



CHINA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Asian Diplomacy
from Ancient History
to the Present

MICHAEL TAI

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AND HER
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To my dad

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This book is the fruit of two years of research on the East and South China Seas at the University of Cambridge's Centre of Development Studies. The topic arose in consultation with Peter Nolan about the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. The aim at the outset was to understand the causes of the conflict for which it is necessary to study the history of the region. Conflicts arise where there is a lack of trust and the maritime disputes present a timely opportunity to explore the nature of China's relations with her maritime neighbours.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CAN THE WORLD TRUST CHINA?

China's reemergence as a leading economy has prompted sharp debate about her role in the world. There are concerns and even anxiety in some quarters about her rise and what it could mean for the international order. Is China a responsible stakeholder? Will she foster peace and prosperity or pursue her own interests at others' expense? Is she a benign giant or a recalcitrant troublemaker? Humanity faces the threat of financial crisis, global warming and cataclysmic war which can only be countered through international collaboration. Cooperation requires trust, but on whose terms can China be trusted?

The history of bilateral relations is an important determinant of trust between states. History is memory. It is the record of past events and conduct, and former cooperative relations build trust whereas a history of aggression and treachery destroys it. Empathy is an equally important factor. It is the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes to see things from their perspective. We are more likely to trust those who show they understand us especially when demonstrated through deeds. Empathy requires an understanding of the other's history and culture, and has the potential to build trust even when there is

none. Current opinions about China, however, are influenced by deeply rooted cultural and ideological biases. The 19th century French-Russian sociologist Jacques Novikov coined the term 'yellow peril' to embody a psycho-cultural perception of threat from the East. It expressed a vaguely ominous, existential fear of the vast, faceless, nameless horde of yellow people opposite the Western world which Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany invoked to urge European empires to invade, conquer and colonize China.¹ How we construe ourselves and the world matters because our intuition shapes our fears, impressions and relationships.² Writing in the 1960s, sinologist Raymond Dawson confessed that for many in the West, China is 'mainly associated with such trivialities as pigtailed, slant eyes, lanterns, laundries, pidgin English, chopsticks, and bird's nest soup'.³ Although the 'whimsical notions of a quaint civilization in a setting which resembles the design on a willow-pattern plate' have since been updated by increased trade and travel, many racial and political stereotypes live on. John K. Fairbank warned early on that Chinese society is very different from America, and that US policymakers would fail unless they took the difference into account.⁴ The greatest lesson of Vietnam, according to Robert McNamara, was to know one's enemy:⁵

What went wrong was a basic misunderstanding or misevaluation of the threat to our security represented by the North Vietnamese. It led President Eisenhower

in 1954 to say that if Vietnam were lost, or if Laos and Vietnam were lost, the dominoes would fall. I am certain we exaggerated the threat. We didn't know our opposition. We didn't understand the Chinese; we didn't understand the Vietnamese, particularly the North Vietnamese. So the first lesson is know your opponents. I want to suggest to you that we don't know our potential opponents today.⁶

It is ill-advised to form opinions about a nation without reference to its history, and it would be a grave mistake to study China in a historical vacuum considering only the People's Republic of China today. Chinese leaders are acutely in tune with their country's long history which continues to shape their thinking in powerful ways, while Western policymakers remain narrowly focused on contemporary China with some still referring to it as 'communist China', a label infused with Cold War presuppositions. Although the country is ruled by the communist party, the pillars of communism such as state ownership of all property, a centrally planned economy and monopoly of political power by the working class, have long given way to private ownership, market economy and inclusive political representation; the party now represents the interest of every social class and counts tycoons among its members. Marxism and Leninism were not ends in themselves but means to achieve the fundamental goals of China's leaders, namely, freedom from foreign imperialism, unification of the nation, creation of

effective political power, establishment of stability, and the building of prosperity and prestige. From Beijing's perspective, there are better ways to achieve well-being than by adopting Western policies which have produced much social, economic and political malaise around the world.⁷ Asia is undergoing fundamental change, but no single conceptual model is sufficient to describe the evolving Asian system. There is growing interdependence and cooperation among state and non-state actors with China increasingly at the centre of this evolution but neither realist nor liberal international relations theory is able to capture the complexities of the region.⁸ Instead a stronger grasp of the region's history is necessary to make sense of the shift.

The purpose of this book is to shed light on the political culture and foreign policy of the Chinese state by examining the history of her relations with her neighbours. Just as we judge a person by his deeds, so too can we understand a country by its history. China's relations with her maritime neighbours dates back more than two thousand years and provides rich material by which to discern her self-understanding and place in the world. Outside of narrow specialist circles, however, the history of the region is not widely known, even among East Asians. Each country's secondary school curriculum focuses on its own history and devotes little space to regional history and geography. Public opinion is shaped by news reports which convey a piecemeal and often skewed perspective. Anyone under 40 today was born after the Vietnam War, and among

those who remember the conflict, few know why America intervened or what the French were doing in Indochina before that. What were China's relations with Vietnam at that time and how did the Chinese respond to French encroachment there? Why did Japan invade China in the 1930s even though she looked up to the latter for centuries as the fount of civilization? When and why did the Chinese migrate to Southeast Asia, and what did they encounter there? How were they received by the local population and their colonial rulers, and what role do the Chinese immigrant communities play today in China's relations with Southeast Asian states? And what is the history of the territorial claims in the East and South China Seas? The question of China's rise has attracted much attention since the reforms of 1978, and became particularly salient in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The resultant discourses convey many conflicting messages about China and her ambitions. This work takes a fresh look at the evolution of China's regional diplomatic and strategic thinking via the use of case studies related to maritime history. It begins with Japan and the Ryukyu Kingdom before moving to Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia. By telling the story of China's engagement with her maritime neighbours, the author hopes the reader will gain a deeper understanding of that nation.

CHAPTER 2

CHINA AND JAPAN



Northeast Asia

EARLY CONTACTS

On 12 April 1784, a farmer preparing an irrigation ditch on Shikano Island in Kyushu, Japan unearthed a large, stone box-like structure. It took two adults to lift the stone slab off the top and inside the box they found a gold seal. The five Chinese characters inscribed on the seal identified it as the seal of the King of Nu, a state of Wa (Japan) and a vassal of the Han Empire. The seal is believed to have been cast in China and bestowed by Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 (5 BC–57 AD) to an envoy bearing tribute from Japan in 57 AD. Made of 95 per cent pure gold, the seal consists of a 2.4 centimetre square base with a handle on top in the shape of a coiled serpent. Recorded in the *History of Later Han* 後漢書 (445 AD), it was the first mention of Japan in Chinese chronicles, but legends about Japan circulated long before.¹

According to early Chinese legends, ancient Japan was an island of magic plants, animals and immortals.² It was a land of golden vegetables with mulberry trees rising a thousand metres from the sea. A 3,000-year-old divine beast resembling

a horse with eight dragon wings lived on the island, and carried the Yellow Emperor (said to live circa 2,600 BC) on tours of his realm. Divine spirits protected the island making access hazardous: approaching ships faced opposing winds and currents, or the island itself would mysteriously sink into the ocean. Chinese legends place the first contact between China and Japan at 1,000 BC when a sage king ruled China. A messenger bearing a rare fragrant herb from Japan came to pay homage to the king, praising the host kingdom's prosperity and tranquility. But in truth, the Chinese knew very little about Japan, a land situated across the waters of the East China Sea; primitive navigational and shipbuilding technology made regular contact impossible, and knowledge about the other was mostly hearsay.

According to the History of the Later Han, the first Qin emperor, seeking immortality, sent the Taoist alchemist Xu Fu 徐福 in search of a life-saving plant on an island in the Eastern Sea 東海. After several years, Xu Fu came back empty handed. Fearing punishment, he claimed he was stopped on the way by the Sea God who demanded him to bring 'young boys, virgins and craftsmen of every kind' as gifts in exchange for the plant of longevity.³ The emperor ordered the construction of a fleet of 60 ships to send Xu Fu off again in 219 BC with a crew of 5,000, and 3,000 each of boys and girls. Not surprisingly, he failed to return and is said to have settled instead on an island believed to be Japan. The farming techniques and many

plants that Xu brought are believed to explain the abrupt end to Japan's 6,000-year Jōmon 縄文 hunter-gatherer culture and the rise of the agricultural economy of the Yayoi 弥生 period. The many temples in Japan honouring Xu Fu as the god of farming, god of medicine and god of silk lend credence to the Chinese accounts.

More reliable information about the Japanese came only in 57 AD when the Wa emissary arrived at the Han court and received the aforementioned gold seal. The Chinese records described the Wa people in great detail: they dwelled on a mountainous island southeast of Korea (most likely referring to Kyushu) and formed more than a hundred communities, some of which maintained diplomatic ties with the Han court through envoys and scribes. The Wa walked barefooted, ate with their hands from bamboo and wooden trays, and lived to over a hundred years. It was an egalitarian society with 'no distinction between father and son, men and women'.⁴

The Chinese did not set foot on Japanese soil until some two hundred years later when in 240 AD an envoy from the Wei court (220–265) arrived. From then on, there were regular exchanges of emissaries until the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907) which yielded a trove of information that revealed a colourful Japan with a rich history. Japan then appeared in successive Chinese dynastic records including the histories of the Wei 魏, the Liu-Song 劉宋, the Sui 隋, the Tang 唐, the Song 宋, the Yuan 元 and the Ming 明. The Chinese learned

that the Japanese tattooed their bodies, dyed their teeth black and practised divination in a process similar to tortoise shell divination in China. Women outnumbered men and polygamy was common. Some men had four or five wives which did not seem to produce domestic strife; the women were faithful and trusting, and sat alongside men at social gatherings. The society had strict norms and punishment for offences was severe. For a misdemeanour, the offender could lose his wife and children and for grave offences, his entire family could be exterminated. Murderers, robbers and rapists were sentenced to death. Crime was low, and litigation rare.

Society was organized into clans which pooled resources to reclaim land, build irrigation, grow crops and construct stockades for protection. They formed regional groups which the Chinese called *guo* 国 or states, some thirty of which emerged as powerful contenders for hegemony, and sent messengers to gain Chinese recognition. Records show Nuguo 奴国, a state in northern Kyūshū, requesting the bestowal of titles and emblems such as gold seals and bronze mirrors which conferred rank in the imperial hierarchy. To handle such requests, the Chinese instituted an investiture system and gift exchanges which developed into the tribute system. Japan belonged to the family of tribute states, but as a distant island across the sea, it did not command the same attention as continental neighbours until the modern era.

TRIBUTE SYSTEM

The tribute system originated in the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BC) and institutionalized relations between the Zhou king and his subjects. Relations were ranked according to geographic distance between king and subject. A subject belonged to one of five classes with respective rites to affirm subordination and obligations to the court. A sovereign-vassal relationship was established through titles and seals, and maintained by regularly exchange of gifts. The vassal obeyed the king in return for political and military support.⁵ A paternalistic system requiring the king to give more than he received, it created a community of states which was an extension of the domestic political order and became the framework for China's foreign relations for centuries. It was based on the assumption of Chinese primacy even though the Chinese did not maintain a large army, and her neighbours were awed more by the force of her civilization than her military might. The size of the empire, coupled with a sophisticated government bureaucracy, infrastructure, art, literature, philosophy, medicine and culinary culture, earned wide admiration and respect. The more sinicized a state, the more it was considered civilized, and political association with China was seen as a source of legitimacy and prestige. The tribute system served as a trade and diplomatic network through which states interacted with each other often using Chinese writing and protocol. It comprised a core of

sinicized states followed by more distant ones. The core states of Korea, Japan and Vietnam adopted the Chinese writing system, Confucianism and Buddhism, and Chinese-style bureaucracy and statutes.⁶ Other tribute states included Formosa, Ryukyu, Annam, Cambodia, Siam, Champa, Samudra, Java, Pahang, Paihua, Palembang and Brunei.⁷

The tributary system was not a static framework centred on China but a delicate equilibrium, sensitive to the needs of all parties. Relations ranged from total subjugation to *de facto* equality, and member states were not passive subjects, but dynamic players of international politics, with each deciding the timing for establishing or ending ties with China. A vassal sought Chinese titles to enhance prestige at home and abroad, but sometimes chose to ignore Chinese policies, stopped bringing tribute and even clashed with the suzerain. The vassal was not a satellite and relations often descended into mere form.⁸ The tribute system also sought to mollify, if not defuse, security threats, but the nomad tribes of the northern steppes who plundered Chinese towns and villages for grain, metals and textiles were a perennial danger. The Chinese sought to keep them at bay with trade, diplomacy, warfare and alliances.⁹ Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (140–87 BC) befriended the Scythians (Yuezhi 月氏) in order to check the Xiongnu 匈奴.¹⁰ Li Yuan 李淵, founder of the Tang dynasty, turned to the Eastern Turks for support against the Sui. The Tang court later allied with Uighurs to put down rebels and fend off the Tibetans.

Depending on the balance of power, nomads were peers and sometimes the stronger party in the alliance.¹¹ On the whole, the Chinese preferred to keep peace using a ‘loose rein’ or *jimi* 羈縻制 system of autonomous rule distinct from the tribute system.¹² The Chinese saw little gain in conquering nomad lands which were ‘stony fields’ with tribes resistant to Chinese culture. Nor were they keen to adopt them as vassals and bear the consequent obligations of a suzerain either.¹³ Formidable cavalymen, the nomads conquered huge swathes of northern China between the fourth and sixth centuries and succeeded in bringing the whole country under their rule during the Yuan (1279–1368) and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

JAPAN IN THE TRIBUTE SYSTEM

Japanese emissaries came sporadically. After the first Wa mission in 57 AD, no emissaries came for the next fifty years. Between the first and ninth centuries, there were active periods as well as long dormant ones. No Wa visitors came during the second and early third centuries, but there were four missions (238, 243, 245, and 247) in a span of nine years. The erratic tempo suggests that the Japanese set their own agenda. In the seventh century, an important shift occurred; five Japanese ambassadors came from 600 to 614 but none requested Chinese titles. The once coveted honours lost value after Japan achieved political unity and no longer looked to Chinese institutions to confer

legitimacy. Material and cultural interests often went hand in hand, and during the Sui and the Tang, Japanese diplomats used their offices to purchase precious wares while studying Chinese culture and institutions. After a lapse of twenty-three years from the first (630) mission to the Tang court, seven came from 653 to 701, a period when the Japanese imperial household went through six emperors and an empress in brisk succession. In the eighth century, missions averaged one every ten years, and in the ninth century, one every thirty years. The fluctuation in frequency reflected Japan's needs and sovereignty within the tribute system.

In addition to titles and wares, the Japanese sought talent, learning and craftsmanship. In 284, senior Wa officials travelled to Baekje (in Korea), a Chinese vassal, to hire the scholar Wang Ren 王仁 to tutor their crown prince.¹⁴ Baekje sent Confucian scholars and specialists in medicine, divination, astronomy, calendrical science and music to serve the Wa court. Wa ambassadors recruited seamstresses, weavers, tanners and physicians, while blacksmiths, potters, saddlers, brocade weavers, painters, interpreters, irrigation engineers, sericulturists and carpenters came from the ranks of refugees. According to the *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀, an 8th century court-commissioned history, Yuan Jinqing 袁晉卿 went to Japan in 735 at the age of 18, and taught Chinese phonetics 唐音 at the Japanese court academy 大学寮.¹⁵ Wa diplomats succeeded after repeated attempts to bring the renowned Buddhist monk Jianzhen 鑑真 to Japan in 754.¹⁶

RELATIONS WITH THE TANG

Ancient Japan was primitive compared to China, and the Tang referred to the Wa as 'eastern barbarians' 東夷. The Tang (618–907) was the most cosmopolitan dynasty in Chinese history, and saw the wide appropriation by Japan of Chinese ideas and institutions.¹⁷ The assumption was that China had all that mattered, and Japan would only improve by learning from it. From 630 onward, Wa monks, students and officials, as many as six hundred at a time, travelled to the capital Chang'an 長安 to study Chinese technology, social system, history, philosophy, art and architecture. The Wa copied the Tang political system and bureaucracy, modelled Heian-kyō 平安京 (today's Kyōto), the Japanese capital (794–1868) after Chang'an (today's Xian), adopted Chinese writing, dress and culinary habits, and some even became scholar officials in China. The gifted Abe no Nakamaro 阿倍の仲麻呂 (698–770) travelled to China at the age of 19 and gained entry to the Taixue 太學 or Imperial Academy, the highest institution of learning at the time. He obtained the highest degree 進士 in the civil service examinations in 727 and was given senior positions in Chang'an and served as governor-general of An-nam 安南 (present day northern Vietnam), a Chinese province at the time. Among his friends were the poets Li Bai 李白 and Wang Wei 王維. After sixteen years in China, he asked to return home, but permission was not granted until 752. On the voyage home, he was