

The Japanese Missions to China

Adapted from an essay by Doug Fuqua from the Japan Society

Between 630 and 894 the Japanese court sent nineteen official diplomats to Tang China known as *kentōshi* to serve as political and cultural representatives to China. The missions brought back elements of Tang civilization that affected Japan's government, economics, culture, and religion. The *kentōshi* missions inspired such important events in early Japanese history as the Taika Reform (645), which applied Tang land reform to Japanese agricultural lands to increase the power of the emperor, and the Taihō Code (701), which created a Chinese-style bureaucratic structure. The Japanese diplomats were also involved in the exchange of goods—official tributary items and, most probably, goods traded privately by individual mission members. They transported raw materials such as amber, agate, and a variety of silk textiles, and exchanged them for Chinese goods, such as books, musical instruments, religious writings, and Buddhist images.

INTRODUCTION

Early Japanese society borrowed many aspects of culture from continental Asia. Most of the cultural exchange occurred due to immigration and trade with the Korean peninsula. However, the Japanese also established and maintained contact with the continent by sending and receiving official missions. One such mission from the Korean Kingdom of Paekche came to Japan in 552 (or 538 depending on the primary source) bearing an image of the Buddha, copies of Buddhist sutras, and a Buddhist monk. This official court exchange marked the first recorded introduction of Buddhism to the Japanese elite. The study of Buddhism in Japan led more people to learn to read Chinese which in turn increased knowledge of Chinese ideas of governance, philosophy, and social harmony.

MISSIONS TO SUI CHINA: 600-614

The Yamato court sent missions to the Sui dynasty in 589 while it was consolidating its authority and establishing a centralized state. The new Japanese state evolved by following the successful Chinese model. Crown prince Shōtoku (574-622), who served as regent to Japanese Empress Suiko, was a student of Chinese culture and enthusiastically sponsored the Sui missions. Prince Shōtoku's respect for Confucian thought was evident in his writings. He relied upon the missions to the Sui court to obtain the knowledge to structure a centralized Chinese-style state in Japan that would incorporate Chinese rules of etiquette, civil and bureaucratic regulations, and systematic taxation.

KENTŌSHI (ENVOYS TO TANG CHINA): 630-838

The first mission to the Tang dynasty authorized by the Japanese court departed in 630. Over the next two hundred years, fifteen more *kentōshi* missions helped Japan assimilate Tang culture and civilization. By the time the last *kentōshi* ship returned from China in 840, the Japanese had been able to create a centralized Chinese-style bureaucracy, Chinese standardized measurements for rice land assessment, and population registers. The Japanese also adopted the Chinese calendar and modeled their capitals of Heijō (Nara) and Heian-kyo (Kyoto) on the Tang capital city of Chang-an.

The *kentōshi* missions carried students and scholars of Tang civilization to and from China, some of whom remained on the continent 30 years or more before returning to Japan to share their knowledge. Saichō (767-822) and Kūkai (774-835) serve as prominent examples of religious scholars who sailed as part of the 804 embassy to China. Upon their return to Japan, Saichō founded the Tendai sect of Buddhism, and Kūkai founded the Shingon sect and went on to become one of Japan's most distinguished scholars. The importance of these two individuals to the development of Japan cannot be understated. Each man voyaged to China as part of an official embassy in order to familiarize himself with little understood Buddhist sects. Each returned to establish his new sect in Japan. Had Saichō and Kūkai not sailed as a part of the 804 embassy, the Japan of today would be quite different. Saichō's Tendai sect eventually inspired the development of new Japanese sub-sects that made Buddhism popular among the common people of Japan, while Kūkai's Shingon sect profoundly influenced the thought and aesthetics of the Heian court aristocracy.

Above all else, the success of the Tang missions is demonstrated by the great volume of knowledge they transmitted to Japan. By the end of the 9th century, the Japanese possessed at least 1700 Chinese texts including Confucian works on government and social harmony, as well as works of history, poetry, divination, and medicine. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the Japanese did not borrow Chinese institutions or practices indiscriminately; rather, they attempted to assimilate what they found useful into their own society.

END OF THE MISSIONS TO TANG

At about the time that the *kentōshi* missions came to a close, the Tang dynasty was in decline. The last official mission was sent to China in 838. It is thought that the missions ceased because conditions had become too unstable in China and because Japan no longer found it necessary to import aspects of Tang culture or conduct diplomacy with its neighbors. The emergence of an East Asian trade network may have played a part as well. Private merchants had begun to appear in Japan who brought many of the goods the court elite had previously obtained through these missions.