

## A First-Person Account of the Japanese Mission to Tang China in 777 C.E.

### Introduction:

Participating in an embassy to Tang was a dangerous venture; the round trip could take up to two years and many ships and passengers were lost in mishaps at sea. The fact that so many Japanese willingly joined these missions attests to their significance in the minds of the Japanese elite. The mission of 777 is an example of an embassy to Tang that voyaged along the open seas to and from the southern region of China, and ended in devastation for many of its members.

The mission was comprised of four vessels that departed on 6:24 (lunar month/day) from western Japan. As many as 600 people may have sailed with this embassy as each ship could accommodate up to 150 people. The mission's voyage to the mainland was uneventful. In just under 10 days the ships arrived safely at Yangzhou, China, having traversed a distance of approximately 925 kilometers (575 miles). However, as these ships returned to Japan nearly a year and a half later, fatal mishaps occurred. Disaster struck shortly after the ships embarked from Suzhou China to return to Japan in the eleventh and twelfth lunar months of 778.

Below are excerpts from a first person account by the Councilor to the Envoy, Ōtomo no Sukune, regarding the 777 mission's voyages to and from the continent. His passage to China was uneventful; however, his account of his return to Japan on Ship No.1 demonstrates vividly the dangers he and others faced at sea.

Last year (777 C.E.) on 6:24, our four vessels set sail across the seas bound for China. On 7:3, we reached Hailingxian Sub-prefecture in Yangzhou and dropped anchor. On 8:29, we arrived at the Yangzhou regional office. We petitioned the regional governor, Chen Shaoyou, and were granted permission for 65 of our number to enter the capital. On 10:16, we set out for the capital. [Omitted]

We arrived at Chang'an on the thirteenth day of the first month. We had an audience with the Tang Emperor on 3:24 (of 778 C.E.). [Omitted]

On 6:25 we reached Weiyang (Yanzhou) [to prepare for the voyage back to Japan]. On 9:3, we set sail from the mouth of the Yangzi. We stopped at Changdan Sub-prefecture in Suzhou to await the winds. [Omitted]

On 11:5, with favorable winds behind us, Ship No. 1 and Ship No. 2 set sail together on the voyage home. While in the midst of the sea on the eighth day (of the month) at approximately 8 PM, the winds began to blow violently and the ocean waves became large. The sides and planks of the ship were torn and the vessel filled with sea water. The deck came apart and washed away. People and supplies floated about in the sea, and neither food nor drinking water was saved. The Vice-envoy, Ono no Ason no Iwane, together with 38 (Japanese), drowned at the same time as Zhao Baoying (an envoy from Tang accompanying the Japanese home to Japan) and 25 (Chinese). I alone managed to make my way to the railing at the back corner of the stern where I surveyed my surroundings and awaited the end.

At approximately 4 AM on the 11th day of the month, the mast fell to the bottom of the ship. The vessel then broke into two sections and drifted separately toward parts unknown. More than 40 people piled upon a part of the stern measuring only about three meters on all four sides as they clung for dear life. After a mooring line was cut and the rudder lost, this part of the vessel floated a little higher in the water.

The survivors shed their clothing and sat upon the top of the broken vessel in the nude. The survivors experienced six days without food or water, and then on the 13th, at approximately 10 PM, the broken part of the vessel drifted ashore at Nishinonakashima in Amakusa in the province of Hinomichinoshiri (Higo).

By the mercy of Heaven, I was granted a second chance at life. I was fortunate indeed!  
(Translated by author from an 8th century Shoku Nihongi account.)

After the initial destruction of Ship No. 1 by the storm, the seas calmed and the parts of the ship that had broken apart drifted to the northeast along the ocean current. Both parts of the vessel, as well as Ship No. 2, arrived on the shores of Kyushu, Japan on the same day. Ship No. 3 and Ship No. 4 also ran into mishap. Ship No. 3 ran into opposing winds three days out of China. It returned to China for repairs, but safely landed in Japan on the 20th day of the 11th month. Ship No. 4 landed on Cheju Island (Korea), where crew members were captured by islanders. Eventually 40 escaped and sailed to Japan, arriving on the 7th day of the 12th lunar month of 778.



Above: The route most likely taken by Japanese envoys.

#### Questions:

1. What evidence above suggests that travel to China was both dangerous and time-consuming?
2. Why did the Japanese envoys take such extreme risks?

## Excerpts from the Reform Edict of Taika

### Introduction:

In the decades after the death of Prince Shōtoku, and in spite of the vision articulated in his constitution of 604, clan rivalries continued to characterize Japanese political life. Finally, in 645, a coup d'état brought to power a new group of leaders with a renewed commitment to the remaking of Japan's government on a Chinese model. In a series of edicts, the court sought to centralize political power, create state institutions mirroring China's imperial bureaucracy, and establish national landholding and taxation systems. Many historians have considered the Taika Reforms the genesis of the Japanese imperial state. "Taika" was the reign and era name assumed by the Emperor Kōtoku in 645; in keeping with the reformist spirit of the day, Taika means "great transformation."

As soon as the New Year's ceremonies were over, the Emperor promulgated the following edict of reforms:

I) Let the following be abolished: the titles held by imperial princes to serfs granted by imperial decrees (koshiro); the title to lands held directly by the imperial court (miyake); and private titles to lands and workers held by ministers and functionaries (omi, muraji and tomo no miyatsuko) of the court, by local nobles (kuni no miyatsuko), and by village chiefs (mura no obito). In lieu thereof, sustenance households<sup>1</sup> shall be granted to those of the rank of Daibu (chief of a bureau or of a ward) and upwards on a scale corresponding to their positions. ...

It is said that the duty of the Daibu is to govern the people. If they discharge their task diligently, the people will have trust in them. Therefore it is for the benefit of the people that the revenue of the Daibu shall be increased.

II) For the first time, the capital shall be placed under an administrative system. In the metropolitan (or capital) region, governors (kuni no tsukasa) and prefects (kōi no tsukasa) shall be appointed. Barriers and outposts shall be erected, and guards and post horses for transportation and communication purposes shall be provided. Furthermore bell-tokens shall be made and mountains and rivers shall be regulated<sup>2</sup>.

One alderman (osa) shall be appointed for each ward (bō or machi) in the capital, and one chief alderman (unakashi) for four wards. The latter shall be responsible for maintaining the household registers and investigating criminal matters. The chief alderman shall be chosen from those men belonging to the wards, of unblemished character, strong and upright, who can discharge the duties of the time effectively. In principle, aldermen of rural villages (ri) or of city wards, shall be selected from ordinary subjects belonging to the villages of city wards, who are sincere, incorrupt and of strong disposition. ...

<sup>1</sup> The term "sustenance households" is a loose translation of the Japanese term hehito or fuko. It refers to a certain number of households, which were assigned to the officials in place of the serfs taken from them. Generally taxes remitted by these households became personal income of the officials. The rights to these sustenance households were hereditary.

<sup>2</sup> Bell-tokens entitled their bearers to use post-horses, which were kept for official use only. By the regulation of mountains and rivers is meant the posting of guards at ferries and mountain passes, thus delimiting the boundaries between provinces.

Districts are classified as greater, middle and lesser districts, with districts of forty villages constituting greater districts; of from four to thirty villages constituting middle districts; and of three or fewer villages constituting lesser districts. The prefects for these districts shall be chosen from local nobles (kuni no miyatsuko), of unblemished character, strong and upright, who can discharge the duties of the time effectively. They shall be appointed as prefects (tairei) and vice prefects (shōrei). Men of ability and intelligence, who are skilled in writing and arithmetic shall be appointed to assist them in the tasks of governance and book-keeping. ...

III) It is hereby decreed that household registers, tax registers, and rules for allocation and redistribution of land shall be established<sup>3</sup>.

Each fifty households shall be constituted into a village (ri), and in each village there shall be appointed an alderman. He shall be responsible for the maintenance of the household registers, the assigning of sowing of crops and cultivation of mulberry trees, prevention of offenses, and requisitioning of taxes and forced labor. ...

**Questions:**

1. Evaluate how at least two of the reforms above have Chinese elements.
2. Do you think it was easy for the Japanese imperial court to implement these reforms? Why or why not?

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<sup>3</sup> The denryō (land regulations) says: "In distributing land, two tan shall be given to a man as his allotment land, and two-thirds of that amount to a woman. ..."

## The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku

### Introduction:

Beginning in the late 6th century, Japan's Yamato rulers sought to refashion themselves from clan chieftains into fully fledged monarchs on the Chinese model. One of the first landmarks in the effort to remake the Japanese state in the form of China's sophisticated political institutions was the Constitution of Prince Shōtoku, also known as the "Seventeen-Article Constitution." Prince Shōtoku (573-621) was the nephew of Empress Suiko and served as regent and trusted advisor on matters of civil administration during her reign. This short document charted the reform of the Japanese government using imported Confucian and Buddhist approaches to statecraft.

1. Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided. Everyone has his biases, and few men are far-sighted. Therefore some disobey their lords and fathers and keep up feuds with their neighbors. But when the superiors are in harmony with each other and the inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly and the right view of matters prevails.
2. The three treasures, which are Buddha, the (Buddhist) Law and the (Buddhist) Priesthood, should be given sincere reverence, for they are the final refuge of all living things. Few men are so bad that they cannot be taught their truth.
3. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Sovereign. He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the vassal is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven. When Heaven and Earth are properly in place, the four seasons follow their course and all is well in Nature. But if the Earth attempts to take the place of Heaven, Heaven would simply fall in ruin. That is why the vassal listens when the lord speaks, and the inferior obeys when the superior acts. Consequently when you receive the commands of your Sovereign, do not fail to carry them out or ruin will be the natural result.
4. The Ministers and officials of the state should make proper behavior their first principle, for if the superiors do not behave properly, the inferiors are disorderly; if inferiors behave improperly, offenses will naturally result. Therefore when lord and vassal behave with propriety, the distinctions of rank are not confused: when the people behave properly the Government will be in good order. ...
6. Punish the evil and reward the good. This was the excellent rule of antiquity. Therefore do not hide the good qualities of others or fail to correct what is wrong when you see it. Flatterers and deceivers are a sharp weapon for the overthrow of the state, and a sharp sword for the destruction of the people. Men of this kind are never loyal to their lord, or to the people. All this is a source of serious civil disturbances.
7. Every man has his own work. Do not let the spheres of duty be confused. When wise men are entrusted with office, the sound of praise arises. If corrupt men hold office, disasters and tumult multiply. In all things, whether great or small, find the right man and they will be well managed. Therefore the wise sovereigns of antiquity sought the man to fill the office, and not the office to suit the man. If this is done the state will be lasting and the realm will be free from danger.

...

12. Do not let the local nobility levy taxes on the people. There cannot be two lords in a country; the people cannot have two masters. The sovereign is the sole master of the people of the whole realm, and the officials that he appoints are all his subjects. How can they presume to levy taxes on the people?

...

14. Do not be envious! For if we envy others, then they in turn will envy us. The evils of envy know no limit. If others surpass us in intelligence, we are not pleased; if they are more able, we are envious. But if we do not find wise men and sages, how shall the realm be governed?

15. To subordinate private interests to the public good — that is the path of a vassal. Now if a man is influenced by private motives, he will be resentful, and if he is influenced by resentment he will fail to act harmoniously with others. If he fails to act harmoniously with others, the public interest will suffer. Resentment interferes with order and is subversive of law.

**Questions:**

1. Identify and evaluate the both the Confucian and Buddhist influences in the Constitution.
2. Why do you think Prince Shōtoku looked to Chinese models for this Constitution?
3. An image of Prince Shōtoku appeared on the Japanese currency (the 10,000 yen note) from the 1950s until the 1980s. Why do you think he was honored in this way?