

BOOK REVIEW

Networks of Faith and Profit: Monks, Merchants, and Exchanges between China and Japan, 839–1403 CE

By Li Yiwen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 245 pp. £85.00 (cloth)

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Sino-Japanese relations in the premodern period have become an increasingly popular topic among scholars in China and Japan, as well as in Anglophone scholarship. In Japan, such studies can be traced to the well-known historian Mori Katsumi (1903–1981), who laid the groundwork through his pioneering studies of inter-regional exchanges and trade.¹ Recently, a new generation of Japanese scholars have not just built on his work but also challenged his interpretations in significant ways, so that there is now a plethora of articles and books introducing both new evidence of trade and traders and new perspectives on how the exchanges occurred. Outside Japan, interest in inter-regional exchanges and relationships has a shorter history, but the last couple of decades have nevertheless seen a number of inspirational works engaging topics of a trans-border nature.² In part, this reflects a growing awareness of the importance of cross-border relations and especially of the continent's role in Japanese society and its historical developments; that awareness stems in turn from a new generation of scholars who are trilingual. They move comfortably between primary sources and secondary readings in both Chinese and Japanese, but they write in English and target an Anglophone audience. Yiwen Li does exactly that in her *Networks of Faith and Profit: Monks, Merchants, and Exchanges between China and Japan, 839–1403 CE*, offering a new angle that historians of Japan should take into account when considering Japan in the context of East Asia, but that also speaks to scholars of China who are interested in the framing of Sino-Japanese relations.

¹The prime work is Mori's *Nissō bōeki no kenkyū* (1975), though he continued to publish on similar topics throughout his career.

²For representative studies, most of which Li cites, see Bruce Batten, *Hakata: Gateway to Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), Michael Como, *Weaving and Binding: Immigrant Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), Charlotte von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 2006), Richard von Glahn, "The Ningbo-Hakata Merchant Network and the Reorientation of East Asian Maritime Trade 1150–1350" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 74.2 (2014): 249–79; and articles by these authors and others.

As Li explains, her reason for choosing the nearly six centuries of exchanges is that 839 was the year the last tribute mission returned to Japan from Tang, and 1403 marks the restarting of tribute missions under retired shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408). Her aim is to demonstrate that frequent exchanges took place throughout the period, as merchants and monks replaced tributary missions as the most important link between the two regions. She refers to their travels as “the religio-commercial network.” No doubt, these exchanges are important and worthy of a study, but I firmly disagree with Li when she states that the hiatus in the tribute system “has led to an assumption that there was little contact between the two countries at the time” (p. i). This claim is a bit of a straw man, given that Li herself cites numerous studies on such contacts and that no historian of premodern Japan has made that claim in recent years.

The book begins with an account of the last official Japanese mission to China in 838, with a focus on the monk Ennin (793–864), who stayed in China for nine years. It is an apt starting point, as the monk then becomes one of the models for future religious trips to China, yet the reader may wish for a general introduction with a more detailed treatment of historiography and the current state of the field. Most of the chapter is devoted, instead, to the religious and political contexts, with particular attention to Buddhism’s approach to materiality and wealth. The introduction offers a summary of the types of sources Li uses (Buddhist records, pilgrim accounts, correspondence, and monastic records), but there is no discussion of theoretical underpinnings. For instance, Li claims that a major reason for monks and monasteries providing an important link for traders was trust, or “reputational mechanism” (p. 10); this assertion is plausible, but she gives little empirical or theoretical support for it. The introduction rounds off with a short, helpful description of the book’s plan.

The book progresses chronologically; Li divides the chapters into periods that are characterized by specific developments in Sino-Japanese monk–merchant exchanges. The second chapter, “Replacing Tributary Relations,” treats exchanges between 839 and 900, continuing the story of Ennin before looking closely at his successor, Enchin (814–891). Both of the monks came from the Tendai center of Enryakuji, and their desire to enhance the position of their school by obtaining both knowledge and material of esoteric Buddhism is well documented. Less well known, however, and ably described by Li, is the role Chinese merchants played in this process, and their desire to generate profit through their connections with monks. The Xu brothers stand out in that regard, and their letters to the Chinese monk Yikong (n.d.), who spent some time in Kyoto, are particularly revealing. Li’s point in this chapter is to mark a time of transition, when an emerging network of monks and merchants collaborated to respond to what she calls a growing demand for Chinese goods and ideas in Japan and a consistent desire for profit among Chinese merchants.

Chapter 3, “Not Only for the Dharma,” deals with the longest span of time, 900 to 1100. The focus here is on three well-known Japanese monks, Chōnen (938–1016), Jakushō (962–1034), and Jōjin (1011–1082), who each spent extended time in China; the latter two remained until their deaths. Through the experiences of these monks and their merchant-supporters, we learn how the deferential writing of Chōnen was over time replaced by less submissive expressions towards China. In fact, Jōjin’s writing even reflects some Japanese national pride. Li additionally notes the challenges that the exchange of gifts and visits presented to both sides, since members of the Japanese elite did not follow tributary expectations. The exchanges became part of a negotiation

between two conflicting worldviews, with religion coming to serve as a safe discourse for interactions.³

In chapter 4, Li turns to the twelfth century, with a focus on the Chinese community in Hakata. The period saw a significant spike in Sino-Japanese trade, caused to a large extent by the Japanese court's deliberate relaxation of restrictions on the number of merchants permitted to be received. More importantly, besides more frequent visits and exchanges, many Chinese merchants settled in Kyushu to take full advantage of the demands on both sides of the sea. Chapter 5 deals with religious networks in the period from 1200 to 1270, especially the role played by Zen institutions and monks. Li devotes much attention to a particular, well-documented case: in the early 1240s, the Jingshan monastery close to Hangzhou requested and received lumber from Japan, with much help from the Japanese Zen monk Enni (1202–1280). The narrative effectively shows how the networks functioned and provides in-depth details about the kind of wood used, how it was paid for, and the journey of the planks themselves. The theme of Zen participation in trade continues in chapter 6, which introduces the reader to ships importing goods to finance Zen temple construction in and around Kyoto. Of special note here is an informative account of the famous Sinan wreck, which set out for Hakata from Ningbo in 1323, but ended up on the bottom of the sea in the Korean archipelago. The collaborative nature of the ship's cargo, evinced by wooden tags, shows in detail how merchants and temples had “shares” in a trade enterprise.

In the final chapter, Li turns to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and the eventual resumption of tributary relations. She first demonstrates the Ming founder's desire to return to a tribute relationship as part of the new dynasty's assertion of control of the borders, and then shows how both Japan's Southern and Northern courts were involved in early exchanges of letters. The turning point came, according to Li, in 1403 when Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third Ashikaga shogun, dispatched a tributary mission to the Ming Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1434). Here, Li argues that Yoshimitsu “presented himself as the *de facto* ruler of Japan” (170) and that he “used the tributes to show that he was more powerful than the [Japanese] emperor” (173). For the latter point, she cites the well-known Japanese historian Hashimoto Yū, but she has unfortunately misrepresented him. In fact, based on the contemporaneous account of the 1402 diplomatic reception of the Ming envoy in Japan, Hashimoto argues that the tributary ritual as well as Yoshimitsu's investiture as the “king of Japan” occurred away from the setting of the court, hidden from imperial princes, nobles, and even ranking Zen monks, as only Yoshimitsu's closest associates attended. There is, in other words, no evidence that Yoshimitsu attempted to subvert the emperor's status since the ritual in Kyoto was kept secret and never communicated, nor that he aspired to the status of king.⁴ In either case, it is here that Li ends her study with a conclusion that regrettably does not provide much food for thought beyond the more obvious points that the religio-commercial network provided a different

³Robert Borgen also made this argument in “Jōjin's Travels from Center to Center (with Some Periphery in Between)” in *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries*, eds. Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 384–413.

⁴Li's footnote indicates that she has misread Hashimoto's summary and criticism of previous scholarship as representing his own views. See Hashimoto *Chūka gensō: Karamono to gaikō no Muromachi jida shi* (Tokyo: Bensei, 2011), 6. For Hashimoto's argument, see *Chūka gensō*, 106–107 and Ishida Sanehiro and Hashimoto Yū, “Mibu-ke kyūzōbon Sōchō sōbō henchō ki no kisoteki kōsatsu—Ashikaga Yoshimitsu no juhō girei wo megutte,” *Komonjo kenkyū* 69 (2010): 14–34.

framework for exchanges, that it changed over time, and that when tributary missions resumed, monks and monasteries continued to play a role, as a legacy of the interim period.

Networks of Trade and Profit provides a vivid account that details missions, exchanges, how ships were funded, how funds were secured and so on, but it is not always clear whether all that detail points to a certain conclusion or interpretation. Or to put it differently, most of the study is more descriptive than analytical, and thus lacks theoretical depth. For example, Li never asks *why* Chinese products were in demand in Japan in the first place. It is an important question because in contrast to Chinese traders, Japanese elites were never interested in profit, and it is not until the late thirteenth century that we see the emergence of profit-seeking merchant groups in Japan. In chapter 2, Li states that “to satisfy the increasing demand for Chinese goods and knowledge, the monks and private merchants stepped in to fill the void” (45). What void is that? Why did the demand increase? What is missing is a discussion of who on the Japanese side used objects, such as sutras, mandalas, Chinese encyclopedias, ceramics, or luxury items, and how exactly they were used. A cursory discussion of cultural capital and Kyoto factionalism would have provided more depth to the notion of faith and profit.

Another tendency is Li’s sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications. In the introduction, for example, she claims that “courtiers still needed abbots’ support to enhance their legitimacy” (13–14). That may have been true for the later part of her period, and indeed she cites works dealing with the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the abbots themselves mattered little to the imperial court in terms of legitimacy in the Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods. If anything, members of the elite competed for posts as abbot in order to extend their control over monasteries, rather than abbots controlling the court elite. There is thus a certain lack of historicity as Li presents the Japanese court as unchanging over six centuries. Likewise, she assumes that the Chinese and Japanese courts, respectively, were unified and easily characterized units. She often mentions the “Japanese court’s” desire for Chinese products, for example; but court edicts also restricted the arrival of Chinese ships and controlled the influx of goods until the twelfth century. How does that work with the “court’s” increased demands? The answer, of course, is that in the competitive setting of the capital, individual members of various elite groups, be they temples, nobles, or warrior aristocrats, used such products to augment and improve their own socio-political standing. Their actions were often at odds with decisions made by the court council, which tried to control and restrain the accumulation of wealth by its competitors. In short, failing to recognize the tension among factions at court does not just oversimplify courtier actions towards trade missions, but also risks misrepresenting the broad desire for products that Li argues for.

The binary opposition between tributary missions and the religio-commercial network provides the foundation of Li’s work, but it is not a sturdy foundation. She claims that it was monks and merchants who *replaced* the tributary missions (19), but was that really the case? Li acknowledges only towards the end of the book that “merchants without any religious affiliations” (182) also traded in Japan, but justifies their omission by a scarcity of documentation. However, absence of documentation cannot explain the almost complete lack of attention to the Wu Yue kingdom (907–978), which is mentioned only once (51). We have records of several diplomatic missions having arrived in Japan, and exchanges of diplomatic letters between the Wu Yue king and the Fujiwara chieftain are well documented. Since they approximate more diplomatic

exchanges, yet fall after the “last” tribute mission of 838, where do they fit in Li’s argument? The same is true for the port of Tsuruga on the Japan Sea, which occasionally received ships outside the network Li portrays. Searching hard for such complicating evidence would have shown that there were alternatives to monk–merchant exchanges in the period when tribute missions were supposedly in abeyance. In short, diplomatic and commercial missions might better be considered as resting on a spectrum, rather than as a dichotomy.

Networks of Faith and Profit in general delivers what it promises: a detailed account of informal networks of Sino-Japanese relations from the ninth through the fourteenth centuries. Li has used the proven and effective strategy of choosing a topic that can be followed over the centuries, and thus demonstrating change. The narrative is accompanied by maps, images of cultural objects (such as from the Sinan shipwreck), and a helpful table; but a table or chart should also support the claim that exchange increased. The style is decisive and clear, but however persuasive, such a style comes with oversimplifications. The press laudably included footnotes (some overly long) and Chinese characters, but at the same time, I wonder about the lack of rigor in the review process. I commend Li for her broad use of Chinese and Japanese sources and for her engagement with current secondary scholarship. At times, I did find her reading somewhat uncritical, and a few important omissions stand out. Liu Hengwu, for example, has written extensively on the Wu Yue and on the famous merchants residing in Hakata who made donations to temples in Ningbo in the twelfth century, but none of his works is mentioned.⁵

Perfection in a monograph is of course elusive, and while I have highlighted weaknesses in Li’s work, she deserves credit for her transregional focus. More scholarship of this kind is needed even if such a work, as I have noted, presents a different set of challenges from more confined studies in terms of the number of primary and secondary sources that need to be mastered, for, in the end, they push us to take into account a fuller range of contextual factors of premodern East Asian history.

⁵See Liu Hengwu, “Godai goetsukoku no tainichi ‘shokan taikō’ kō,” *Kodai bunka* 59:4 (2008): 58–69 and his *Ningbo gudai duiwai wenhua jiaoliu: yi lishi wenhua yicun wen zhongxin* (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe, 2009).