

Japan's Admiration for "China" and East Asian Networks in the Mongol Period

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The Mongol empire extended its hegemony over Eurasia and promoted interregional exchanges through the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean and South China Sea routes. This paper will discuss cultural exchange between Yuan, the Mongol empire, and Japan, and examine the influence of Yuan-Japan relations on "traditional" Japanese culture.

In the eleventh century, Chinese merchants, mainly from the southern and eastern coastal areas in China, aggressively expanded maritime trade across the East China Sea. As a consequence, economic and cultural exchange between Song China and Japan intensified. Although trade and cultural contacts between China and Japan were interrupted immediately after the Song-Yuan transition in 1276 (because of the Yuan-Japan war), economic and cultural relations between Yuan and Japan were restored in the fourteenth century and were no less prosperous than those between Japan and Song. One reason for the flourishing of relations was Japan's admiration for "China." In Japan, the commodities brought from Yuan were not treated as Mongolian goods, but as "Chinese" ones. Similarly, Japanese monks who studied in the Yuan Buddhist society were treated like those studying in "China," and the monks who came to Japan from Yuan were respected like those from "China."

In reality, however, after the Yuan dynasty (the "global" empire) replaced the Song dynasty (the "local" government in Eastern Eurasia), the "Chinese" culture admired by the Japanese also somewhat changed. In this paper, I will analyze this "global" aspect of "Chinese" culture accepted in Japan through the Yuan-Japan exchange.

Although Yuan-Japan relations prospered in the fourteenth century, there was a structural problem between Yuan and Japan because Yuan still considered Japan a potentially hostile country. Therefore, Yuan-Japan trade and cultural exchange were periodically interrupted, and this instability also affected the Japanese admiration for "China." I will examine how the conflict between admiration for "China" and esteem for Japan affected Japanese "traditional" culture, by paying particular attention to Zen Buddhism.