

[Book Review]  
**Before the Imjin War:  
East Asian International Relations in the Fifteenth  
and Sixteenth Centuries**

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**Reviewed Books**

*Räuberische Chinesen und tückische Japaner: Die diplomatischen Beziehungen zwischen China und Japan im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert.*

[Predatory Chinese and Treacherous Japanese: Diplomatic Relations between China and Japan in the 15th and 16th Centuries.]

By Csaba Oláh. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009. pp. xv+346. ISBN 978-3-447-06071-4.

*Avant la tempête: La Corée face à la menace japonaise 1530–1590.*

[Before the Storm: Korea Facing the Japanese Threat 1530–1590.]

By Guillaume Carré. Paris: Collège de France, 2019. pp. 416. ISBN 978-2-905358-20-2.

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English is the hegemonial language in modern Western academia and this is no less true for East Asian area studies. Nevertheless, works of considerable interest continue to be produced in other Western languages and two of these considered here—one written in German and one in French—have appeared in the last two decades. Both of these works have shed important new light on international relations in East Asia prior to the Imjin War but have not received the attention they deserve, because they do not belong to the anglophone research mainstream. In temporal terms, both works only partially overlap, notably in their treatments of the early sixteenth century, but are otherwise complementary in subject matter as the former focuses on the development of Sino–Japanese relations and the latter on those between Japan and Korea.

The first (German–language) work, whose title translates as “Predatory Chinese and Treacherous Japanese: Diplomatic Relations between China and Japan in the 15th and 16th Centuries” was written by the Hungarian scholar Csaba Oláh. It traces these diplomatic relations predominantly from the perspective of the Japanese and the twenty tribute embassies that they sent between 1432 and 1549. As such, the work concludes its narrative just before the large waves of *Wokou* (Japanese: *Wakō*, Korean: *Waegu*) “Japanese” piracy hit the southeastern coasts of the Chinese Ming empire in the 1550s and 1560s. However, the author refrains from commenting on the significance of the simultaneous breakdown of formal diplomatic relations between Ming China and Japan and the rise of large–scale pirate violence. The book therefore does not add to the ongoing debate on the exact nature and extent of Japanese involvement in *Wokou* piracy during the mid–sixteenth century, but it does provide an unparalleled detailed look at the Japanese side of the diplomatic relations before violence became the norm along the Ming coasts. Oláh brings together an impressive range of Chinese and Japanese primary sources, as well as the full panoply of relevant secondary research as it existed by 2009 in all modern academic languages. The book is divided into a large introduction, complete with a near–exhaustive treatment of the historiography (as is customary for German–style academic works), as well as five chapters, before reaching a rather brief conclusion. The most impor-

tant and detailed sources that Oláh uses are the diaries of Buddhist Zen temples in Kyoto, which were charged with managing the preparations of the missions on behalf of the Ashikaga shogunate (1336–1573), because of their familiarity with the Chinese language and culture. A tipping point regarding the detail of the sources seems to have been 1511, when control over these missions finally came into the hands of the Ōuchi daimyō and the monks from Kyoto no longer recorded the preparations.

In the introduction and the first chapter, “Foreign Trade and Diplomatic Relations with China: Rules and Peculiarities,” Oláh sketches the historical background of the restrictive Ming tributary system and the reasons it came to be. The Ming founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–1398) wished to restrict interactions between his subjects and overseas actors, partly for the political danger these interactions could pose as defeated domestic enemies and Japanese raiders depended on the maritime world. The Ming court monopolized control over overseas interactions like foreign trade and diplomacy and stipulated that they be subjected to a highly ritualized and regulated system. Following Li Kangying and Angela Schottenhammer, however, Oláh holds that the main *raison d’être* of this system was ideological: upholding the claim of Ming China as the centre of the East Asian world order (pp 27–29). Compared to previous Chinese dynasties, this led to a highly illiberal state of affairs, especially *vis-à-vis* trade. Hence, Oláh’s book poses its main question of how the Japanese practically conducted diplomatic relations under these conditions after a rocky start under the first Ming emperors, which earned the Japanese the reputation of being cunning and untrustworthy, a reputation they would never lose. To control interactions, the Ming provided foreign rulers it recognized as vassals (like the Japanese shoguns) with tallies (*kanhe*) which tributary envoys could use to identify themselves as authentic missions, and the first chapter also explores this system in detail in the case of Japan. Japan would receive these in the 1430s as diplomatic relations between the two countries returned to normal. Oláh also fastidiously describes the composition and function of the *biao*, which were indispensable letters issued by foreign rulers addressed to the Ming emperor. Any misstep in the formulation of these letters, es-

pecially if it undermined the superiority claim of the Ming emperor, could lead to a refusal of the tribute mission, hence the expertise of the literate Zen monks was essential.

The second chapter, “The Preparation of the Embassies to China in Japan,” and the third chapter, “The Preparation of Diplomatic Documents: The Vassal Letter (*biao*) and Accompanying Document” stay true to their titles and describe the preparations in painstaking detail, based on a thorough reading of the Japanese primary source materials. This preparation and its financing depended on a collaboration of the shogun’s bakufu with Buddhist temples, daimyō and merchants. Oláh’s research makes it clear that the bakufu’s role was increasingly marginalized after 1465 as the country’s emerging civil wars impoverished the shogunate, although tributary missions would continue to be sent in its name until 1547. Instead, the competing Ōuchi and Hosokawa daimyō took over *de facto* control, although Buddhist monks remained indispensable mediators because of their language skills and facility with Chinese culture. Competing missions sent by both daimyō eventually clashed in Ningbo in 1523, which led the Chinese court to further tighten its policies regulating the Japanese visitors. With the fall of the Ōuchi in the 1550s, the *kanhe* tallies were also lost in a fire, which ended the formal diplomatic relations as there seem to be no sources confirming that Japan received replacement tallies. Chapter Two gives detailed breakdowns of the costs of different tributary missions and their financiers, the administration of the ships, and the backgrounds and roles of the participants. Of particular note here are the backgrounds of interpreters, who often were Chinese refugees or captives (pp. 82–85). Interesting is also how Chinese monks, Ryūkyū and even Korea were instrumentalized by Japan on certain occasions to lubricate contact between China and Japan in case of conflicts, although Oláh only mentions these in passing (pp. 69–70, 108, 125, 166). Chapter Three provides a detailed breakdown of the structure and contents of the *biao*, which the author has translated as “Vassal Letter.” The so-called “Accompanying Document” (*biefu* in Chinese) is also put in the spotlight, a document which enumerated the diplomatic gifts offered by the bakufu and also sometimes included miscellaneous information

about urgent matters. This genre of document was incidentally also used in communications between Korea and Ryūkyū. The author again stresses the vital role Buddhist monks played in composing these documents.

The fourth chapter, “Japanese Missions in China,” affords an intricate look at the actual travel and stay of several Japanese missions in China. The role of the interpreters is brought to fore, as well as the sea route travelled, the reception in Ningbo and the eventual stay in the guesthouse in Beijing. The granularity offered by Oláh’s narrative would allow for interesting comparisons with European accounts of their missions to China during the Ming and Qing eras. The chapter also briefly dwells on the private trade in goods between Japanese and Chinese merchants that was allowed within the context of these missions beyond the exchange of diplomatic gifts. Oláh mentions that Japanese merchants were often swindled by their Chinese colleagues and that therefore the disturbances that took place during these missions cannot always be solely put at the door of the former.

The fifth and final, chapter, “Trade and Merchandise between Japan and China,” zooms in more specifically on this private trade and the role the differing values of silver and copper coins in both countries played in the commercial dynamics. This chapter makes clear that the tribute system could only serve as a pressure relief valve for the growing trade ambitions of the respective mercantile populations of both Japan and China for so long, as the economies in both countries grew and diversified in the course of time. Oláh specifically singles out the trade in Japanese swords, a popular item on the Chinese market. The Japanese increased production of these weapons for export, which led the Chinese court to put a cap on the import quotas and attempted to pay for them with fewer and debased coins in an effort to restrict the loss of valuable currency. In this context Oláh paraphrases the Japanese uttering an ominous warning: if the Chinese emperor would not allow for fair trade, the tributary trade would become defunct, and a new wave of piracy would take its place (p. 306). This was something which would indeed happen.

My biggest criticism of Oláh’s work is that it sells itself short through the lack of a thorough conclusion which highlights the main

findings of his work and how they complement or challenge the existing state of the field. This is especially poignant, because the author also omits to sum up the key insights of each chapter in their respective final paragraphs, leaving this to the reader, which is a disservice to the non-specialist. In the final analysis, not much new is revealed about the substance of Sino-Japanese foreign relations as represented by these tributary embassies, except for the already extant perception that they were mostly an excuse to conduct trade in luxury goods and a way for the shogunate to bolster its domestic legitimacy. What the book does offer is an amazingly deep probe into the internal political machinations on the Japanese side of the diplomatic equation and a panoramic view of the shifting landscape of power brokers that assumed responsibility (or often simply usurped it) to represent Japan to its powerful neighbour overseas. Devotees of diplomatic history will also be captivated by the many minutiae of East Asian practice presented here, often for the very first time.

This book will likely be the most profound treatment of formal Japanese relations with China during the Ming dynasty for a long time to come, as the author was exceptionally thorough in utilizing his extraordinarily large collection of primary sources. In the conclusion the author also offers a tantalizing prospect on how to continue the exploration of Sino-Japanese relations at this time, namely, by investigating the private ties between subjects of both countries. Especially the activities of Japanese Buddhist monks and their contacts with Chinese monks and scholars could be profitably traced in the extant source material. This approach has already been implemented for the Song dynasty and has yielded fruitful results.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of intellectual history, studying these international exchanges of ideas and knowledge during the Ming would be a welcome topic and a focus on the informal aspect of international relations could shed new light on formal diplomacy alone would not.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Kotyk, 2020, 'The Medieval Chinese Vision of Japan: Buddhist Perspectives in the Tang and Song Periods,' *Studies in Chinese Religions* 6 (4): 360–85.

The second book that is subject of this review has a title which can be rendered as “Before the Storm: Korea in the Face of the Japanese Threat 1530–1590.” It was written by the French East Asianist Guillaume Carré and it zooms in on Chosŏn Korea’s relations with Japan from the perspective of the former. In terms of temporal coordinates, it picks up where the first book stops: the early-to-mid sixteenth century. Carré’s work consists of a lengthy introduction, six chapters and a thorough conclusion. In the introduction, the author makes it clear that he wishes to shed light on the relations between both countries in the few decades before the outbreak of the Imjin War (1592–1598), a conflict which the author sees as the final nail in the coffin for the Chinese tributary system. This system upheld a kind of maritime *pax sinica* and *inter alia* positioned Korea in a loose defensive maritime alliance with Ming China as a result of the first wave of Japanese piracy in the late fourteenth century. Note that Carré here diverges from Csaba Oláh’s claims regarding the main motivation for enforcing the tribute system. For Oláh, it was an ideological exercise first, a system embodying the superiority claim of the Ming empire, rather than primarily a pragmatic response to maritime threats as Carré contends. These differences aside, this second book highlights the practical similarities between Chinese and Korean relations with the Japanese circa 1530. As with the conduct of Sino-Japanese relations, in diplomatic exchanges with Korea the Japanese Ashikaga shogunate had been marginalized as an actor by the mid-fifteenth century because of ongoing civil wars. Instead, official contacts were maintained through the intercession of prominent daimyō families on Tsushima and Kyūshū, who sent impostor embassies and were mostly interested in trade. As a consequence, the Koreans were not well informed on Japanese affairs. A contrast with Oláh’s work is formed by Carré’s quantity of sources. Because the latter describes his topic from the point of view of the Koreans, he is forced to rely on a much leaner source base, mainly constituted by Chosŏn’s *Veritable Records*. The entries for the crucial period of 1560–1580 were largely lost, however, as a result of the destruction wrought by the Imjin War. Carré thus supplements the *Veritable Records* mostly with the writings of Korean civil official Yu Sŏngnyong

(1542–1607), who wrote a detailed—if highly partisan—personal account of the Imjin War and the period leading up to it after the war. In addition to providing an account of Korean relations with Japan just before the Imjin War, Carré also aims to question some of the received wisdoms pertaining to aspects of this era, especially those related to the Korean military reforms before the Imjin War.

The first chapter, “The Silver Islands: Japanese Silver Takes over Korea,” argues that the discovery of new silver veins and a new technique to extract them (cupellation, which ironically came from Korea) in Japan started to undermine the regional power balance in East Asia. Suddenly, the Japanese had a trump card in hand which allowed them greater access to the Chinese and Korean markets through smuggling and piracy. This would also in due course attract European actors. The Koreans were first confronted with this new reality and after a short while made the conscious decision to not monetize silver in the domestic market and to closely monitor Japanese trading activities along their shores. They took this momentous decision while fearing social upheaval and a deterioration of their relations with the Ming by functioning as a facilitator of silver–fueled trade. This led to the rerouting of this illicit trade to China, where silver was eagerly accepted as an alternative currency. The Koreans only used obtained silver as currency during their tributary trade with Ming China, which kept the luxury trade goods thus obtained compartmentalized within the elite domain. Carré concludes the chapter by positing that the access to silver gave the rulers of Japan the assurance to challenge the East Asian world order, including when it was unified under Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598). In the second chapter, “The Ŭlmyo Affair,” which refers to a largescale attack by pirates in the eponymous year 1555, the resulting belligerence was felt for the first time by the Koreans. It stoked fears that the fourteenth century *Wokou* piracy was making a comeback and revealed deficiencies in the military defence. Carré, however, questions why this event had such a shock value. After all, when looking at the known facts it seems like the provincial armies had been relatively successful, despite initial losses, in largely defeating the raid on their own without the reinforcements from the capital armies. The

shock seems to have come from a dual awareness of the intensity of the contemporaneous pirate attacks on Ming China as well as the deplorable state of the Korean military based as it was on the decreasing conscription of free men by way of *corvée* service. This conscription had been progressively undermined by recent socio-economic changes. Carré also dwells on the reasons the pirates launched this attack and connects it to the active repression of Japanese trade with China on or near Korean territory, which had led to many casualties among the pirates. This chapter also shows how and why Tsushima distanced itself from the pirate activities by blaming its Japanese competitors in overseas trade. As Tsushima was recognized by Korea as the official representation of Japanese shogunal authority, they were held responsible for the activities of the pirates.

In the third chapter, “Mysteries and Myths of the ‘Victorious Strategy’,” the author engages in some myth busting regarding the purported military reforms that were undertaken as a response to the Ŭlmyo Affair and which were blamed for Korea’s initial disastrous defeats during the Imjin War. Carré argues that these reforms were more a chimera than real, and this modern misconception is caused by a lack of sources and resulting overreliance on Yu Sōngnyong’s testimony. One of the key features of these purported reforms Yu criticized was that troops were no longer to resist invading enemies on the spot as individual units, but should mobilize on a provincial scale and gather at predetermined locations to await their commanders who sometimes had to travel for hundreds of kilometers. Nevertheless, Carré posits that aspects of these reforms were not very different from earlier Korean military praxis and that Yu misrepresented their debilitating effects in order to justify his own failed postwar military reforms after his ouster. The author continues his myth busting in the fourth chapter, titled “Nothing Equals Firearms.” The Ŭlmyo Affair and other incidents had confronted the Korean army with pirates armed with the latest (Western-style) firearms, which should have spurred technological innovation but did not, as lamented by Yu Sōngnyong. Carré takes Yu to task, however, by presenting evidence that Western style harquebuses did influence native gun designs and that

cannons were updated to shoot more effective iron cannonballs. However, success with these improved firearms against the Jurchen in the north and with iron cannonballs against pirates prematurely restored confidence in the existing arsenal. Fully appropriating the harquebus was obstructed, because these relied on specialized skills to manufacture and required more complex training regimens. Carré concludes the chapter by positing that the centralized weapon production system, subject to political decisions of a few experts, could block innovations too easily. When this control broke down, as it did during the Imjin War, free reign was given to local initiative, which led to the successful appropriation of the harquebus by the frontline naval squadron of admiral Yi Sunshin (1545–1598).

The fifth chapter, “Who Were the *Wakō*?” asks a question that has been asked many times before in East Asian historiographies and this chapter, in the opinion of this reviewer, does not bring much to the debate which is new. The pirates remain multiethnic members of coastal societies, dependent on the sea for their livelihoods, who turned to banditry when central authorities were weak while benefitting from a preexisting facility with violence. Tsushima was eager enough to capitalize on this multiethnic nature to distance itself from the pirates by informing the Koreans *inter alia* of the Chinese leadership of these groups. The chapter does provide a useful overview of the historiographical debates and it compares the *Wokou* piracy wave of the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries with that of the mid–sixteenth century. Carré highlights the usually underacknowledged role of Koreans in the piracy waves and concludes that, whereas this role was very significant during the first wave, Koreans were mostly uninvolved in the second one. The author concludes that the country’s smaller size and more efficient navy and trade surveillance practices kept the Korean coastal populations from joining the pirates in the sixteenth century in significant numbers. A seeming paradox, unresolved by the author, presents itself of a Korea too weak to resist the Japanese invasion of 1592, but strong enough to keep itself outside of the piracy turmoil which embroiled the Chinese coasts just a few decades earlier. The sixth chapter, “Ambiguous Alliances: Chosŏn and

Tsushima in the Midst of Turmoil,” redirects our gaze to the diplomatic aspects of Korean relations with Japan, as represented by Tsushima. This diplomacy centered on the dilemma of repatriating the many pirates of diverse origins that ended up shipwrecked on the Korean coasts. Handing them over to the Ming court as criminals risked Korea being drawn much further into the conflict between the Ming and the pirates on the side of the former, while simultaneously increasing friction with Japan. Executing the shipwrecked pirates would similarly risk hostilities with both China and Japan, and executing men innocent of committing crimes on Korean soil raised ethical concerns. In the latter part of the chapter the author shows how Tsushima was instrumentalized by Hideyoshi to conduct diplomacy in a bid for recognition as Japan’s new leader and obtaining permission to have his troops pass through the country on the way to attack Ming China. For this purpose, a rare Korean member of the pirates, Sahwadong, was extradited to Korea as a sign of goodwill and Hideyoshi’s new power as unified Japan’s leader. Carré posits that Hideyoshi’s crackdown on the pirates was more apparent than real: he still needed them for his invasion of the mainland despite his proscription of piracy. This gesture was well received by the Korean court, who initially saw the pacification of Japan under the leadership of Hideyoshi as a hopeful development.

Carré ties the strands of his research together in his conclusion, where he also draws a useful comparison between the Chosŏn’s relations with the Jurchen and the Japanese to explain why the Japanese invasion took the Koreans unaware. Whereas it benefitted the Koreans to have the Jurchen divided among themselves, a divided Japan on the contrary always meant piracy and chaos. Hence the Korean court welcomed the reunification of Japan, which should have restored peace and tranquility. However, this was a different Japan from the one before the effective exploitation of the silver mines. The abundance of silver had made Japan a driving force behind the rising private trade in the region and whetted the appetite of its rulers for continental conquest and the exploitation of international trade. This miscalculation was aided and abetted by the success with which the Koreans were able to enforce their system of restrict-

ed trade with only one Japanese actor, Tsushima, and enforce their control over their territory and domestic economic arrangements. Korea's fate diverged from China, because it had managed to annul the impact of silver on its internal socio-economic relations and therefore became largely immune to the destabilization wrought by private trade kindled by this Japanese bullion. In this way a victim of its own success, the Chosŏn dynasty was also unable to mitigate the recruitment crisis which undermined its military, leaving it in a weak state before an unexpected full-scale Japanese invasion, despite attempts at upgrading its firearms. Carré offers here, for the first time, a comprehensive treatment of the half-century of Japanese-Korean relations leading up to the Imjin War, carefully weighing different explanations as to why the invasion came as such a surprise. In the opinion of this reviewer, Carré's work threatens to be too reductionist in its consideration of Japanese silver as the game changer for the East Asian international order. It does not adequately explain why the earlier fourteenth-century wave of piracy took a hold in the absence of this silver. It would seem that the absence of a strong central political power in Japan was a sufficient explanation for the emergence of these phenomena, although Carré does state that the sixteenth-century wave of piracy resorted less to plunder and more to illegal trading activities than its predecessor. This could then be ascribed to the impact of the availability of silver, although the nature of the available sources should make it hard to quantify this shift in pirate activities. However, together with Oláh's work, Carré's book also provides many new insights in the nature of international relations in East Asia before the landmark Imjin War. Carré's book should be required reading for understanding Korea's ambivalent reaction to the rise of a unified Japan and the country's subsequent early defeats during the Imjin War and would be so had it been written in English. This reviewer's hope is that by bringing the two monographs by Oláh and Carré to the attention of a wider readership, their insights will not be lost.