Books and Boats: Sino-Japanese Relations in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

by Ōba Osamu and translated by Joshua A. Fogel
Portland, ME: Merwin Asia, 2012

Yulia Frumer
Johns Hopkins University

Books and Boats is a translation of *Edo jidai no Nitchū hiwa*, written in Japanese by Ōba Osamu, and published originally by Tōhō Shoten in 1980. At the time of its publication, this seminal book sent waves through academic and non-academic worlds alike, shattering commonly held views concerning the supposed Japanese isolation during the Edo period and its subsequent cultural "leap" at the beginning of the Meiji period. By 1980, Ōba Osamu had already spent decades researching the book trade between China and Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and had published numerous academic works on the subject. However, the 1980 version was different. This time Ōba Osamu set for himself the goal of shattering gross historical misconceptions perpetuated by common opinion. Addressing a general audience, he aimed to change the minds of people who held dearly historical myths, as if they were proven facts. In the introduction to the book he writes: "There are many fans of ancient history because of all the novels that have been set back then, but this has nothing to do with scholarship in the sense that there is solid ground on which to work. The more I doubt my own general historical knowledge nurtured on fiction, the sooner nothing will be left. Thus, in my view,

historical scholarship begins at the point when general historical knowledge is first demolished" (4).

Yet, we should not think that by "general historical knowledge" Ōba meant the knowledge held by ignorant masses vis-à-vis enlightened academics. In 1980, the commonly held opinions Ōba sought to demolish were based on multiple axioms still deeply rooted in academic domains of history as well. These axioms dictated that during the Edo period Japan was culturally and economically isolated under the sakoku policy; that the only contact Japanese of the time had with the outside world was with Dutch merchants on the artificial island of Dejima, near Nagasaki; and that Japan was able to undergo a historical miracle, and thanks to this very limited contact with the West, transform itself into a modern, Western-style nation that quickly assumed scientific and industrial leadership, first in Asia and later across the globe. Every one of these historical assumptions denied not only the importance of, but even the very existence of cultural and economic ties between Edo Japan and Qing China.

This exclusion of Sino-Japanese interaction from general historical knowledge is precisely the facet Ōba Osamu sought to dismantle. In the book, he argues that Japanese trade with China through Nagasaki was not only much more extensive than Japanese trade with the Dutch, but also that such trade was immensely significant for cultural development in Edo Japan, serving, among other things as a central vehicle for the subsequent modernization of Japan in the Meiji period. This argument is noteworthy on its own, especially given the time when it was promulgated. No less noteworthy is Ōba's method of proving his point. Rather than digging for explicit statements by Edo scholars concerning the significance of Chinese culture, he looked at the material realities of the Nagasaki trade. Focusing on the leads provided him by numbers, quantities, licensing, and censure procedures, etc., Ōba set out to untangle the knot of entangled international relationships in the Edo period of Japan.

The book is divided into two parts. The first deals specifically with book trade, while the second, entitled “Interpersonal Contacts,” focuses on the movement of other culturally and economically significant elements— animals, medicinal plants, and people. The first part starts with an autobiographical chapter in which Ōba states his intention to demolish the general historical narrative, according to which the main cultural influence on Japan during the Edo period was the so-called Dutch studies. Ōba asserts that many historical assumptions about cultural developments in the Edo period have been derived from misconceptions about the Japanese seclusion policy retrospectively dubbed *sakoku*. The term meaning “nation in chains” was coined by Englebert Kaempfer, who visited Japan at the end of the seventeenth century and translated into Japanese only in the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is true the Japanese were not allowed to visit foreign countries under these policies, but, according to Ōba, it was simply that—a prohibition on travel abroad. It neither meant that Edo Japanese were oblivious to foreign cultures, nor that they were passive in their reception of those cultures. In fact, Ōba maintains that following the trade of goods, such as books, reveals a very active Japanese government during the Edo period in shaping the kind of knowledge that arrived in Japan through the Chinese trade.

One of the major claims in the book is that, in spite of the general association of Nagasaki port with the Dutch East India Company (VOC), the Nagasaki trade was mainly based on Asian, and more specifically Chinese, imports. According to Ōba, upon calculating the number of ships, looking at their size and the size of their cargo, exploring the origins of goods on Chinese ships, and counting the number of Chinese individuals who came and lived in Japan (Ōba assembled a list of at least 400 people whom he deemed “the most influential”), the Dutch trade pales in comparison to the vast scale of Japan’s trade with China. It was not only the quantity of goods, but also the fact that there were numerous books among the commodities, which makes the Chinese trade crucial to

our understanding of Edo history.

By looking at how the book trade was managed, Ōba makes several important claims. First of all, the book trade makes it clear the Edo Japanese were by no means the passive recipients of foreign cultures they are often portrayed to be. Generally speaking, since the Edo administration only allowed licensed merchants to bring goods into Japan, they could force Chinese merchants to comply with Japanese requests for specific goods. This meant the Japanese could press their demands for specific commodities, as well as specific books, actively managing what was brought into Japan from China.

The management of book trade by the Edo authorities is often portrayed only in restrictive terms, for example in terms of censorship. Indeed, the system that was supposed to prevent the spread of Christian literature in Japan was rather well-established. However, confronting the popular image of the early Edo period book ban as a firm barrier against foreign knowledge, Ōba shows that the censorship failed to prevent the circulation of foreign books. Forbidden fruits were difficult to resist, and lists of banned literature the government circulated to bookshops and libraries often turned into lists of bestsellers, created by none other than government attention itself. Ōba describes the creative ways shopkeepers encoded original titles under different, albeit easily understood names, and thus advertised the sale of what were supposed to be books forbidden from circulation. Numerous references to the officially blacklisted foreign books in Japanese literature testify to the fact that the supposedly iron wall of censorship was rather permeable, and something more like a sieve.

In a sense, the censorship system actually facilitated the spread of contents from banned books. The major question for Japanese censors was whether a newly imported book should be allowed to the public, banned altogether, or, perhaps, allowed only after certain parts were blotted with black ink. However, in order to make such a determination, imported literature had to be read, and carefully at that. Thus, the bureau

established for the purpose of examining books and potentially preventing their circulation actually became a place of learning. Entrusted to the Mukai family of scholars, the bureau's task was not only to watch out for unwanted content, but also to look for literary, professional, and cultural gems.

Active requests for Chinese professional literature, as well as hunts for occasional rare books, shows a continued high regard in Edo Japan for Chinese knowledge, contrary to the popular opinion in Ōba's time, according to which the status of China as a cultural authority sharply diminished in Japan following the fall of the Ming and the rapid development of Edo culture. Dwelling on this last point, Ōba unraveled the history behind the importation and interpretation of the Qing legal code in Japan following competing requests by the powerful lord of the Kaga domain and the eighth shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune.

Books, however, were far from the only agent of knowledge transfer. The second half of the book focuses on non-textual mediators of knowledge. It tells us a story of elephants brought from Siam to Japan, following the request of the Japanese shogun, of enormous quantities of medicinal plants that were not only imported but also exported from Japan, and, most importantly, of humans who traveled to Japan and had an enormous impact on Edo culture.

One of the most astonishing aspects of this book is that the historical truths skillfully presented by Ōba should have been clear all along, given that they were supported by well-known examples. The elephant travel is a famous story, but before Ōba's book, it was not taken to be an indication of ongoing trade on a massive scale involving multiple countries. It is well known that the Obaku sect of Zen was established by a Chinese monk, and that the influential Nanpin school of painting was named after the Chinese artist Shen Nanpin who worked in Japan. Yet those famous cases never provoked speculation as to whether, maybe, there had been others like them. Ōba Osamu showed there were—the books, drugs, animals, and humans coming from China to

Japan were not just anecdotal examples, they were transformative. Reading the book, one cannot escape the feeling that the vast and fertile Sino-Japanese trade, the mere existence of which Ōba needed to prove, was in fact a secret laid open.

The book is not without flaws, nevertheless. One of Ōba's assertions, bold for his time, is that the Sino-Japanese trade in books not only existed, but also played a much more significant role in the subsequent modernization of Japan in the Meiji period than trade with the Dutch. However, Ōba's proof of this claim falls short of his promise. The majority of the materials in the book deal with the late seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, focusing specifically on the Kyōhō period (1717-1736). Evidence from later periods, on the other hand, is scant and rather anecdotal. A reader unwilling to accept Ōba's claim could simply argue that later periods saw much more cultural import from Holland, and that even if the quantity of commodities brought by Dutch ships was smaller, the intellectual impact of geographical atlases, books of anatomy, scientific instruments, maps, specimens, and so forth was much more transformative. This is not to say that Ōba was entirely wrong in his assertion, but is just to point out that the nature of his sources does not allow a sufficient backing of this claim. A much stronger point could have been made by looking at the importance of the Chinese medical materials in the development of natural history throughout the Edo period, by examining the explicit references to Chinese medical treatises in so-called translations of Western anatomy, or by looking at Edo period astronomical practices that relied heavily on astronomical treatises written by Jesuits active in China or by their students and imported to Japan in the course of the eighteenth century. In the last case, especially, the role of Chinese-language treatises in the work of astronomers from the most West-oriented Edo period is undeniable. Still, it must be noted that, although written in classical Chinese and using Chinese astronomical concepts and terminology, such sources were explaining Western astronomical practices and tools.

It would also be unfair to the reader not to address the question of representations of influences. When reading Ōba's work, one cannot avoid the feeling that it was the Chinese influence alone that shaped the intellectual climate of the period, while the Dutch trade was marginal. Ōba, of course, was writing in the period when even the existence of Sino-Japanese trade, let alone its cultural significance, was firmly ignored, and it is thus quite understandable that his aspiration to repair this historical injustice inspired him to drive the argument all the way in the opposite direction. Therefore, for a modern-day reader, it is important to read the book in light of its times and to recognize its substantive contribution to history, namely charting out the material realities of the trade with China and the importance of Chinese culture during the Edo period, all the while being mindful not to slip into the equally disturbing position that mirrors the imbalance of the "general historical knowledge" Ōba was striving to demolish. The Edo period saw a fertile and changing scholarly culture in Japan that drew inspirations from a variety of material and textual sources, many of which came from abroad. This wonderfully rich and complex intellectual landscape exemplifies how crucial outside sources were, as they provided new tools, images, and inspirations, but the amalgam created by Edo scholars did not discriminate based on the national origins of knowledge alone.

This brings us to one crucial point that has to be kept in mind while reading this book—the differences in intellectual climate and prevalent ideologies between the time of Ōba's work and today. Ōba was writing against narratives that portrayed Japanese modernization as Westernization. He was writing against *Nihonjinron*—theories of Japanese uniqueness. He was also writing against particular forms of nationalism that sought to distinguish Japan from other East Asian countries. Today, there exists the danger of feeding another kind of nationalism, one hailing "Asian" values and aiming to demarcate East Asia from the rest of the world. It is now necessary to stress that identities and cultures are ever evolving and contain global influences,

for better and for worse.

Books and Boats is a book of enormous significance and should be read by any aspiring scholar of early modern Japanese and East Asian history. However, it should be studied in conjunction with other books that not only show the scope of Edo period international interactions—with China and Holland, as well as with Korea, Ryūkyū, Russia, and other countries, but also explore what Japanese scholars and amateurs alike did with the knowledge and pieces of material culture they acquired through this international communication.

Finally, it should be noted that in *Books and Boats* Joshua Fogel has managed a masterful English translation of the original Japanese. Translations always require editorial choices, and the most difficult of them is when to adhere closely to the original text and when to modify it to fit the foreign readers' knowledge. Fogel achieves a great balance between those. On the one hand, Fogel preserves both Ōba's own semi-autobiographic and conversational style, and the official, concise tone of the numerous documents cited in the text. On the other hand, Fogel chooses to makes some major changes to better convey Ōba's message to the contemporary, English-speaking reader. For example, he chooses to translate the title of the book as "Books and Boats" rather than "The Secret Story of Sino-Japanese Relations." The existence of such a relationship is no longer a secret today, yet the crucial importance of materiality for any historical investigation, and especially for those focused on intellectual history, remains of scholarly import today. The sequence of the chapters has also been slightly rearranged, separating the book-related chapters from the ones dealing with non-textual commodities. This step is extremely helpful to the reader in following the argument about book trade. Nevertheless, one wonders whether this division inadvertently creates a hierarchy between books and other commodities, such as between texts and non-textual artifacts, which also played an extremely vital role in the process of knowledge transmission.

In conclusion, the long needed English translation of Ōba Osamu's

Edo jidai no Nitchū hiwa is a captivating read, which weaves personal angles and anecdotes together with an array of invaluable primary sources. It makes an extremely important argument concerning Edo period intellectual history by exploring the material realities surrounding it. This is an undeniably invaluable piece of research for both scholars and educators, and, in conjunction with other sources, should find a place on any syllabus that introduces students to Edo period cultural and economic trends.