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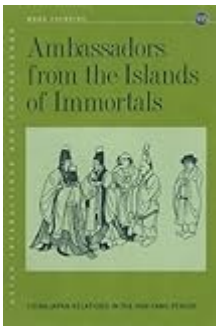

Wang Zhenping. *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China-Japan Relationships in the Han-Tang Period.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005. xiii + 387 pp. $57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2871-4.

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This work draws on "recent archaeological findings and little-known archival materials" (from the book jacket). The archaeological finds refer to such items as official seals, shown in chapter 2 on "Chinese Insignia in East Asian Politics." The archival materials come largely from Japan and Japanese scholarship. Wang's work now provides us with details of a Sino-Japanese diplomatic exchange that would force some of us to rethink and/or rewrite some common assumptions about the Chinese worldview. The title of the book might entice some into thinking that it has to do with some religious fantasy about Japan being the isles of immortals located over the eastern sea, but this book is not about immortals; it is about ambassadors. It is a history of changes in the real world of diplomatic relationships.

Although legends like the islands of immortals (covered in chapter 1) might have played a role in such relationships (as suggested by the earliest Chinese account of the female shaman ruler or queen, Himiko), these legends are placed within the context of political maneuvers made by contentious powers in Japan and Korea seeking recognition from China. Chapter 3 covers the roles played by "Messengers from the Emperor."

Beyond those early accounts, Wang's attention is on the actual journeys, both physical and political, made by interstate ambassadors. The coverage is deeper and wider than the anecdotal diary from a single pilgrim like Ennin. We are afforded a fuller account of what transpired in such official, long-distance undertakings. For example, chapter 4 on the "Voyage to China" and chapter 5 on the "Journey to Changan" recall for us the many and variegated experiences during the physical journeys. Chapter 6, dealing with "Diplomacy in the Tang Capital," and chapter 7, on "Weight and Nuances in State Letters," delve into the details of protocol and the delicate art of using well-chosen words in official communications. The latter shows how words in the same text might be actually read differently by the parties involved. A Chinese, for example, might be pleased to see her Tang dynasty referred to as the "Great Tang" (*da tang*); but the same two Chinese characters are read in Japanese according to their prior reference, and refer simply to the coastal provinces where Japanese ships disembark, suggesting nothing particularly deferential. Much, in short, could be "lost in translation," intentionally or unintentionally. Western medievalists might be interested in how such imperial court rituals might–those face-saving and face-giving gestures notwithstanding–help to create and sustain a distinct socio-political order. There are Sinologists intrigued by the theory and method of Ritual Studies who are interested in pursuing such an investigation. But chapter 8, on "Information Gathering," and chapter 9, on "Acquiring Foreign Talent," show Wang's chosen focus

on topics that are more concrete and less nebulous.

For all the new details Wang provides us, this book will be best remembered for its central thesis, condensed in a succinct summation in chapter 10 on the "Multipolar Nature of the International State System in Asia." It challenges the usual presentation of the Chinese worldview that has China as the Middle Kingdom in the center, the Son of Heaven ruling over "all under Heaven," with all foreign states as his vassals, who ingratiate themselves by paying tribute to the one and only sovereign. A picture derived from Western Zhou, especially one romanticized by the classics, it is one preserved in the official records and so reported by traditional scholars well grounded in those records. Modern Japanese scholars have used it for constructing an "oriental history" as opposed to an occidental one; a variant of that, the "investiture theory," still perpetuates that "monopolar" perspective with China being the one powerful, all-overseeing state. That is an ideal to strive for. Even then, notable Chinese historians did not buy into that official scheme. True perhaps at the best of times, it was seldom the reality most of the times. The Warring States saw the collapse of that model; the Han often played off one foreign power against another; the Age of Disunity had nomadic rulers overrunning the Central Kingdom; the Tang had often to negotiate with various Central Asian powers. Japan in the China-Japan exchange had her own political destiny to consider, such that she too had been variously warm and cool toward China.

To better present the reality of the actual situation, Wang therefore offers this reading of the multipolar nature of the international state system in Asia. The new data, or the new use made of the little-known data, seem to support his thesis, but then, perhaps "international state system" is naturally multipolar. (Even with the UN charter, world politics now is still so.) Maybe in focusing especially on the exchange of envoys between China and Japan, we get indeed the "real" diplomatic history. By common parlance, to be "diplomatic" involves being able to successfully negotiate a settlement that might not exactly be in accord with the public rhetoric of the "official history" of such interstate relationships. Of course, the best diplomacy would make it appear to be still in accord with such. The worst is when, such as with recent current U.S. public policy, the use of some "backdoor diplomacy" not only contradicts certain sworn presidential stands, but also fails to resolve said interstate tension. (Not that I think the Chinese history here involves the same exigency or hypocrisy as the debacle, say, of "arms for hostages." One is modern and post-Realpolitik; the other is medieval and, with all the fanfare of courtliness and courtesy, hopefully more than just that.)

Erza Vogel, Series Editor, writes in the preface: "In the end, [the author] adopts the model of 'mutual self-interest' to describe Sino-Japanese relationship in this early period" (p. x). Interestingly, for such a rationale of "mutual self-interest," Wang evokes (p. 224) the authority of a statement from Mozi. Mozi believed that his program of loving others would be mutually beneficial. Or, as I prefer to put it, it will be to the public (or common) good that would do the public (community) good. The admission of a philosophical inspiration for the interpretation of interstate dealings is intriguing, considering how such Chinese foreign relationships have been analyzed previously. The moral idealism that paints China as the benevolent ruler and the foreigners (deemed "barbaric") kowtowing to her superior standing (model culture of the civilized) is the one that idealistic Confucians to this day still speak up for. The self-proclamation of China as a country of *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness) still went out in recent KMT history. Like America, the Land of Liberty, China's enlightened and non-coercive culture-centric policy is supposed to draw willing converts to her way. If we can dub that "Confucian," we can as easily find "Legalist/Statecraft" readings about China's foreign policy. Instead of some win-win situation due to this pursuit of "mutual self-interest," China has been depicted as inherently expansionist and working off a stark "zero sum" win/loss calculus. It is not for me to decide where facts end and where variant interpretations begin; or whether the Mohist position mediating between the Idealist and the Realist happens to be the most "diplomatic," while juggling demands from both ends.

I am more bewildered over whether Buddhism, or better, Buddhist politics, could or did provide an alternative, and if that ever substantially changed China's political culture. Clearly Christianity remade European kingship and statehood in the West more than Buddhism could in China. It is not that issues of "Render unto Caesar and unto God" have no counterpart in Buddhism. "Sangha and State" offers a comparable spectrum of possibilities as "Church and State." Nor is it that there are no indicators of the presence of Buddhist politics in the Far East either, as one finds more obvious in South-East Asia. Did not Japan learn of the faith from the gift of the Three Treasures she received from Korea as part of the Korean mission? (The picture we usually get, though, is that of monks, images, and sutras coming as accessories to the official missions; this seems to make the Buddhist emissaries out as "cultural attachÃ©s" within the entourage

of the official ambassadors.] Was not the *Golden Light Sutra* set up as the "platform" for a Golden Light congregation, a pact among Buddhist kings dedicated to the propagation and protection of the Dharma, in early Mahayana northwest India? We read of such Golden Light assemblies in the Northern Dynasties. (Later, we have the *Virtuous King Sutra*, an apocryphal Chinese composition, and Virtuous King Assemblies.) We read of the frequent use of the threefold Nation-Protecting Sutras in China, Korea, and Japan–a tradition ingrained enough in Japan as to inspire Nichiren in Kamakura and the third largest political party in the current Japanese parliament. From intertribal compacts among otherwise contentious kings to a singular Cakravartin, or, bolder still, an Indra's Net of international states, Buddhism offered alternatives to simply bowing to the Caesars of the world or complying with the single polar star that was the Chinese Emperor. Were these experiments in Buddhist kingship in China just too rare and too short? Were they doomed to failure in the long run? At least among the ruling class. Or are we again faced with this problem of official reportage that minimized such Buddhist options? How likely is it that there are untapped resources waiting to be tapped for another new look at interstate religionship in Asia that is somehow multipolar but more than just serving "mutual self-interest" so that instead–may we dream a little–"In Buddha We Trust" and with a Dharma at the "Service of All"?

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