

The significance of the “Sakai Totosen” in the dispatch of tribute ships from Japan to Ming China during the Sengoku period

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Previous research on the dispatch of tribute ships from Japan to Ming China (*kenminsen* 遣明船) during the Sengoku period claimed that the Ouchi Clan of the northern Kyushu and western Chugoku regions achieved a monopoly on this activity after the Ningbo Incident of 1523, in which ships dispatched by the Ouchi Clan attacked a ship dispatched by the Hosokawa Clan of the Kinai and Shikoku regions. However, whether this commonly accepted theory reflects the actual situation is questionable. The purpose of this article is to examine this theory by focusing on the ships referred to as “Sakai Totosen” 堺渡唐船 (tribute ships planned to embark from Sakai to China) in the primary sources, considering specifically the parties involved in their dispatch, their crews and passengers, the purpose of their dispatch, and their overall historical significance.

First, the parties involved in the project of dispatching these ships are discussed. The sources, including *Tenbun Nikki* 天文日記, a mid-16th century diary written by the abbot of Honganji Temple, indicate that these ships planned to embark from Sakai and were prepared by the shogunal deputy (*kanrei* 管領) Hosokawa Harumoto and the Sakai merchants. The other players, Honganji Temple and the Ichijo Clan of Tosa Province, merely supported this project, while Sengoku Daimyo Ouchi Yoshitaka and Hatakeyama Tanenaga attempted to prevent the dispatch.

Next, regarding those aboard the ships and the purpose of their dispatch, the author introduces two newly discovered diplomatic documents from *Katto* 活套, a mid-16th century miscellanea concerning Sakai, the content and dates of which prove that they are related to these ships. According to these documents, the ships were to be outfitted like their predecessors as bearing official tribute to the Ming Court. The Zen monk Chushuku Shojo was meant to be on board as

ambassador along with the physician Nakarai Akifusa. The purposes of the dispatch were 1) to present the tribute goods carried by the previous Hosokawa ship and supposedly left behind in China after the Ningbo Incident; 2) to acquire the return of personal belongings of the previous ship; 3) to secure the release and return of Song Suqing, the member of the previous ship; 4) to acquire new tallies (*kango* 勘合) for tribute trade along with the related gold seal from the Chinese authorities; and 5) to secure permission for Nakarai to study Chinese medicine.

Finally, concerning the historical significance of these ships, it is clear that Hosokawa Harumoto and the Sakai merchants intended this project to continue diplomatic negotiations with the Ming Dynasty, which had been carried out by the Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshiharu and the shogunal deputy Hosokawa Takakuni in the aftermath of the Ningbo Incident. The transfer of the previously unknown provisional tally for tribute trade issued in the Jiajing period (*Kasei jun-kango* 嘉靖准勘合) illuminates the process leading from the original negotiations to this project. Furthermore, when comparing this project with the ships dispatched by Ouchi Yoshitaka in 1539, we find that both were meant to recover cargos related to the Ningbo Incident and to acquire new tallies.

While it was previously thought that the Ouchi Clan eliminated competition from the Hosokawa Clan following the Ningbo Incident, the information above shows that the rivalry over the dispatch of tribute ships actually continued unabated.