Yiming (0:00):

Welcome to another episode of the Chinese History Podcast, my name is Yiming Ha, your host for today's episode and I'm joined by my colleague and co-host Greg Sattler, who as you remember, I interviewed for our very first episode. And in our first interview, Greg shared with us the growing role of private merchants in the maritime trade between China and Japan and China and Korea, and how private merchants started to displace official embassies that were sent between Japan and China. So today, I want to talk a little bit about why this transition took place. What happened that made private merchants more appealing in this exchange between China and Japan? And also talk a little bit about these embassies that had been going on for hundreds of years before the Song dynasty. So when people talk about the Japanese embassies to China, they often imagine the embassies that were sent to the Tang dynasty in the seventh and eighth centuries, but textual evidence and archeological evidence suggest that these embassies from what is today the Japanese Archipelago to China began long before that. So to start off, can you please tell us a little bit about these earlier embassies? Who were the polities sending embassies to China? What were some of the possible reasons these embassies were sent? And what kind of evidence do we have for these embassies?

Greg (1:17):
First of all, thank you very much for having me. So the earliest recordings of the Wa arrivals in China, they're quite foggy, and what's written about them in Chinese sources, it's actually not that much information. Quite often you only see a sentence or two sentences. I believe the earliest mention, I could be wrong here, but I believe at one point I looked at an early mention of… it might have been a Han dynasty recording that stated that the Wa were arriving in China during the Warring States period. I'm not so sure that's enough evidence to say that was happening, but people at the time apparently did think that was true. The first clear-cut instance of a Wa embassy, and I'll just get this out of the way first, the Wa…I suppose you could think of them as proto-Japanese. They were the inhabitants of the Japanese Archipelago before there was state formation. It's not really clear cut-if they were one ethnicity or many ethnicities, if they were one tribe amongst many, but we can think of them as the people that existed in Japan before Japan became Japan. And the first Wa embassy in the Chinese records arrived in 57 CE during the Han dynasty. So this was the earliest recorded visit. I don't believe any details were provided. However, (one of the only details of the event) was of a gold seal that was bestowed to the Wa embassy at this time, and interesting enough in the 18th century, just a farmer, a Japanese farmer on the island of Kyushu, found a gold seal that seems to meet the description and what we know of gold seals at the time. It seems to be exactly what we think that gold seal is and there has been a lot of debate on whether or not this gold seal is the gold steal that was bestowed on the Wa embassy in 57 CE. I think it is from what I've read about it, I think this is an authentic find. The farmer who found it, he found it on the northern side of the island of Kyushu, which is where exchange was happening, which is where you would imagine people setting out for China would be based. And it does certainly look a lot like the other seals that were being produced in China at the time. So this is… this really is not only our earliest textual evidence of Wa people arriving in China, it's also our earliest material evidence, and we're extremely lucky that we have these two types of evidence coinciding. Now after that, and this is also a very

instrumental moment in Japanese history, about 200 years after that, we have a description of a woman leader in Japan who united a lot of tribes or minor polities into her own confederacy, and her name was Himiko. And people just generally now regard this as her given name, but it seems actually that it was a title, either a princess or a priestess of some sort. But she was a very powerful leader in Japan and she sent some envoys to China in the third century and that was the beginning of a series of embassies that were sent by her successor and later by other people, perhaps from other polities on the Japanese Peninsula as well. And then really for the next four or five centuries, you see embassies from Wa people arriving in China, perhaps once every few years, perhaps once every few decades. I think there were about one or two long pauses of about a century each, but it's fairly consistent - from about 57 CE until the period when maritime technology allows for greater, more frequent exchange, you do see Wa people and Chinese people interacting almost always in the diplomatic sphere because the people who wrote the primary sources that we know about these events from they were largely concerned with diplomacy and politics.

Yiming (5:36):
Yeah, and I remember reading some of these dynastic histories of the earlier dynasties, say the *Hanshu*, the *Hou Hanshu*, *Sanguozhi*, and the *Suishu* and all those texts, and in the section on foreign states, there's always mention of Wa embassies and there will be descriptions of how far it is, these Wa lands from China, how long it takes to sail, which directions you need to sail, and it also describes some of the customs of these people. So it seems there's a lot of textual evidence for these embassies. And I think Himiko, as you mentioned, she appears in the Chinese records as well. But aside from this textual evidence, are there any other archeological evidence that scholars can use to say that these embassies happened?

Greg (6:22):
Well, for the early embassies, I think what stands out of course is the gold seal. Fortunately, in Japan, a great amount of archeology has been conducted. A lot of it I know is rescue archeology, archeology that takes place before big building construction plans come in and tend to really change up the landscape. But the state as a whole has invested a lot into archeology and I believe there are some finds that suggest the movement of peoples. I believe there are early Buddhist idols from maybe just before the first record of Buddhism arriving in Japan, it's hard to say whether this was carried over by immigrants or by diplomats. But really, I think that the clearest evidence has been, I would say, around the eighth century, around the time of the Tang dynasty, that's when you see some really interesting prestige goods arriving from China. And the reason we have these extant is that they were preserved by the Japanese leaders, the Japanese imperial family, and preserved essentially until the… the present day. But I think for earlier tribute diplomacy missions, I don't think that there's much that exists in the way of material evidence. I suppose one exception would be the bronze mirrors though. A lot of bronze mirrors have turned up on the Japanese Archipelago. Again, there's debate between scholars about whether these were produced locally, whether they were produced in China, and I'm not so sure where scholarship stands now on that. I believe the last I read, it seemed that at least some of these bronze mirrors were being produced in China and they had the names of Chinese craftsmen on them. I think they were produced in workshops. So that's probably the

biggest exception and you can think of these as prestige goods that really helped the Japanese leaders who sent the envoys to China, because when these bronze mirrors came back to Japan, perhaps in the dozens, perhaps in the hundreds, the leaders could distribute them to loyal people in outlying areas who would serve them or allied with them. And this in turn, encouraged the Japanese leaders to continue sending envoys to China. It really, it was ingenious. It gave China a way to influence polities that were very far away from its borders. And really it was a win-win situation. It helped the Japanese leaders and it allowed the Chinese leaders to exercise at least a certain degree of influence.

Yiming (8:59):
That's very interesting, because there's a lot of textual records for these interactions. But we've always lacked the archeological evidence to back up these textural claims and these mirrors as you mentioned, and this seal I think are really exciting finds that we can finally start to say perhaps the textual records, there's some truth to these right, these missions weren't just all made up. But the prestige goods you mentioned, I think are very interesting. And I remember when I went to Nara, there is this place in, I believe it was at Todaiji, right, the Shōsōin, which was a storehouse belonging to one of the emperors in the mid eighth century, where he sealed up all the good that he had: his daily use items, prestigious goods, (etc.), and a lot of these came from China via the Silk Road. So you had items from Persia, items from Central Asia, that are in Japan that you can't really find in China anymore. So it's very interesting how these are so carefully preserved in Japan.

Greg (9:58)
Yeah, absolutely. And I strongly suggest to anybody who's interested in Tang Dynasty culture, I strongly recommend that they travel to Japan and go to some of the temples, and especially go to some of the national museums, because Japan has done a remarkably good job of preserving Tang dynasty culture over the ages. I think that in terms of the Silk Road, like you say, some of the best ideas we have of Tang dynasty goods actually come from Japan, which is somewhat ironic because although scholars say that Japan was on the “eastern terminus” of the Silk Road, I don't think that the exchange between Japan and the continent was frequent enough to really merit that type of statement. I think that, really, Japan was far off the edge of the exchange that was happening. Not to say that it was discluded, but it was quite isolated in the eighth century. And I think that isolation probably helped Japan to maintain a lot of these goods. Because there weren't many invasions in Japanese history, not many foreign invasions. And because there were not many foreign invasions, cultural change happened at a different pace. There was not as much destruction from warfare from outside groups, and I should really emphasize outside groups. But yeah, a lot of the structures and the goods of the eighth century, ninth century, tenth century, if they haven't survived, then the designs of the buildings, some of the ways that these goods were produced, they have still continued on to the present day. So by going to Japan, you can really get a good sense of what early Chinese culture was like.

Yiming (11:40):
Yeah, I absolutely agree. And this is probably going a bit off topic, but certain practices that we think of as iconically Japanese today were actually from China. It's just that in China, because of

the foreign invasions, certain practices, social practices changed, whereas in Japan, they were still preserved. But going back to the issue of exchange, I'm not an expert on the subject, but from what I've read, the Korean Peninsula really served as a key conduit in facilitating the exchange between China and these various polities on the Japanese archipelago. I've seen that a lot of goods went through Korea, and a lot of immigrant families were of Korean descent, and came from the Korean peninsula to Japan. So what was the role of the Korean Peninsula in this exchange?

Greg (12:28):
Yes, I should add that the Chinese culture that has arrived in Japan, many would also argue that it has existed with a Japanese twist. Because, and this really leads into your next question as well, there are a lot of nationalist sentiments on the exchanges between Japan, China, Korea, and some people do have very strong feelings about this. It is unfortunate that when you really dig deep into some of these exchanges, they weren't always wonderful moments where it was a win-win situation. And that certainly seems to be the case for the Korean Peninsula because the earliest involvement we know about the Wa people in the Korean Peninsula… first of all, some of them might have been natives. I think the jury's still out on that. Wa people might have been living in the Korean Peninsula far before the (official) history articles were written. And that's not to say that they were Japanese people, they were their own thing, their own groups, and they seem to be present in the southern part of the Korean peninsula since the earliest records. However, Wa people from outside of the peninsula, most likely from the Japanese Archipelago, were invading the Korean Peninsula from a very early time onward. And these Wa people, they appealed directly to the Chinese courts (that were) sometimes large polities, sometimes smaller polities. Because at this time, essentially from the collapse of the Han Dynasty until the beginning of the Sui dynasty, there were various empires in the north and in the south. China wasn't a large unified empire to the extent of the Han or Tang empires, but nevertheless, there were Wa leaders who saw fit to appeal to Chinese leaders to acknowledge their conquests in the Korean Peninsula and to receive titles - acknowledgement of their authority in the Korean peninsula. And certainly Chinese leaders used this to their advantage. This was another way of exercising influence. And we do see that sometimes Wa leaders were successful in this regard. They would be acknowledged as the leaders of the southern part, of Silla, of Mimana, also known as Kaya, which is this kind of southern area, this southern confederacy of Wa peoples, and also some smaller tribes or smaller polities. They could be successful in this regard. And this was one incentive to engage in diplomacy, to receive that recognition. Some of the earliest textual accounts from the Korean Peninsula talk of these battles. One account of the early fifth century is of a Koguryŏ leader who talks of defeating this group of Wa invaders, pushing them back. He very proudly writes this. So we do know that some of the earliest exchanges on the Korean Peninsula were due to warfare and the geopolitics of the time. However, on a more positive note, we do know that there was a lot of movement, a lot of immigration. Peoples of various backgrounds traveling within the Korean peninsula. And many of them did actually make their way to the Japanese archipelago. And quite often these people were very well received. Some of them were nobility. Some of them were royalty. They could enter the ruling class of Japan, and they would also be able to advise on foreign affairs with Korean states (and) foreign affairs with China. And they would bring these ideas of how diplomacy was supposed to be

carried out in this East Asian Chinese tributary system. And they would advise the Japanese rulers on how to do this. And we do see that many of the diplomats themselves have surnames that suggest a background on the Korean peninsula, and perhaps even from China as well.

Yiming (16:32):
Yeah, I remember reading about some of these surnames, for example, Hata, the Hata clan. The kanji for that pronunciation is ‘Qin’ (as in the) Qin empire. So there's some speculation that these people might have come from China, and they claimed descent from the Qin empire. But I also would expect that traveling from Korea to Japan is probably much easier than traveling directly from China to Japan, because the Strait of Tsushima is relatively narrow (so) that you can sail there. So it probably will make sense that a lot of people and goods and ideas went through the Korean peninsula to Japan rather than from China directly to Japan.

Greg (17:07):
Certainly. Yeah that's a very good point that you make. I believe it's possible, from what I've read previously, to sail all the way from China to Japan constantly with land in view if you go this route. And I think it might depend on the weather conditions and clarity, but it certainly was the most safe route. If you wanted to travel from China to Japan, you would want to go across from the Shandong peninsula to the Korean peninsula, from the southern tip towards Tsushima. And then from Tsushima, all the way to some of the smaller islands near Kyushu, and then to Kyushu itself. So that was a lot easier. It was a lot safer than traveling across the East China Sea, but eventually in the eighth century, and after that, the technology did exist to make that direct crossing from, let's say, Zhejiang province to the island of Kyushu across the East China Sea,

Yiming (18:05):
Not to mention from the Han Dynasty, and continuing for a couple hundred years after that, on and off of course, China actually had territory in the Korean Peninsula. There was a commandery system that they established after militarily conquering the region. So I guess that's another way that goods and ideas from China could have gone to Japan because the Chinese were there.

Greg (18:25):
Yes, yes. And the information on this, there's not that much information. I'm really interested in the archeological record because that's probably where we'll get the most clarity on it. But the Chinese do, actually, from the Han Dynasty, and after the Han Dynasty - even when the Han Dynasty collapsed - there were Chinese leaders, Chinese kingdoms that did have a stake in some of the Han commanderies that existed on the Korean peninsula. Until these people were pushed out. And it's questionable whether or not Chinese people continued to stay on the Korean peninsula after I believe it was the kingdom of Koguryŏ that pushed them out and they lived under Koguryŏ rule. I would imagine that was the case. But Chinese people were there. It's possible that a lot of the ideas for statecraft - for establishing and maintaining a state - were imported into the Korean Peninsula via this commandery system. The commanderies existed for quite some time. They existed for centuries. So they certainly must have exerted a lot of

influence on ideas. And also technology in terms of pottery shards are usually our greatest clue on the presence of peoples and we see pottery shards with Chinese styles spreading throughout the Korean peninsula at that time. The Chinese states that did inhabit the commanderies on the Korean peninsula must have exerted some degree of influence.

Yiming (19:54):
So speaking of state building, starting from the mid seventh century, what scholars today will call the Yamato polity in Japan, began this large scale state building project. And as part of this project, they began to send embassies known as 'kentoshi' to Tang China, and this we have a lot of information on: textural, artistic material evidence of these missions being sent to China. So why did the Japanese send these embassies to China? And what distinguished them from these earlier embassies that you've talked about?

Greg (20:26):
That is an excellent question. And I think much of my answer is going to derive from speculation, but I think what really kicked it off was that the Sui dynasty unified China into the largest empire that existed until the fall of the Han dynasty [note - should be "since the fall of the Han dynasty"]. So this was the first time in centuries that the territorial domains of China had been so large. It was when the Sui dynasty came into power. And they came into power in the late sixth century. So early in the seventh century, we do see some interest from Japanese leaders in continuing diplomacy with people on the continent and specifically with the Sui empire, with the Sui leaders. The reasons for this: it could be that the Japanese were concerned of this large, powerful presence. It could also be, however, that people from China were coming into Japan either directly but most likely from the Korean peninsula, and they were bringing with them some ideas about the Buddhist religion, about statecraft, other technologies, so it's hard to say what the biggest incentive was, but there were probably multiple incentives for the Japanese to reestablish diplomatic links with the Sui dynasty. Because until the year 600, I don't believe there was an embassy that the Japanese had sent to China for the span of a hundred years. I could be wrong on that, but I think it was quite some time that passed before Wa or Yamato sent an embassy to China. Now what's really interesting is that as soon as they sent an embassy to China, the Japanese were asserting themselves rather aggressively for when we consider how Chinese-style diplomacy is supposed to be carried out. You might attribute this to ignorance. They might have forgotten how diplomacy was carried out. I'm not so sure that was the case. But they seemed very confident in themselves to the point that when they conducted their second embassy to the Sui empire, they sent a letter from the Japanese sovereign that said that the Son of Heaven from the land where the sun rises, sends regards to the Son of Heaven, where the sun sets. So essentially, the Yamato people were asserting that they were equals to this great Sui kingdom, and that certainly caused a reaction in the Sui court. The Sui officials seemed to have handled it well when they were around the envoys. But I believe as soon as the envoys left, the Sui emperor was quite displeased with that, and he actually lectured his own officials about this. And then, one year later, the Sui leaders sent an envoy to Japan, to the Japanese archipelago, to see what was happening there; to see if the Japanese posed a military threat. And I think reading between the lines, they could tell that there wasn't really a military threat. They seemed quite reassured. However, we do see some interesting

descriptions on this visit. One of them being that they saw one part of Japan, one area that was inhabited all by ethnic Chinese people. So there aren't a lot of details about what's going on here, but we do see some really interesting insights on what's happening in this exchange, how these people are influencing each other and what their worldviews are at the time. So I believe there were maybe four or five embassies that were sent from Yamato to the Sui empire, and the frequency of these embassies continued. To varying degrees of frequency, they continued into the Tang Dynasty. So from the seventh century, early seventh century, until about just after the or 900, there were very strong connections. And for most of the Tang Dynasty, these connections were maintained through official diplomacy, and that's where you hear the term 'kentoshi.' It literally translates to "envoys that are sent to the Tang empire." And there were many of these missions. Now what the Japanese got out of it, there was quite a lot. There was quite a lot that they could receive. Both sides wanted to know about each other. So that's one point. Maybe not the most important point, but they wanted to know about each other in terms of military intent, military capabilities, their diplomatic relations with their neighbors - both (for) China and what became Japan. Japanese leaders were very interested in this. For Tang China, they were happy to receive tribute from kingdoms far and wide. This really sustained their rule. It gave Tang leaders legitimacy, and, of course, Tang leaders were very happy to receive foreign goods, especially if they were novelties or curiosities. Now what Japan got out of this, they were able to send students to China and they did this for a very long period of time. Silla, the state on the Korean peninsula, they did the same thing. And some of these students were quite successful. Some of them they studied for decades in the Tang Empire. They got the highest civil service degrees, they served in the Tang government, and many of them brought these ideas of statecraft into Japan. Buddhism was a huge part of this as well. Buddhism was really taking off in the seventh and eighth centuries in Japan. Japanese institutions were sending Buddhist monks to train in Tang China, to come back with scriptures, interpretations, and sometimes they would come back with Chinese monks who would teach in Japan. That was one of the major incentives, no doubt, Buddhist exchange was very important to Japanese leaders and to the Japanese Buddhist establishments. And then of course, there were goods. Japanese leaders were very interested in receiving prestige goods at this time. It was mostly prestige goods rather than resources. A lot of these goods were silks, aromatics, medicines, crafts, so there was a lot to gain from this exchange, especially from the perspective of the Japanese aristocracy.

Yiming (26:56)
That's interesting, because when you consider (that) the normal narrative was that in 663, there was this major battle between Tang and Silla on one side, and the Yamato polity and Kaya on the other, and the Yamato fleet, they had a massive fleet that was just decimated, and because of that, or so this theory goes, that was the reason why they decided they had to learn from the Tang. But from what you've said, it seems that exchange had been going on long before this battle took place.

Greg (27:26):
Yes. That is a very important event, a very important factor…catalyst of change in Japan. Until recently, I think in the last several decades, scholars had always identified…they're called the

Taika Reforms, which happened in the year 645, as the pivotal moment when Japanese state formation really took off, really solidified. It happened at least the records tell us it happened under the Japanese Prince Shotoku. However, recently, there has been some reinterpretation, and scholars think that this battle, as you say, this battle between the Tang empire and what was becoming Japan in 663, that this might have been really the biggest catalyst for change in Japan. And I should clarify what was happening here was, until this time, the Korean peninsula had never been unified into one polity. There had been several kingdoms and in the lead up there were only three kingdoms that existed on the Korean peninsula. But what was happening was one kingdom, the kingdom of Silla, had allied itself with the Tang empire and successfully conquered its two neighbors to essentially become the only polity. And just before that happened, Japan sent several hundred, I believe it was around 300 ships, a naval force, to the Korean peninsula to try and counter this Tang threat and to help their ally which was another Korean state called Paekche. To help them fend off this dual threat of the Tang empire and the kingdom of Silla, and they were totally unsuccessful. There was a massive defeat by any means of calculation. Most of the naval force was out-maneuvered by a Tang admiral, they lost most of their ships, they went back in defeat, and it really caused a lot of soul searching in the Japanese political system that was forming. And because of that soul searching, you can really see that state formation was happening, that it was accelerating even before this time, but that (event) changed everything. Then at that time, every leader in Japan knew that what they were doing was not enough. That they had to change to become more like China if they want to become as strong as China. And it certainly was a period of uncomfortable change. Not long after that in 672, there was the Jinshin War. Probably a lot more centralization was taking place once they were able to implement Chinese forms of statecraft. Probably not nearly the degree of centralization and central control that the Tang empire had over Chinese society, but it was moving in that direction. So, that was certainly a big factor for the changes that were happening in Japan. And in regards to diplomacy after that time, really, even though Japan was at war with Silla, they allied with each other right away, because, well I shouldn't say “right away,” but in the span of maybe one or two decades, they became very close allies, because she had pushed the Tang empire out (of the Korean peninsula). They wanted to be independent. They were successful at this, but they needed to balance the threat of another Tang invasion, and they did so by keeping close contact with Japan. Perhaps, this is also debated, perhaps they might have acknowledged Japan as something akin to superior or they might have flattered them in some way that the Japanese leaders thought that they were superior but they, even though they were becoming a very strong force on the Korean peninsula, they had to balance their security by establishing close relations with Japan. And then not long after that, we see that they went back to reaffirming their relations with Tang China, and Japan continued to have good relations once more with Tang China, and these embassies resumed, and this flow of people and goods back and forth continued.

Yiming (31:31):
I see. So these embassies had been happening before the battle in 663, but after the battle, they increased in frequency because there was a more intensive effort at state building in Japan.

Greg (31:42):
I think there was an embassy from Japan to Tang China only one or two years after the battle, but then, for several decades, it trailed off, and then I think really at the beginning of the eighth century, it continued it resumed and then it carried on it at approximately the same pace that it was happening before usually once every one or two decades.

Yiming (32:04):
So these embassies then, who did the Japanese send on these embassies and what did they do in China? Apart from studying.

Greg (32:12):
If we look at it from the top down, the leaders of the embassies, the envoys, the diplomats, the ambassadors, all of these people were aristocrats - they came from aristocratic families. So they were at the top tier. And the higher you go up the ladder, let's say the main ambassador, usually that person came from one of the most esteemed aristocratic families. And then you see lesser families taking on lesser roles and so on. But we also see, as I said, before, monks were on these missions. They were being transported, monks and students. And then on the bottom tier, it's sailors. And these sailors, from what we can tell, they seem to just be regular people, probably not tied to the political establishment in any way. They might have come from families that lived on the coast with some knowledge of seafaring, perhaps from fishing families. The Japanese records do suggest that there were families that specialized in naval knowledge. So when they arrived in China, generally, these groups would split up so that the commoner folk would remain behind, remain in the seaport where they landed, remain with the ship, and the people of political backgrounds, and perhaps some of the monks and students as well, would go to the capital to pay tribute. Sometimes the monks would branch off and just go straight to a temple, but the largest group would go to the Tang capital, and then you would see the diplomatic - the very formal - diplomatic, elaborate diplomatic process, in which there was a very complex system of tributary exchange. But after these people would meet, usually some of them would meet with the Emperor, but after they went to the Tang court, then they would receive gifts from the Tang court, and I believe before that they would give their own tribute. But in this process, almost always, you would see that the Tang court was more generous in what they gave. They were giving more than they got, essentially, to put in more simple terms, and they did so because the goods that they received, that was not the main incentive. They wanted to receive goods, but they also wanted to exercise influence. So they were essentially paying for that. They were paying very generously, they were giving a lot of goods very generously, so that the tribute missions would come back on a fairly regular basis, so that they would, the tribute missions, would conform to a lot of the norms of Chinese diplomacy. And then after this gift exchange, the embassy would go back to where their ship was docked in whatever port city they were at. Usually, I think quite often it was was around Yangzhou or Mingzhou. And then you just see a lot of spending. You'd see officials higher and lower with a lot of these goods, a lot of these gifts, and they would sometimes just go to town in the marketplace buying all kinds of Chinese goods that they could bring back to Japan, probably resell in Japan. And sometimes they even broke the laws when they did this, because there were strict laws on what foreign visitors were able to do, what they're able to purchase in the marketplace. And then after that

the mission would go back to Japan. And usually this whole process, it was quite long, usually would happen within about a year or so.

Yiming (35:41):
I see. But I mean, with eighth century technology, navigating the waters between Japan and China directly must have been quite treacherous. Did any of these missions fail ultimately, because of shipwrecks or weather or any of that?

Greg (35:56):
Yes, yes. There's a scholar who has researched this particular issue, Japanese-Chinese diplomacy, by the name of Wang Zhenping, and I think by his estimation, it was one third of the ships that Japan sent to China became shipwrecked. And what I find really interesting is that it wasn't from the early stages that we see this. It was from the later stage that we see the Japanese ships were not good enough. And it's really open to interpretation for why this might be the case. Most likely, I think there was a span of about thirty or more years between the second-last and the last tributary mission. And by that time, the people who had knowledge about building ships, and their shipbuilding techniques, quite a lot might have been lost. So on the very last embassy four ships were sent to China and every single one of them was shipwrecked. And fortunately, the monk Ennin recorded this in detail in his diary. So we know quite a bit about how this played out, the unfortunate events in which people died, lives were lost at sea. But yeah, towards the end, the Japanese tributary ships were not safe enough to cross the open ocean. And that, before we talked about how private merchants started arriving in Japan, this coincides temporally. This happened in 838-839 and private ships were already coming in at this time. And then after that, exchange between China and Japan was solely through private ships. The Japanese court did not bother building the ships. In fact, on the 838 mission, all of the ships were shipwrecked. Sorry, all but one of the ships was shipwrecked on [note: should be “prior” instead of “on”] their return. And most of the people who participated in the mission, they took Korean ships in order to get back to Japan. And all the Korean ships, I think there were nine, they all arrived safely. And unfortunately, the one remaining Japanese ship was shipwrecked. So that that might have actually been a major factor. I definitely do not think it was the only factor, but it might have been a major factor in why these tributary missions came to an end.

Yiming (38:05):
That is very interesting because when you think about it, normally you would expect at the beginning they would have bad technology. And as time goes on, they would have mastered the art of sailing, of building ships, and it would have gotten better. But here you see the reverse, right? It’s that at the end they just suddenly lost the technique, and they just couldn't sail anymore.

Greg (38:22):
Yeah, I'm not sure why that would be. It's not clear if it was hubris or other reasons, but they took the dangerous route. They took the road that crossed the open sea, the East China Sea, to get to China, rather than taking the safe route from the Korean peninsula. And I'm not sure why

they decided to do that because even before the mission began, there were clear signs that these ships were problematic. The main ambassador refused to sail on his ship, and he ordered another diplomat, I think it was his second in charge, to switch ships with him and the diplomat was not pleased. He called the ambassador coward. He was exiled for this. They were clearly fearful of these ships. They knew that there were issues with these ships, but nevertheless the mission did want to sail directly to China. So it's not clear what was going on. But like you say the technology towards the end does not seem to be as good as it was at the beginning. Even though the technology for safe seafaring did exist at this time.

Yiming (39:25):
So in our last interview, you mentioned that by the Song period, merchants had replaced diplomats as intermediaries between China and Japan, and that maritime voyages became more for the sake of private trade. Was this a gradual process? Or was it more of an instantaneous process? And if it was gradual, can you talk more about how and why this transition occurred?

Greg (39:48):
In some ways, it was both. In some ways, it was instantaneous. In other ways, it was gradual. So if you want to make the argument that it was instantaneous, then you just look in the 810s. Almost overnight, these Silla merchants, private merchants from Silla on the Korean peninsula, they were coming from the Korean peninsula to Japan to trade and it was continuous. There was no stop. Almost every year these people were coming, and then several years after it begins, we see Chinese merchants joining them because the Silla merchants also had very large trade hubs and trade communities in China. So they were working with Chinese people. And you see this constant from the start to the end. There's not really an explanation for why this would happen, either on the China end, or on the Japanese end, but if you really think about it from around 755 with the An Lushan rebellion, there was a lot of deregulation going on in the Tang empire, and that that left a lot of room for Chinese merchants and commercially oriented officials to maneuver, which allowed for this system of private trade to be established. This three-way private trade that was happening between the Tang empire, Silla, and Japan, and was also connected as well with a kingdom north of Silla called Parhae, and with Southeast Asia. So deregulation in Tang China helped. On the Japanese end, you get the sense that the leaders were becoming a little bit less interested in this system of formal diplomacy. We know of course, that these ships were becoming dangerous that the system was conducted in a way that was very favorable for the Tang empire. Politically, it seemed, and there were ways to maneuver around this, but it seemed that from the outside that Japanese were paying tribute to a higher Tang power and they did find ways to make it so that they weren't and both sides could save face, but you don't see so much interest in continuing this process. So what these private merchants offered was a way for Japanese leaders to get almost everything they wanted from the tributary exchange and being able to shed a lot of the things that they didn't want. And what we know they wanted were prestige goods. And the private traders were able to bring them, and they were easily influenced, easily controlled by the Japanese government. So the government after some time could really, I wouldn't say outright control, but they could influence the frequency of these missions. They could tell these merchants what they wanted, what goods

they were interested in buying. So in that regard, you can see it being an instantaneous process. Now, if you want to take the perspective that this change was gradual, we have to keep in mind that there was no formal declaration from the Japanese government that they would end this diplomacy. The last mission was in 838. And then, I believe in 894, there was one more mission planned. That was scrapped. There are a lot of theories. For why it was scrapped. I'm not persuaded by most of them. There are theories that the head ambassador didn't want to go because it wouldn't have been favorable for him politically, or maybe there was something politically going on between Tang China and Japan. I think here we can look at the primary sources and read them at face value. So the ambassador said that the (Tang) empire was disintegrating. We know from primary sources that the Japanese court was receiving, essentially intelligence, from monks that they had in the Tang empire that said as much, that said that the empire was disintegrating. It was dangerous. And if you look at Chinese history for this specific year, for the year 894, and the years before and after, China was an extremely dangerous place to be. There were a lot of revolts going on. There was no central control. From a historian's perspective, this ambassador who made the decision not to go, his name is Sugawara no Michizane, his decision was the right decision. And so I'm certainly willing to take that at face value. But even after this point, there was no formal declaration on the Japanese side that they would stop this tributary diplomacy. So in that sense, you can see that the change was gradual. The Japanese did not want to take a position. These private merchants were coming. They were giving them what they wanted, but nothing was really set in stone. And you just have to wait over the years until you see the Japanese leaders becoming very comfortable with this system. And then centuries after that, before they were willing to engage in diplomacy again.

Yiming (44:40):
Yeah, that's really fascinating, especially these earlier embassies. And I really hope as archeology continues to develop in China and in Japan, that we can get more archeological evidence that can tell us more about these exchanges and complement the textual records that we have. So thank you, Greg, for sharing this information. And if you want to learn more about what happens after this period, about the contact between China and Japan, I highly recommend you to go back and listen to our first interview where Greg talks about this in some detail. And in its own way, it's also very fascinating how this developed into its own kind of institution that could facilitate this exchange between China and Japan.

Greg (45:21):
My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Yiming (45:24):
So that concludes our interview for today. Thank you so much for listening to the Chinese History Podcast and we'll see you next time.