

# Japan as a Maritime Nation

## – From the Past to the Future –

### Commemorative Speech: The Ocean and Civilization

#### Part II

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Interviewer - *Akioka Eiko*

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(Continued from Part I)

#### Arrival of Tungus Naval Forces

**Akioka:** So, where do you believe the Japanese came from?

**Umesao:** Egami's theory is extremely intriguing, and there are several points he makes that we should take into consideration. The military structure in ancient Japan, for example, was quite similar to the Mongolian military. There are also cultural similarities between Japan and Mongolia in north-east Asia. These points do warrant consideration.

I personally believe, and would like to hear the opinions of other experts on this, that it was the Tungus, rather than the Mongolians, who came to Japan.

**Akioka:** Am I correct in stating that the Tungus were the group who built the Kokuryo, Bohai and Jin dynasties?

**Umesao:** Yes. In the past, the Japanese language was thought to belong to the Ural-Altai languages. Linguists, however, no longer subscribe to this theory. It has since come to light that the Ural and Altai languages are considerably different and no longer lumped into the same group. The European languages of Finnish, Estonian and Magyar, or Hungarian, belong to the Ural family of languages. Altai languages constitute a separate group which includes, traveling west to east, Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus. The Manchu are one of the better-known ethnic groups within the Tungus. The Tungus language is entirely different from Chinese. Some people believe the Tungus language may include Japanese. There are indeed significant grammatical similarities between Tungus and Japanese.

**Akioka:** Do any Tungus remains exist?

**Umesao:** A significant number of Tungus remains have been found. They are, for the most part, scattered across Manchuria. The Tungus peoples were based in Manchuria, a region lying southeast of China's three north-east provinces. The main Tungus tribe in existence today is the Manchu, one of the 55 ethnic minorities in China. In fact, it was the Manchu who built the Qing Dynasty, also known as the Great Qing Empire. The Manchu rose in the mountains of eastern Manchuria, conquering Beijing in the early 17th century and gaining control of the entire country to build the Great Qing Empire. My hypothesis is that in ancient times a faction of the Manchu came to the islands of Japan. Rather than a horde on horseback invading overland, as Egami has proposed, I believe that naval troops came by boat. I call this the "Tungus Naval Force Theory."<sup>1</sup>

#### Routes and Vessels

**Akioka:** Where would you say they came from and by what route did they arrive in Japan?

**Umesao:** Let's look again at Egami's theory that Emperor Sujin was the first emperor of Japan. Two emperors appear in old documents under the same name, Hatsukuni Shirasumera Mikoto, which translates as the "first emperor to rule." We know that one of these was Emperor Jinmu and the other was Emperor Sujin, but how can we explain two emperors identified as the first emperor to rule? Egami believes that Emperor Sujin led troops of nomads on horseback into Japan, but I have a slightly different theory. Although we can say with certainty that

a Tungus faction came to Japan, there is no evidence to support the idea that a horde on horseback came by way of an overland route. I would like to suggest that it is more plausible that they came by boat.

Now, this is where we can finally begin to speak about the ocean. The Tungus came to Japan by boat. My answer to the question of how mainland dwellers would have been able to navigate sea-going vessels is that the major rivers on the continent would have led the Tungus to develop naval forces. I would cite the Liao River, an enormous river in southern Manchuria. In addition, the Yalu River spans the Chinese-Korean border. Further east, we find the Tumen River. I believe the Tungus mastered the techniques involved in navigating boats across these huge rivers and ultimately set sail on the sea.

The Liao and the Yalu rivers lead into the Yellow Sea on the western side of the Korean Peninsula. The Tumen River leads into the Sea of Japan on the eastern side of the Korean Peninsula. Assuming the Tungus navy did come to Japan, which route would they have taken? Although either route is entirely possible, I would speculate that the Tungus took the Sea of Japan route. I believe they traveled down the Tumen River to the Sea of Japan, reaching the Japanese islands by going due south along the eastern side of the Korean Peninsula. This is the most natural assumption to make considering the subsequent contact between the Tungus and Japan.

In determining how these boats were powered, we must address the issue of sails. Of course, there was no cotton cloth at this point. Perhaps they used sails made of junk-like wood or sails woven from grass as seen on the *yanbarusen* ships in Okinawa. The most likely scenario, however, is that they

## East Asia in the mid-8th century



Note: For reader's convenience, contemporary names are used for some places.

used manpower to row their boats.

Once they reached the waters near Japan – and again this is just speculation – they probably traveled through the Kanmon Strait and out into the open Suo Sea, moving south to land at Hyuga (now covers parts of Miyazaki and Kagoshima prefectures). I doubt they approached from northern Kyushu, because the Iwai, also called the Tsukushinokimi, and other peoples had already established a powerful presence there.

The basis of my theory of a landing at Hyuga lies with the existence of the ancient Saitobaru tombs in Miyazaki Prefecture. There are more than 300 burial mounds of all sizes, including some that are quite massive. We have unearthed from these tombs clay images in the shape of boats that are detailed with six oarlocks along each side. These boats were rowed using large oars, the shafts of which fit

through the oarlocks. Boats of this type were clearly used to navigate the open sea, and I would propose that it was this type of boat that transported the Tungus to Japan.

At a museum in Seoul, I had the opportunity to view a model of an ancient Korean ship of the same type as the clay boats found in the Saitobaru tombs. They also had these same oarlocks.

From this evidence, I have inferred that the Tungus navy crossed the Sea of Japan and established a base in Hyuga. It is estimated that the ancient Saitobaru tombs were built between the latter half of the fourth century and the sixth century, which would put the arrival of the Tungus navy sometime during the first half of the fourth century. Legend has it that the Eastern Expeditions led by Emperor Jinmu departed from Hyuga. Even more intriguing, these expeditions were com-

prised of marine, not land forces. They traveled east by boat through the Seto Inland Sea, landing at Kawachi (now the eastern part of Osaka). This legend certainly seems to be related to my theory of the Tungus naval forces. I should note that, while historians do not specify when Emperor Jinmu lived, if the legend of the Eastern Expeditions reflects the truth, we could place him around the fifth century.

#### Contact with the Bohai Nation

**Akioka:** Europeans often say that civilization originated in the Mediterranean, spreading toward the Atlantic Ocean and then on to the Pacific. From what you have told us so far, it seems that quite a bit of contact between peoples using the ocean as a conduit took place in the vicinity of Japan. Expanding this to include civilizations throughout Asia, it seems to

me that a sphere of civilization was developing along the coast of the East China Sea.

**Umesao:** The idea that civilization originated in the Mediterranean is ignorance on the part of Westerners who think that the west is the world. They know nothing at all about Asia. Around the time that Mediterranean civilization flourished, a great sphere of civilization had already been established here in Asia along the East China Sea, and there must have been quite a lot of people coming and going across that ocean. As you know, Japan was already in contact with, and even sending envoys to, the Sui and Tang dynasties.

**Akioka:** This would have been between the sixth and 12th centuries, wouldn't it?

**Umesao:** Yes. At the beginning of the eighth century, an event took place that was epoch-making in terms of the history of contact between the Tungus and Japan. Namely, a Bohai envoy arrived in Japan in 727. The Bohai nation was built in eastern Manchuria after the fall of the Kokuryo. Evidently, the people who inhabited this nation were Manchu, or Tungus. The inhabitants of the Bohai nation are thought to have lived by hunting and slash-and-burn agriculture and to have established a government modeled on the legal system of the Tang Dynasty.

The Bohai envoy crossed the Sea of Japan, swept by the Tsushima current and drifting onto the coast of Dewa Province (now covers most parts of Yamagata and Akita prefectures) where, it is said, they were attacked by the Emishi (tribes lived in northeastern Japan). Sixteen of the 24 delegates were killed. Barely managing to escape, the survivors reached Heijokyo (now Nara Prefecture) four months later. Their arrival marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between Bohai and Japan and was followed by more than 30 missions to Japan between the beginning of the Nara period and the beginning of the Heian peri-

od, which corresponds on the western calendar to the period between the eighth century and the beginning of the 10th century. Splendidly outfitted, these envoys were loaded with sovereign letters and gifts.

Now, where did these envoys come from? They probably embarked at the mouth of the Tumen River, which is where I speculated earlier that the Tungus navy had begun their journey. The place is situated at the root of the eastern side of the Korean Peninsula, facing the Sea of Japan and was, of course, part of the Bohai territory at that time. This is where the ships making up the envoy assembled and began their journey across the Sea of Japan. They would have first passed along the eastern side of the Korean Peninsula, sailing smoothly on the gentle current. As they approached the Japanese islands, however, they would have encountered, and been swept away by, the violent Tsushima current so they would have had no idea where exactly in Japan they would land. Having landed, however, they set up base camp at the base of the Noto Peninsula, assembled their ranks and marched to the capital. Subsequent Bohai missions continued, as a rule, to use Noto as their base.

This were the official diplomatic relations between Japan and the Tungus nation of Bohai. Japan reciprocated by sending its own diplomatic mission to Bohai. The Tungus had apparently sent their envoys with the expectation that the gesture would be returned. At one point, they even arrived in a junk boat asking that the Japanese build them a new ship so they would be able to return home. Envoys were sent frequently, as often at times as once a year.

These missions had an aggressive and international strategic importance with regard to Silla. Silla occupied the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula and had a history of rivalry with Japan. The two countries were, in fact, enemies, as were Bohai and Silla. By forming an alliance, Japan and Bohai sought to bring pressure on Silla. Japan-Bohai relations began therefore

as a military alliance.

As time went on, however, diplomatic relations shifted to certain types of government-sanctioned trade. A significant amount of trade took place between Bohai and Japan. Now, what would the Bohai trade missions have brought to Japan? Several hundred pelts of marten. These pelts were very appealing to the Imperial aristocracy of the time. Since cotton was not produced at the time, Japan provided the Bohai with linen and silk. After trading cloth for fur, the trade mission would be sent home bearing gifts from Japan. We now find it reprehensible, but the Japanese apparently presented one mission with 11 dancing girls. It makes you wonder what would have become of them.

**Akioka:** Quite a sad story.

### Rise and Fall of the Tungus Bypass

**Umesao:** Ueda Takeshi has published a book of in-depth research on the Bohai envoys in which he presents clear evidence of more than 200 years of diplomacy between the Bohai and Japan.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the two countries was so close it leads one to surmise that they actually understood each other's languages. The fact is that they apparently exchanged Chinese poems in order to communicate. At the time, both countries were immeasurably influenced by Chinese civilization, and all scholars were able to compose Chinese verse. They exchanged grand poems, at times even competing against one another to see whose compositions were the most impressive.

Replacing the direct route across the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan-Bohai route served for a long period as a diplomatic bypass between the Japanese and the Tang. Quite a few students and monks from Japan traveled this route to visit Changan, the Tang capital.

Relations between Bohai and Japan lasted until the fall of the Bohai nation in 926 at the hands of the Khitan, a Mongolian neighbor to the west. Around this time, however, Mt. Paektu,

a volcano lying south of Bohai, also erupted. Some historians speculate that this eruption actually caused the Bohai nation to collapse by wreaking mass destruction on the slash-and-burn agriculture that was their main method of production. Having drifted eastward, ashes from the Mt. Paektu eruption were found as far away as the northeast region of Japan.

As a young man, I climbed Mt. Paektu. This huge shield volcano is no longer active, and a large crater lake called Lake Chon sits at the top of the mountain surrounded by cliffs, lending an air of mystery to the landscape. Water from the lake overflows to the north, forming a waterfall that is one source of the Sungari (Songhua) River.

At the beginning of the 11th century, an incident took place that we have come to refer to as "Toi's invasion." Armed pirates attacked along the coastline at Iki, Tsushima and Chikuzen (now the northwestern part of Fukuoka Prefecture), plundering and inflicting suffering on these regions. Who were the Toi? It is unclear exactly where they came from, but they seem to have been a branch of the Tungus. Whether for good or for bad, the Tungus were consistently active on the Sea of Japan.

Following these raids, direct contact between the Tungus and Japan would never be revived.

### Role of the East China Sea

**Akioka:** Lying to the west of the Korean Peninsula, what role did the East China Sea play in the sphere of civilization in the Far East?

**Umesao:** The northern part of this sea, which is surrounded by the Korean Peninsula, Kyushu, Okinawa and mainland China, is called the Yellow Sea, while the southern part is known as the East China Sea. This ocean, an inland sea in ancient Far East civilization, was the stage for the activities of ethnic groups in the surrounding regions. As evidenced by the Japanese envoys to Sui and Tang, traffic between Japan and China via this ocean was bustling. At first, envoys traveled a course called

the "northern route," departing from Naniwa (now Osaka) and crossing Kyushu to arrive at the Shandong Peninsula. Later, a larger number of envoys began traveling due west from Naniwa and Kyushu to arrive at Ningbo and other sites located further downstream on the Yangtze River. Although for Europeans the phrase "ancient civilization" seems to bring the Mediterranean immediately to mind, the East China Sea played a similar role in Far East civilization.

In discussing major incidents that occurred on this ocean, we must mention the so-called "Mongolian invasions." These occurred during the Kamakura era in Japan (1192-1333), which coincides with the period of the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271-1368). Mongolian troops attempted to invade twice – first in the 1274 Battle of Bun-ei and again in the 1281 Battle of Koan. In both battles, the Mongolians were hit by typhoons, suffering major damage and spoiling the Yuan Dynasty's plan to conquer Japan.

The main Yuan force during the Battle of Bun-ei appears to have been Kokuryo troops, while the main force in the Battle of Koan seems to have been naval forces from the Southern Song, which was at that time under the control of the Yuan Dynasty. Mongolian nomads who may have had no knowledge of typhoons directed the Yuan military headquarters. It is inconceivable, though, that the Kokuryo and southern Song troops would have known nothing about typhoons. It is quite surprising that they would have dispatched a large contingent during the most dangerous season of the year. At any rate, nature spared Japan from the Mongolian invasion.

Not long before these invasion attempts, Mongolian troops sent by the Yuan Empire and defending Western European troops clashed at the Battle of the Liegnitz, and the European forces were roundly defeated. Just when all of Europe was left precariously vulnerable to total invasion, news of the death of Ogodai Khan reached the frontlines, and the Mongolian troops retreated.

Japan in the Far East and Western Europe in the Far West had, at nearly the same time, just barely been snatched from crisis by a hair's breadth. Although purely coincidental, this seems to suggest some analogous aspects in Japanese and Western European history.

During the Ming Dynasty, large numbers of ethnic Han Chinese began sailing the East China Sea – so many that this sea would have been filled with Ming vessels. They sailed what we call junk boats, which had wooden sails. Today you still find many of these boats on the downstream of the Yangtze River. During the Ming Dynasty, these boats sailed throughout the East China and South China seas. A museum in western Quanzhou is actually made out of a sunken boat dating from the Ming Dynasty. Extravagantly constructed with a partitioned keel, the museum ship now displays all of the recovered cargo the ship was carrying when it sunk. Shipping tags on the cargo indicate that some of it was destined for Japan. As you can see, the East China Sea played a major role in the development of Far East civilization.

### Sea-Faring Han Chinese

**Akioka:** Lying on either side of the same sea, Japanese relations with Korea and China developed on various fronts. Although we think of the Chinese, for example, as mainlanders, weren't they in fact quite a sea-faring people?

**Umesao:** In the Middle Ages, violent gangs called *Wako* terrorized the East China Sea. Although the *Wako* gangs are generally thought to have been Japanese pirate groups, in truth, apparently not all were from Japan. Not a few of these gangs were made up of Han Chinese. In fact, there were quite a number of private Chinese naval troops terrorizing the coastlands, frequently coming on shore to pillage. One leader of these private troops was Zheng Zhilong, who established a base on the Goto Islands in Japan from



Not a few of the Wako gangs (right) were made up of Han Chinese, which means that Chinese were in fact quite a sea-faring people

which he exercised control throughout the East China Sea. He took a Japanese wife and fathered a child with her. His son was later known as Zheng Chenggong.

**Akioka:** This child would have been the figure Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724) wrote of in *Kokusenya-kassen* (*Battles of Coxinga*).

**Umesao:** That's correct. The Ming Dynasty had enjoyed a long-established rule, but was toppled by an armed peasant rebellion at the beginning of the 17th century. Qing forces then stormed in through Shanhaiguan. These forces were, in fact, the Tungus. They immediately seized all Chinese territory and built an ethnically Tungus Qing Dynasty. The late Shiba Ryotaro's grand historical novel *Dattan Shippuroku* describes romantic tales from this period. Zheng Chenggong also appears as a character in this novel.

The character *sen* in Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *Kokusenya-kassen* was originally written *sei*, an entirely different character meaning "surname." According to this story, Zheng Chenggong worked extremely hard to revive the Ming Dynasty and was rewarded with the honor of a surname from one of the descendants of this dynasty – Zhu from Zhu Yuanzhang, the given name of Emperor Hongwu, the first Ming Dynasty Emperor. The honorific *ya* was also added. As a child Zheng Chenggong was given the name Watounai, meaning "a half-breed who is not Japanese, not Chinese."

In fact, Zheng Chenggong was a general who led an army of naval forces on coastland pillaging sprees. Although


the Qing Dynasty, at that time under the control of southern China, is said to have had trouble dealing with Chenggong's army, his campaign to revive the Ming Dynasty ultimately ended in failure.

Today, the island of Collons lies near the port of Amoy. The Zheng Chenggong Memorial Museum, displaying various artifacts and materials related to the life of Zheng Chenggong, was built on this island. Even to the Chinese, he is a folklore hero.

Zheng Chenggong had extensive control over the southern Sea of China and maintained a number of bases, including one in Taiwan. In this sense, he had built himself a kingdom on the sea. It is true that the Han Chinese were quite a sea-faring people – to the extent that they had established themselves as a significant naval power by the beginning of the 17th century.

A bit prior to this in the Ming period, we hear of a general named Zhenghe. By order of the Ming government, Zhenghe led a fleet of ships on expeditions to invade and subjugate populations throughout the South Seas. His campaign reached as far as Madagascar.

**Akioka:** That includes Indonesia, Ceylon and Madagascar – an incredible amount of territory.

**Umesao:** His fleet covered the entire Indian Ocean. This is not something that most people know, and it suggests, I think, that we must reexamine our ideas on the extent to which Chinese people exploited the ocean. 

(Continued in Part 3)

## Notes

1 The "Tungus Naval Force Theory" was first introduced in the following book: Hayashiya Tatsusaburo, Umesao Tadao, Yamazaki Masakazu, *Henkaku to Joho – Nihonshi no Shikumi* (*Innovations and Information: The Structure of Japanese History*), Chuo Koronsha; Dec. 1971.

This book was later re-titled and published in Chuko Bunko.

Hayashiya Tatsusaburo, Umesao Tadao, Yamazaki Masakazu, *Nihon-shi no Shikumi – Henkaku to Joho no Shikan* (*The Structure of Japanese History: A View of Innovations and Information*), Chuo Koronsha (Chuko Bunko); Jan. 1976.

2 Ueda Takeshi, *Bokkai-koku no Nazo* (*Mystery of the Bohai Nation*), Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, Kodansha, June, 1992.

3 Shiba Ryotaro, *Dattan Shippuroku*, Volume 1, Chuo Koronsha, Oct. 1987. Shiba Ryotaro, *Dattan Shippuroku*, Volume 2, Chuo Koronsha, Nov. 1987.

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