Japan’s emerging nineteenth- and twentieth-century military power and control of the Korean peninsula and Manchuria. They accepted Kojiki and Nihon shoki tales of Japanese military might as fact. After the war, newly gained academic freedoms, new archaeological discoveries, and the
work of non-Japanese scholars—especially those in Korea—encouraged Japanese historians to question prewar conceptions and reevaluate Japan’s relationships with China and Korea. By the last two decades of the twentieth century, scholars—both Japanese and non-Japanese—had set aside prewar perspectives, directing new focus on the Japanese court’s relations with non-Chinese peoples and the states of Paekche, Silla, Koguryŏ, and Parhae. Today few, if any, scholars, accept the Nihon shoki and Kojiki accounts as literal truth, although many do still insist that Japan existed as a fairly powerful state from the fourth through sixth century.

Scholarly focus on the Japan–Silla relationship includes research into the thirty-three missions sent to Silla from Japan between 668 and 882, and the forty-eight missions sent to Japan from Silla until 803. Relations soured between Japan and Silla after the 663 Battle of Paekchon River, but formal exchange was soon reinstated, out of a mutual fear of invasion from Tang. Relations grew quite close, at least until 735, when the Japanese court turned away a Sillan envoy, Kim Sang Chŏng, for referring to his country as an imperial state.

Work on diplomatic relations between Japan and Parhae has also been fruitful. Ueda Takeshi and Son Eiken, for instance, examined this relationship in the context of East Asian geopolitics, providing detailed historical background to more than four dozen missions dispatched between Parhae and Japan. They focused on the vessels, maritime skills, and routes utilized in crossing the Sea of Japan.

Japanese scholars have also explored relations with peoples along the periphery of the Yamato/Japan state. Suzuki Yasutami and Yamazato Jun’ichi, for instance, each investigated Japan’s trade with the southern islands from the early seventh century, while Mori Kimiyuki described Japan’s relations with the people known as Tanra, who occupied Cheju island. Also of significance was Sakayori Masashi’s research on exchanges with the Mohe, an ethnic group that likely lived north of Parhae until at least the ninth century.

English-language scholarship on Japan’s foreign relations with states and entities other than China is not as rich as that published in Japanese, but significant contributions have been made. These include a paper by Aleksei Okladnikov, a Soviet archaeologist who referenced Chinese source materials—some in Russian translation—to conduct the first Japan-Parhae-Mohe study available in English; works by Borgen and William McCullough, each of whom offered valuable historical and thematic background for Japan-Parhae studies; and Inoue, who focused on seventh-century relationships with Paekche and Koguryŏ before the fall of these states in the 660s. Both Verschuer’s Across the Perilous Seas and Bruce Batten’s Gateway to Japan offer comprehensive, English-language research regarding Japan’s overall diplomatic and economic relations with both China and non-Chinese states from the classical to the early medieval periods.

Japan in the East Asian community

Scholarly consensus concerning Japan’s diplomatic status vis-à-vis non-Chinese states has also changed in recent decades. Based on literal readings of Japanese primary sources that described Paekche, Silla, Koguryŏ, Parhae, and the southern islands as tributary neighbors, earlier historians commonly attributed to the Japanese state primacy within its immediate geopolitical region. This was especially true of the eighth century, when, the sources tell us, the Japanese greeted embassies from Silla and Parhae as representatives of subordinate states. Accordingly, historians maintained that classical-period Japan regarded its neighbors as part of its own, multi-ethnic, “small empire” (tōi no shōteikoku), which also included the Emishi and the people of the southern islands.

The stance the Japanese court took in its official dealings with the non-Chinese states has, however, become subject to debate. While most historians still accept the premise that the
Yamato Japanese state envisioned itself superior to its Korean neighbors, many now note that there is insufficient evidence to indicate that Silla, Paekche, Koguryǒ, or Parhae, ever concurred, and several have expressed skepticism concerning the likelihood that they did.42

Issues of trade

Work on classical Japan’s foreign relations includes a great wealth of scholarship regarding trade relations. Kimiya, Akiyama, and Mori Katsumi laid the groundwork for the investigation of a maritime East Asian trade that developed around the time the kentōshi missions ended. Kenzuishi and kentōshi carried special goods to the Sui and Tang courts, which reciprocated with gifts of their own that were received as luxury items at the Japanese court. In addition to this court-to-court exchange, members of the Japanese embassies became involved in trade of their own. Embassy personnel were awarded travel stipends from the Japanese court to pay for their long trips to China. These stipends were meant to cover travel, as well as room and board expenses, but since the Chinese court usually paid a foreign mission’s expenses while it remained inside the country, scholars have speculated that the Japanese used some, if not most, of their stipends to engage in the exchange of private goods—most likely trading raw materials and a variety of silk textiles for Chinese books, musical instruments, religious writings, and Buddhist images.43 While there is no clear mention of private trade conducted by kenzuishi or kentōshi members in Japanese primary texts, Chinese texts do describe the purchase of many written works by the ambassador of the Japanese mission of 702.44 There are also descriptions, in the Japanese primary sources, of Parhae envoys heavily involved in trade while in Japan.

Kenzuishi and kentōshi trade is believed to have served as catalyst for the emergence of an East Asian trade network. It stimulated a demand among the Japanese aristocracy for Chinese products—a demand that became particularly pronounced by the beginning of the Heian period when a private merchant trade with the continent became prominent. There has been some uncertainty regarding who these traders were. Private merchants did not receive official recognition on behalf of any government, and as a result, the primary sources are somewhat vague with regard to ethnicities. Japanese primary sources do refer to some merchants by national origin (e.g., “Chinese traders”), but there is debate regarding the accuracy of these references. The sources also utilized vague, general terms, such as minkan shōnin or “private traders.”45

Edwin Reischauer was perhaps the first Western scholar to address the issue of the East Asian trade, arguing that the “Chinese” merchants mentioned in Japanese primary sources were, in fact, Sillans, possibly from trading communities situated along the southern coast of the Shandong peninsula and lower stretches of the Huai River. Reischauer introduced the role these Koreans played as sailors and traders in ninth-century East Asian commerce to the historical discussion, and he provided descriptions of the sea routes mariners traveled between Japan and China during the eighth and ninth centuries.46

In the last several decades, an increasing number of scholars of the East Asian trade have tackled issues of private and commercial exchange and the role East Asian merchants played in foreign relations. Wu Ling, for instance, provided important Japanese-language discussion of this East Asian trade, noting, as Reischauer had, the importance of Sillans in the East Asian trading network. Even Chinese merchants, for instance, traveled on Sillan ships before making the journey to Japan on their own vessels by the middle of the ninth century.47

Similarly, Bruce Batten explored issues of tribute and private trade during the classical age, noting that private trade became more prominent at times when the Heian state was weak. Koyama Yasunori, moreover, addressed aspects of Chinese trade with Japan from the tenth century, including descriptions of tenth- and eleventh-century Japanese aristocrats who acquired
Chinese luxury goods, and of Japanese merchants who traveled abroad in the eleventh century. Koyama found that Japan became an intricate part of the East Asian trading sphere, despite its eventual withdrawal from the East Asian diplomatic world. And William McCullough described the way in which Taïra Kiyomori’s Ise Taïra profited from foreign commerce with the Song during the late twelfth century.48

In 1988, Verschuer produced the first comprehensive, Western-language study of premodern Japan’s trading relations with the continent, cataloging the products traded during the Heian period as a result of the Japanese aristocracy’s demand for mainland goods, and describing the continental demand for Japanese goods, such as horns and paper. She wrote that China played a dominant role in East Asia with respect to trade by imposing its own model of trade upon its neighbors until the tenth century, when the Song and Yuan dynasties adopted a policy of free trade.49

What is meant by “Japan?”

From the 1980s, a trend toward questioning the meaning of national identity and national boundaries arose in Japanese historical studies, leading scholars to redefine premodern Japan as a geopolitical state. Today’s Japanese polity is a much larger geographical entity than the Yamato confederacy of the sixth and seventh centuries or the Nara or Heian states. Historians now use “Japan” and “Japanese” with greater caution when conceptualizing the past. They have begun to recognize the classical-period archipelago as multiethnic and host to polities other than the one centered in Nara and Kyoto.

This has influenced our understanding of classical relations and the degree to which the Japanese polity may have been isolated from the continent. Japan’s past was often conceptualized in terms of its geographic remoteness from the continent—as such, the seas were described as a great divider, not a conduit for contact and exchange. Batten notes a recent paradigm shift in Japan regarding history vis-à-vis geography thanks to Amino Yoshihiko.50 Amino and others, including historian Gari Ledyard and archaeologist Mori Kōichi, have suggested that the sea not be defined as a barrier, but rather as a conduit facilitating contact between the archipelago and continent. Ledyard even proposed the existence of a wa “thalassocracy,” writing that the Yayoi culture “was essentially an area connected by water, not by land, and one of the most common scenes must have been people going back and forth in their boats.”51

Moreover, Heian-period Japanese mariners were assumed inept, lacking the fundamental maritime skills necessary to successfully traverse the seas between Japan and China. Mori Katsumi, Sudō Toshiichi, Mozai Torao, and Sugiyama Hiroshi are among notable historians who suggested that the kentōshi navigators lacked knowledge of the seasonal winds and currents. Reischauer too, suggested Japanese sailors sailed at the mercy of the wind and sea, while Borgen described Japan’s poor shipbuilding skills and primitive boating practices (e.g., use of large numbers of oarsmen due to lack of keel operational knowledge) as factors that hampered Japan’s exchanges with China.52

Kentōshi maritime disasters are, in point of fact, described in much detail in primary sources, such as a Shoku Nihongi account of the 777 mission’s disastrous return voyage, when one of the mission’s ships was torn apart during a storm.53 This and other accounts reinforced the assumption that the Japanese were relatively isolated from the continent, at least from their own side. Nevertheless, although Middle- and Late-period kentōshi disasters at sea are well-documented, it should not be forgotten that kenzūshi and Early-period kentōshi ships followed a route along the Korean coast that met with considerable maritime success. Sailing to China by way of the Korean peninsula was not arduous; the Japanese were experienced with coastal sailing and sailing to and from the Korean peninsula long before the start of the classical age.
Recently scholars have even begun to question the assumption of Middle- and Late-period kentōshi maritime ineptitude. Tōno Haruyuki, for instance, posits that the kentōshi Middle- and Late-period sailors were very much aware of the seasonal winds and currents. He argues, however, that from at least the beginning of the eighth century, Japanese envoys felt obliged to set sail at dangerous times of the year in order to present tribute in China during the Lunar New Year’s celebrations, the traditional time to pay homage to the Tang emperor. If his thesis is correct, the Japanese mariners were aware of the dangers from typhoons and storms, but set sail anyway at inopportune times to arrive in the Tang capital for the New Year celebrations.54

Batten addressed the degree to which the Japanese may have been isolated from the continent by applying world-systems theory to analyze the degree of interaction premodern Japan experienced with its neighbors. He found that Japan was never isolated from the continent or other parts of the archipelago, but rather, embedded in a world system in terms of military, political, and cultural relations. The question of Japanese isolation has also been addressed, albeit indirectly, by an important study by Wayne Farris, who applied William H. McNeill’s model of epidemics to Japan.55 McNeill had hypothesized that classical Japan’s geographic isolation from the continent insulated it from regular exposure to certain diseases, leaving the Japanese population unable to achieve disease immunity and vulnerable to epidemics brought through maritime contacts. Farris contends that the Great Smallpox Epidemic of 735–737 fits the pattern of McNeill’s hypothesis.56 He suggests the activities of Sillan traders and travelers were likely responsible for the transmission of this disease into Kyushu, but concludes that, because there is no record of a similar outbreak on the continent for these same years, the Japanese were isolated to a certain degree, at least enough to prevent the population from achieving disease immunity.

Primary sources and material culture

Historians of classical-period foreign relations have a number of standard primary sources at their disposal. The books of the Rikkokushi (Six National Histories of Japan) record diplomatic exchanges with Sui and Tang China, Silla, Parhae, and the Tanra, as well as with the seventh-century Emishi, Hayato (in southern Kyushu), and peoples from the Ryukyu islands.57 The Rikkokushi also record elements of trade conducted by Sillan and Tang merchants coming to Japan. The Engishiki and Ruijū sandai kyaku offer important accounts of trade. The former, a collection of court regulations compiled in the tenth century, provides the names and quantity of items given to the sovereigns of Tang, Silla, and Parhae, including, for instance, the type and quantity of gifts presented in Japan to a Tang envoy as gifts to bestow upon the Chinese emperor. Ruijū sandai kyaku describes details of transactions administered when Sillan merchants arrived in Japan to trade. It tells us, for example, that private individuals bartered for goods under the supervision of the Dazaifu official.58 One of the most important sources for trade-related research is the Bai-shirage no motsuge, which documents a trade between the Japanese aristocracy and members of an official Sillan mission attending the 752 consecration ceremony at the Tōdaiji temple.59

Fortunately, valuable new compilations of scattered primary sources concerning Japanese diplomatic and commercial exchange have been made available to scholars since the late twentieth century. Two of the most important are Kentōshi kenkyū to shiryō by Mozai Torao, Nishijima Sadao, Tanaka Takeo, and Ishii Masatoshi, and Tajima Isao’s Nihon – Chūgoku – Chōsen taigai kōryūshi nenpyō. The former provides excerpts of primary sources concerning the kentōshi, while the latter is a collection of passages taken from primary sources—in modern Japanese translation—that reference overseas contact and exchange of goods between Japan, China, and Korea from 697 to 1185. A third, and even more comprehensive, publication, Taigai kankeishi sōgō nenpyō, indexes all
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Japanese and overseas primary sources concerning external exchange from the archaic period to the nineteenth century. Prepared by nearly three dozen Japanese scholars, this work compiles all references to the Japanese archipelago’s relations with foreign states.

Archaeology also supplements our understanding of Japanese relations with the continent. We know from excavations throughout Japan that Chinese ceramic ware was in great demand during the classical era. Yue celadon, for instance, produced primarily in Zhejiang, China, made an appearance in Japan at about the time that Sugawara Michizane petitioned the court to halt the last mission to Tang, giving us a better understanding of the nature of late ninth-century, private trade. The archaeological record also suggests that, by the ninth century, Tang ceramics were used by increasingly diverse strata of society. Further archaeological discovery is certain to contribute more to our understanding of classical Japan’s ties to the continent.

Further research

As the foregoing discussion shows, most English-language scholarship on relations between Japan and the continent has focused upon issues such as the adoption of continental culture from the seventh century, the official missions dispatched to China from the seventh to the ninth centuries, the way in which Japan saw itself in the Chinese tributary order as well as in a diplomatic order of its own, and aspects of a merchant trade that developed from the ninth century. To date, detailed discussion of tenth- to twelfth-century relations with the continent—that is, after the cessation of the kentōshi—remains sparse in English-language publications. Notable exceptions are the works of Robert Borgen, Charlotte von Verschuer, and Bruce Batten, as well as William McCullough’s 1999 study, which, among other issues, offers additional insight into Japanese contact with the small, short-lived state of Wuyue (907–978).

Scholars have tried to understand the primary goals for the kenzuishi and kentōshi missions, asking to what extent they may have been diplomatic and political in nature—particularly in response to political developments on the Korean peninsula and in China—or dispatched with the primary goal of retrieving continental culture. Scholars have also devoted much attention to an East Asian trade network that developed from at least the ninth century. More work is needed, however, to understand Sino-Japanese relations in light of China’s relations with its other neighbors. Why, for instance, did Southeast Asian diplomatic missions to Tang decrease at approximately the same time Japan was ending its own missions? Further comparative research of international diplomacy could prove fruitful.

Related to this, further work is needed regarding Japan’s geopolitical relationships and position within the East Asian community during the latter centuries of the classical age. This research should reference recent studies already published in Japanese while addressing greater aspects of Japan’s relations and exchanges with the Song, Koryŏ, the Liao dynasty, the southern islands, and other ethnic groups and peoples located on the continent or to the north of Japan.

Notes

1 From at least the fourth to the mid-sixth centuries—a confederation known as Kaya (Jpn: Mimana) also occupied a small part of the southern Korean peninsula.
2 Diplomatic trade missions to China date to as early as the first century, but they were sporadic, especially after the fall of the Latter Han dynasty. Chinese political instability until the end of the sixth century left the evolving Yamato court without a clear Chinese partner, and as a result, exchange of embassies with the Korean states of Paekche and Silla became more crucial to the Yamato court.
3 An additional mission was appointed in 894, but was soon canceled.
4 See Lee Sungsi, Higashi ajia no ōken to kōeki, 12–14, for further discussion.
5. The classical and Meiji period have been characterized as the only two occasions when Japan extensively and purposefully adopted from the outside. See, for instance, Inoue Mitsusada, “The Century of Reform,” 163–165.

6. Kimiya Yasuhiko, Nisshi kōtōshi; Akiyama Kenzō, Nisshi kōshōshi kenkyū; Mori Katsumi, Kentōshi. (See also Kurita Mototsugu, Nara jidai no tokusei).

7. A short list of prominent Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Kentōshi scholars includes Ishii Masatoshi (“Kentōshi”), Masamura Hiroshi (Kentōshi no kenkyū), Tōno Haruyuki (Kentōshi to shōsōin), Lee Sungsi (Higashi ajia no ōken to kōeki), Mori Kimiyuki (Kodai nihon no taigai ninshiki to tsūki), Wang Yong (Tō kara mita Kentōshi), and Ueda Takeshi (Kentōshi zen'kōka). Kegasawa Yasunori has produced a detailed study of the kenzushi (Kenzushi ga mita fūkei—higashi ajia kara no shinshiten).


9. Reischauer, Ennin’s Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law; and Ennin’s Travels in T’ang China. The first is an annotated translation of Ennin’s diary—supplemented with nearly 1600 footnotes. The second release, a companion to the translation, retold the story from the third-person point of view, with added historical context. The quoted passage is from Ennin’s Travels in T’ang China, 39–40.

10. See reviews by E.G. Pulleyblank (in Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies) and George Sansom (in Pacific Affairs).


12. The influence of these individuals would have been especially pronounced during the seventh century. Verschuer’s study begins with the eighth.

13. Sugiyama Hiroshi (“Kentōshi no kōro ni tsuite,” 36) doubts the southern island route was followed, suggesting rather that vessels following this route simply drifted at the mercy of the seas.

14. For more information regarding Kentōshi periodization, see Fuqua, “The Japanese Missions to Tang China and Maritime Exchange in East Asia, 7th–9th Centuries,” 22–33.

15. Ishii Masatoshi, “Kentōshi Q&A,” 260–261. Over-emphasizing the political nature of the Early-period missions is problematic, in that it understates the significance of seventh-century cultural importation. These seventh-century missions introduced elements of Chinese civilization that profoundly affected Japan’s government, economics, culture, and religion.

16. Wang Yong, Tō kara mita Kentōshi, 27.

17. Primary sources are part of the problem. Envoys dispatched to Tang are referred variously as Kentōshi (the standard used by scholars today), nisshi no michi no tsukai, nittōshi, heitōshi, and chōkōshi. For more on defining Kentōshi missions, see Fuqua, “The Japanese Missions to Tang China and Maritime Exchange in East Asia, 7th–9th Centuries,” 121–127.

18. Wang (Tō kara mita Kentōshi, 25–26) summarized the positions of prominent scholars regarding what constituted a Kentōshi mission. Kegasawa Yasunori (Kenzushi ga mita fūkei—higashi ajia kara no shinshiten, 31–42) did the same for kenzushi scholarship by summarizing the views of thirteen prominent scholars who approached the authenticity of kenzushi-related primary sources in differing ways. See also Tōno, Kentōshi ga mita chōgoku bunka, 84.


20. Mori Katsumi was one such scholar, although he acknowledged that Japanese enthusiasm for Chinese goods did not wane (Kentōshi, 187–198). See also Inoue Mitsusada, Introduction to Japanese History: Before the Meiji Restoration. For further discussion, see von Verschuer, “Looking from Within and Without: Ancient and Medieval External Relations.”


22. Robert Borgen, Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court; his summary of reasons behind the halt of diplomatic missions appears on pp. 246–247. Ivan Morris (The World of the Shining Prince, 19) discusses the theory that Michizane was in a power struggle with members of the Fujiwara and feared loss of position if he left for China. This theory is not commonly supported today.


25. Including Kimiya Yasuhiko, Mori Katsumi, and Nishijima Sadao.
Suematsu ("Japan Relations with the Asian Continent and the Korean Peninsula (Before 950 A.D.)," 681–684) is one example of a scholar who argued that criticism from the Sui Emperor caused the Japanese to eschew writing additional letters, relying instead on oral greetings. See also Kimiya Yasuhiro, Nikka bunka koryūshi; Mori Katsumi, Kentōshi; and Nishijima Sadao, "Nana, hasseiki no higashi ajia kokusai kankei." Wang Zhenping (Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals) was the first to hypothesize that the Japanese continued to prepare state letters that they kept ambiguous.  

See, for instance, Tōno Haruyuki, "Kentōshisen no kōzō to kōkaijutsu," 9 and Kentōshi to shōsōin, 15.  


Charlotte von Verschuer, Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries, 4.  

See Wang Zhenping, "Speaking with a Forked Tongue: Diplomatic Correspondence between China and Japan 238–608," 23–32; and Ambassadors from the Islands of the Immortals, 1–2.  

For more information, see Nishijima Sadao’s sakuhō system theory as discussed in Chūgoku kodai kokka to higashi Ajia sekai, and the introduction to Tanaka Fumio’s Kokusai kōriki to kodai Nihon. In English, see Kitō Kiyōaki, "International Relations in Ancient East Asia," 2–6; Charles Holcombe also addresses the issue of the sakuhō system in The Genesis of East Asia: 221 BC – AD 907, 53–60.  


Faith in the veracity of the early Japanese primary sources also affected the Western historical narrative. See, for instance, David Murray, Japan and James Murdock, A History of Japan: From the Origins to the Arrival of the Portuguese in 1542 A.D.  


Important new studies of Japan’s relations with non-Chinese states include contributions by Ishii Masatoshi (Nihon-bokkai kankeish to kōryū), Suzuki Yasutami (Nihon kodai no shūen), and Sakayori Masashi (Bokkai to kodai no nihon), each of whom researched Japan’s diplomatic relations with one or more of the states of Paekche, Silla, Koguryō, and Parhae. For an archaeological perspective on exchanges between Japan, Koguryō, and Parhae, see articles by Korean sociologists translated into Japanese in Association of Korean Sociologists, Kōkuri, Bokkai to kodai Nihon. See also Yanagida Yoshitaka (Kyūshū shinpōjumun: ima kōrokan ga yomigaeru) and Arano Yasunori, Ishii Masatoshi, and Murai Shōsuke’s Nihon no taigai kankei 2: Tsūkō, tsūshōen no kakudai and Nihon no taigai kankei 3: Tsūkō, tsūshōen no kakudai.  


Tajima Isao, Nihon, Chūgoku, Chosen taigai kōriki nenpyō, 10.  

Ueda Takeshi and Son Eiken, Nihon Bokkai kōshōshi. Sakayori Masashi and Ishii Masatoshi have also each made substantive contributions to the field of Japan–Parhae studies with books published in 2001. Sakayori’s Bokkai to kodai no Nihon included a useful summary of the scholarship already conducted in the field of Parhae studies, while in Nihon-Bokkai kankeishi no kōron, Ishii summarized the problems facing the Parhae scholars of today, while explicating issues of multilateral relations between Parhae, Japan, and its Korean neighbors.  

Suzuki Yasutami, “Nantōjin no raihō wo meguru kisoteki kōsatsu” and “Kodai ezo no sekai to kōriki, kodai ouen to kōriki; Yamazato Jun’ichi, Kodai Nihon to nantō no kōriki; Mori Kiyotaka, Kodai Nihon no taigai ninshiki to tsūkō; Sakayori, “Gagaku shinmakkatsu ni miru kodai Nihon to tōhoku Ajia.”  

Aleksandr Oskadnikov, “The Mo-ho Tribes and the P’o-hai State”; Robert Borgen, Sugawara no Michizane; McCullough, “The Heian Court, 794–1070”; Inoue, “The Century of Reform”; von Verschuer, Across the Perilous Seas; and Bruce Batten, Gateway to Japan: Hakata in War and Peace: 500–1300.  

This theory is based on the work of Nishigami Sadao and Ishimoda Shō. (For more, see Ishigami Eiichi, Kodai higashi Ajia chiniki to Nihon. Kitō Kiyōaki provides an English-language discussion of Ishigami’s theory in ‘International Relations in Ancient East Asia,’ 1–20.)  

While many believe that Parhae adopted a subordinate position to Japan, there are no extant records to indicate how Parhae perceived its relationship with Japan. Wang Zhenping (Ambassadors from the Islands of the Immortals, 136–138) suggests that both Silla and Parhae acknowledged Japan’s superiority in the eighth century, but because each country pursued an agenda of mutual self-interest, no country—China, Silla, Paekche, Koguryō, or Japan—played a fixed, dominant role in this geopolitical region.  

See Yanagida et al., Kyūshū shinpōjumun: ima kōrokan ga yomigaeru, 87.  


47 Wu Ling, “Kyūsei ki tōnichi bōeki ni okeru higashi Ajia shōningun,” 96–109. Also, Sugiyama Hiroshi’s Nihon kodai katsushiki no kenkyū provides a summary of prewar and postwar Japanese scholarship regarding maritime commercial exchange in East Asia. Arano Yasunori, Ishii Masatoshi, and Murai Shōsuke’s Nihon no taigai kankei 3: Tōkō, tsūshōen no kōkai, and Tanaka Fumio’s Kokusai bōeki to kodai Nihon offer excellent studies on topics of commercial activity with the Tang, Song, Silla, Koryŏ, the Liao (i.e., Khitan), and the southern islands.
48 Bruce Batten, Gateway to Japan, 182–192; Koyama Yasunori, “East and West in the Late Classical Age,” 374–376; McCullough, “The Heian Court, 794–1070,” 96.
49 Charlotte von Verschuer, Le commerce extérieur du Japon des origines au XVIe siècle, later published in English as Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries.
50 For more, see Batten’s To the Ends of Japan.
55 William Wayne Farris, Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan.
57 Excerpts in English translation are found in Sakamoto Tarō’s The Six National Histories of Japan, translated by John S. Brownlee. For historical background to the Six National Histories, see Marian Ury, “Chinese Learning and Intellectual Life.” The Nihon shoki, the first of the national histories, has been translated into English by W.G. Aston as Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697.
58 See Mori Katsumi, “Nittō bōeki no keitai,” 710.
59 The paper upon which these requests were written was recycled and used in the backing of the “Court Lady Screen” (Tōrige ritsujo byōbu), where they remained forgotten until the Tokugawa period. The Baishiragi no motsuge has been thoroughly researched by Tōno Haruyuki. See, for instance, Shōsūn monjo to mokkan no kenkyū, 311, and “Tōrige ritsujo byōbu shitabari monjo no kenkyū—Baishiragi no motsuge no kisoteki kōsatsu.”

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