

# Useless Tribute, Desirable Exotics: Japanese Folding Fans in China, 1000–1500

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**Abstract:** During the premodern era, folding fans were among the few handicrafts that China imported from Japan. The availability of Japanese folding fans in China changed along with Sino-Japanese relations. They were rare during the Northern Song due to the suspension of diplomatic relations, but after the Ming court reestablished a tributary relationship with the Ashikaga shogunate in the early fifteenth century, many more Japanese folding fans entered China via tribute trade. The scholar-officials, who generally admired the delicate Japanese-made folding fans, chose to emphasize different values of the fans in different contexts. The Japanese folding fans were “useless tribute” in the scholar-officials’ public writings, but in reality the “Japan” brand actually increased the commercial value of the fans in the market.

**Keywords:** folding fans, Sino-Japanese relations, tribute trade, exotic goods, craftsmanship

In the 1070s, a Chinese scholar-official saw a delicate Japanese-made folding fan at a temple market in the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng. He admired the beauty of this folding fan: it had a lacquer-coated handle, and when it was opened a landscape painting appeared, with mountains and rivers in the distant background, a fisherman on a boat closer to the viewer, and flying birds and clouds in the sky. The autumnal scene was painted in light colors on dark blue paper. The scholar-official described this painting on the folding fan as “very fine drawing with profound meanings; even the skilled painters in China probably cannot achieve this level.” But the seller asked a high price that the scholar-official could not afford. He always regretted missing the chance to purchase the fan, but when he visited markets in the capital later, he never saw similar fans again (Jiang Shaoyu, *Xindiao Huangchao lei yuan*, 60.11a–b; von Verschuer 2006: 73).

This Song scholar-official experienced firsthand how delicate and precious a Japanese folding fan was in eleventh-century China, but he probably did not expect that four hundred years later Japanese traders would buy Chinese folding fans and resell them as Japanese-made ones because the label “Japan” added value to such fans in Chinese markets (Wang Fu, *Wang Sheren shiji*, 2.5a). While the fever of *karamono* (唐物, lit. “objects from Tang China”) in Japan has received much scholarly attention (Kawazoe 2014), Chinese consumers’ zeal for Japanese products in the premodern era still needs further exploration. In this article I show that imported Japanese fans were actively sought by Chinese literati for centuries.

During the premodern era, most of the products China imported from Japan and other countries were raw materials, such as mercury, sulfur, and raw silk. Production of very few commodities remained beyond the abilities of Chinese artisans for long, and one of them was folding fans. Not until the fifteenth century did domestic production of folding fans in China reach a level comparable to that in Japan. Starting from the sixteenth century, when more goods from East Asia arrived in Europe, folding fans were among the most popular “oriental exotics” that appeared in countless European works of art, right up until the twentieth century, as representative symbols of the Orient. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), China exported so many folding fans to Europe that they exerted a strong influence on fan making there. Given the fame of Chinese folding fans in the modern era, more than a few people have mistakenly assumed that folding fans originated in China.<sup>1</sup>

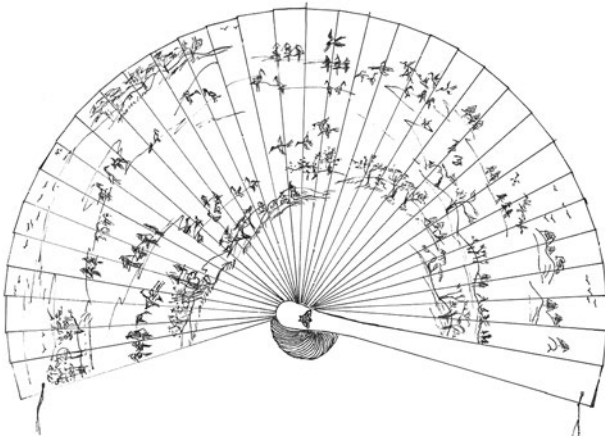
The history of Japanese folding fans has been discussed by scholars at different levels (Wang Y. 1996; von Verschuer 2006: 72–74, 159–61; Shi 2010; Lü 2013).<sup>2</sup> Benefiting from previous scholarship, this article further investigates the political and cultural meanings of folding fans in the larger context of changing Sino-Japanese relations and focuses on how the changing relationship affected the perception, consumption, and production of Japanese folding fans.

From the time Japanese folding fans first appeared in China, in the tenth century, until the fifteenth century, when folding fans were among the regular Japanese tribute goods to the Ming court, they were luxury commodities and appeared often in literati writing.

Literati accessed folding fans in various ways: exchanging gifts with diplomat friends, paying high prices in markets, or having them bestowed by emperors. By closely examining how the Chinese literati pursued and described the Japanese folding fans they owned or saw, this article shows that Japanese folding fans, as handicrafts from a country long under Chinese influence, had two types of value to Chinese literati. First, as the Song scholar-official saw in the market, the folding fans had commercial value, which derived from their rarity and superb craftsmanship. Second, the fans also had political and cultural value. On many occasions, the fans were used to present Japan, where they originated, as a place bonded to China by tributary ties and usually considered culturally inferior. Remarkably, the political and cultural value of the fans did not diminish their commercial value; on the contrary, in the Ming, “Japan” even became a brand that added commercial value to the fans. Thus, we see on the one hand that Chinese literati used Japanese folding fans to publicly express their view of the Sino-Japanese relationship, especially the supreme status of China; on the other hand, they were obsessed with the “Japan brand” and were willing to pay dearly for the brand alone.

### **Precious Gifts and Political Metaphors: Folding Fans in Northern Song China**

Fans, specifically round nonfolding fans, originated in China, and after they were transported to Japan, the Japanese invented folding fans, which then became exotic and luxurious commodities in China (Wang Y. 1996: 203, 209). Evidence



**Figure 1.** Line drawing of a twelfth-century cypress fan. 16×32 cm. Collection of Itsukushima Shrine. Courtesy of Mr. Eason Y. Wang.

**Figure 2.** Paper folding fan by Kanō Masanobu 狩野正信 (1434–1530). 18.8×43.3 cm. Collection of Tokyo National Museum. Image accessed from webarchives. [tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/C0034597](http://tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/C0034597).



suggests that Japanese folding fans first appeared in China during the Northern Song dynasty. In 988 the Japanese monk Chōnen 耆然 (938–1016) sent his disciple Ka'in 嘉因 to bring various gifts to Emperor Taizong 太宗 (939–97, r. 976–97) to express his gratitude for the emperor's warm reception of his visit in 986. Among these gifts was “a gold-and-silver-lacquered fan box, containing twenty cypress fans and two paper folding fans” (Tuotuo, *Song shi*, 491.14138).

Cypress fans (*hiōgi* 檜扇) and paper folding fans (*kawahori-ōgi* 蝙蝠扇) were two types of folding fans invented in Japan. A cypress fan was made of twenty to thirty-five cypress-wood blades bound by a thread at one end, while paper folding fans “had a frame with fewer blades which was covered in Japanese paper and folded in a zigzag pattern” (von Verschuer 2006: 72; for an example of a cypress fan, see fig. 1; for a paper folding fan, see fig. 2). Cypress fans appeared earlier than paper fans. Japanese scholar Nakamura Kiyoe (1969) thinks cypress fans originated

from private notebooks for court officials during the Heian period (794–1185), since wooden slips were also a medium for writing then (Wang Y. 1996: 210).

During the Heian period, cypress fans were part of official dress for aristocrats, and usually only cypress fans were suitable in formal settings. An aristocrat who used a paper folding fan on a formal occasion might face criticism. For example, in 1015 Fujiwara no Yukinari 藤原行成 (972–1028), a high-ranking official from the prestigious Fujiwara clan, attended a mourning event in the middle of summer with a paper folding fan, and his contemporaries considered his behavior very inappropriate (Miyajima 1993: 64). Until the fourteenth century, Japanese court aristocrats wrote that using paper fans in summer was acceptable, but if one dressed formally, then cypress fans were required, regardless of the season (Miyajima 1993: 65).

The monk Chōnen's gift to Emperor Taizong also shows that cypress fans enjoyed a higher status: the ratio of cypress fans to paper folding fans is ten to one, suggesting that Chōnen also thought cypress fans were more suitable for the emperor, while paper folding fans might be presented as novelties. It is also worth noting that almost all of the collapsible fans preserved from the Heian period were cypress fans. A large number of paper folding fans do survive from the fifteenth century. But even if we take the difference between preserving wooden products and paper products into consideration, the surviving numbers still reflect different manufacturing situations at different times. Production of paper folding fans blossomed much later, probably no earlier than the fifteenth century.

The Japanese folding fan that the Chinese scholar-official came across at the temple market in Kaifeng was clearly a paper fan. Although paper folding fans were seen as inappropriate in formal settings by contemporary Japanese aristocrats, they were sought-after luxury commodities for Chinese scholar-officials in the eleventh century, while the more expensive cypress fans probably would not even appear in a public market. During the Northern Song dynasty, China and Japan did not have any official diplomatic relationship, so private merchants replaced tribute envoys, becoming the principal actors transporting Japanese commodities, such as gold and sulfur, to China (von Verschuer 2006: 65). But luxurious objects like folding fans also arrived in China in another important way—via the Korean peninsula by diplomatic channels.

Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛 (active 1070–75), an eminent art critic and connoisseur, recorded of folding fans brought to the Song by Koryō embassy members: “Every time the Koryō court sends emissaries to the Middle Kingdom [China], some of them would bring folding fans as commodities for private trade” (*Tuhua jianwen zhi*, 6.254). Guo's record is consistent with the common practice that the members of tribute delegations, although presenting tribute to Chinese emperors was their primary mission, actually were allowed to bring some commodities themselves for private trade in China. This practice was a way to compensate the embassy members and was also a motivation for them.<sup>3</sup> That Koryō embassy members brought folding fans suggested that they knew the fans were popular and profitable commodities in China. The fans that Koryō embassy members brought were in fact made in Japan. Guo records: “These [folding fans] were called ‘Japanese wo fans’ [by the Koryō people] because they originated in the Wo country. In recent years,

they have been especially treasured because the custodians of foreign visitors seldom obtain them” (6.254–55).

Guo Ruoxu was born into a military family, and he once served as an embassy member to the Khitan Liao court (Li Tao, *Xu Zizhitongjian changbian*, 255.6235). Guo might have seen some folding fans himself; at least he had reliable information about them. His description of the folding fans also fits with the Japanese fan at the temple market in Kaifeng:

The fans are made of dark blue paper, on which are the images of the Japanese aristocrats, with ladies or horses; some depict golden sand banks near water, with lotuses, flowers, and water birds, which are all arranged in a delicate way in the picture. Furthermore, there are clouds and moonlight depicted in silver paint—very adorable.

其扇用鴉青紙為之，上畫本國豪貴，雜以婦人、鞍馬，或臨水為金沙灘，暨蓮荷花木水禽之類，點綴精巧。又以銀泥為雲氣月色之狀，極可愛。(Tuhua jianwen zhi, 6.254)

Images on cypress fans surviving from the Heian period contain many motifs that fit the descriptions by Guo Ruoxu and the scholar-official at the temple market. Itsukushima Shrine 厳島神社 preserves three cypress fans, which were probably from the same set. The images on the fans reflect different seasons, while trees, mountains, water, bridges, flying birds, and aristocrats are common motifs on all of them. The mountains and river banks are decorated with gold and silver paints, and the figures are gathered under trees, riding horses, or playing near the water (see fig. 1; Egami 1992, figs. 3–5). Japanese scholar Egami Yasushi 江上綏 (1992: 31) thinks these three fans were made in the twelfth century, which was close enough to the period when Guo Ruoxu and the other scholar-official saw the paper folding fans. These shared motifs indicate that during that time cypress and paper folding fans in Japan probably had similar images on them.

Another account further confirms the Korean Peninsula's intermediary position on the path of Japanese folding fans entering Northern Song China. After the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234) was founded, the Northern Song court worried increasingly about the potential threat from the Jin dynasty and thus tried to ensure that the Koryŏ dynasty remained loyal to the Song. In this circumstance, Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082–1135; r. 1100–1126) of the Song dispatched an embassy to Koryŏ in 1123. Xu Jing 徐兢 (1091–1153), the assistant general secretary of this embassy, finished an account of this trip in 1124. This *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 (*Illustrated Account of the Xuanhe Embassy to Koryŏ*) contained much valuable information about the customs and culture of the Koryŏ dynasty (Vermeersch 2016: 2–5). In his account, Xu Jing recorded several types of fans he saw in Koryŏ. The paper folding fans he described were very similar to those in Guo Ruoxu's writing: “Painted folding fans are decorated with gold and silver foil. Furthermore, local scenery, people and horses, and women are painted on them. But the Koryŏ people cannot [make them]. It is said that they are made in Japan, and looking at the clothing and other gifts the Koryŏ people gave me, I believe this is the case” (*Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing*, 29.103; Vermeersch 2016: 191). After describing paper folding fans, Xu

Jing wrote about cypress fans: “Cypress fans are not very refined. They just use Japanese cypress wood cut and sliced to resemble paper [strips], which are then strung together with colored cords so that [the wooden strips] are joined together like feathers. One can also stir the air with them” (Vermeersch 2016: 191–92).

It is clear that during the early twelfth century Japanese folding fans circulated among the Koryō elite commonly enough for Xu Jing to see them and that people were fully aware of the difference between paper folding fans and cypress fans. Interestingly, Xu Jing considered the supposedly more formal cypress fans to be less refined than the paper folding fans. It is possible that the best cypress fans remained in Japan for aristocrats’ exclusive use, but perhaps Xu Jing’s appreciation for paper folding fans indicated Chinese scholar-officials’ taste, presaging the trend away from cypress fans and toward paper folding fans in the following centuries.

Although both Xu Jing and the local people in Koryō confirmed that the fine manufacturing and decorative skills required to make paper folding fans were still beyond the capability of Koryō artisans, Koryō was probably producing lower-quality folding fans by then. Xu Jing recorded another type of folding fan in the same account, which were called “white folding fans”: “White folding fans are made by rigging bamboo strips as a skeleton that is then covered over with cut rice paper. Here and there silver and copper nails are applied for decoration. Those with more bamboo are considered precious. People who run errands put them inside their chest or sleeves; they are very convenient to use” (Vermeersch 2016: 192). The white folding fans seem to have been domestically produced in the Korean peninsula, but maybe because they were mainly used by lower-class people (people running errands), they were not exported to China in large numbers, nor did they receive much attention from the Chinese literati.

When Japanese folding fans arrived among the Northern Song literati in China, they were, on the one hand, rare, exotic handicrafts, and on the other hand, products made in a neighboring, foreign land that used to be under China’s influence. Facing both the commercial and cultural values of the fans, the literati often inserted many allusions when writing about Japanese folding fans. Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112), brother of the eminent scholar and writer Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), wrote a poem about Japanese fans, although he did not even own one:

The fans came from Japan, while the breeze is not Japanese breeze.

The breeze does not come from within the fan; so I ask the breeze where it comes from.

The breeze does not know, either: you have to ask the Great Emptiness of the atmosphere. If the atmosphere is the origin of the breeze, then the atmosphere could be equal with physical objects.

But the atmosphere is obviously not a physical object, so it cannot be the progenitor of breeze.

All we can do is hold the Japanese fan and enjoy the inexhaustible breeze it makes.

扇從日本來，風非日本風。風非扇中出，問風本何從。

風亦不自知，當復問大空。空若是風穴，既自與物同。

同物豈空性，是物非風宗。但執日本扇，風來自無窮。(Su Zhe, *Luancheng ji*, 13.321)



The language in Su Zhe's poem is very simple and almost playful, while the meaning is abstruse. Su Zhe was apparently amused by the Japanese fans—interested enough to write a poem on them. It is worth noting that “breeze” or “wind” has frequently been connected with Chinese supremacy or benevolence in other poems on imported fans.<sup>4</sup> In his poem, by pointing out that the physical features of the fans would not change the nature of the breeze, Su Zhe also separated the Japanese origin of the fans from their practical functions. Perhaps he was also suggesting that the appreciation of exotic products made in foreign lands like Japan would not affect the supremacy of Chinese civilization—the breeze.

Since information regarding how Japanese folding fans circulated among Chinese literati in the Northern Song is very limited, I use a case of exchanging and writing about exotic fans from Koryō to show how these foreign handicrafts circulated and were viewed among scholar-officials. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, although the white folding fans from Koryō were not for elite people, Koryō was producing another type of fan that was much treasured by Chinese literati. These fans were called “song fans” (*songshan* 松扇), which literally means “fans made of pine.”<sup>5</sup> Xu Jing recorded how these pine fans were made. According to Xu, artisans selected the soft limbs of pine trees, cut them into narrow strips, pounded the strips into threads, and wove the threads to make fans. The fans had patterns on them, and those bestowed on the embassy members by the Koryō court were among the best (Vermeersch 2016: 192).<sup>6</sup>

For scholar-officials of the Northern Song, pine fans were precious and desirable objects. Qian Xie 錢勰 (1034–97), a descendent of the royal family of the Wuyue 吳越 kingdom (907–78), visited Koryō as part of an embassy in 1079. The Wuyue kingdom was on good terms with Koryō before the Song unification, and this was the primary reason that Qian Xie was sent with this mission (Tuotuo, *Song shi*, 317.10349). Qian Xie brought back several pine fans from Koryō and gave them to his friends. These fans became the subject of many poems by some of the most famous scholar-officials of the time. Zhang Lei 張耒 (1054–1114), one of Su Shi's important followers, received a pine fan from Qian Xie and wrote a poem titled “In Gratitude to Qian Xie for his Present of the Koryō Fan” 謝錢穆父惠高麗扇 (“Zhang youshi wenji,” 12.105). Su Shi and his friend Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), although they did not receive similar gifts from Qian Xie, also showed great interest in the exotic fan. They both wrote poems in response to Zhang Lei's and depicted the pine fan in them. Su Shi personalized the fan and started his poem with, “What a pity for Mr. Eighteenth, who did not enter the Mingguang Palace even until he died of old age!” 可憐堂上十八公,老死不入明光宮 (*Dongpo shiji zhu*, 30.19b–20a). Here “Mr. Eighteenth” is an alternative literary name for pine, since the sinographs for Mr. Eighteenth, 十八公, when put together, create the character for pine, 松. Su Shi continued with how the pine tree could not gain its deserved attention until it was made into fans; after the dust on the pine fans was cleaned up, they would then be praised and have a position in the literati's collected works. Su Shi ended the poem by saying that the situation of the pine fans was still better than that of the round fans hung in the unfavored concubines' rooms, covered with spider webs that obscured the image of the ascending goddess.

Kong Wuzhong 孔武仲 (1042–97), who was also in Su Shi and Huang Tingji-an's circle, even wrote a poem begging for a fan from Qian Xie. His poem described the journey from the Song court to Koryŏ as dangerous and the land of Koryŏ as distant and barbarous but most suitable for the growth of pine (Kong, Kong, and Kong, *Qingjiang san Kong ji*, 6.1a–b). Apparently, Kong Wuzhong's wish was fulfilled, since he later wrote another poem to thank Qian Xie for the gift of a Koryŏ fan. Kong wrote that since it was already autumn and getting cold, he had not had a chance to use the Koryŏ fan but instead hung it up in his hall. Kong also mentioned that he gave a large piece of high-quality paper made in Meizhou (modern Guangdong Province) as a reciprocal gift to Qian Xie. Interestingly, Kong emphasized the exotic nature of this Meizhou paper, specifically saying that it was made by “barbarians stepping on it bare-footed in the creeks” 蠻奴赤腳踏溪流 (6.1b–2a).

To those scholar-officials who were the most eminent intellectuals of their time, writing poems on exotic objects was never just about the objects themselves. They always embedded political implications in such poems, either to express their personal sentiments toward their circumstances or to comment on the relationship regarding the “Middle Kingdom” Song and its neighbors.<sup>7</sup> For example, when Zhang Lei wrote to thank Qian Xie for the Koryŏ fan, the last sentence in his poem read “Koryŏ's tradition of being sincere had lasted for more than a thousand years since the ancient time of Jizi” 千年淳風古箕子 (*Zhang youshi wenji*, 12.105). Jizi was the uncle of the last king of the Shang dynasty, and according to sources from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), King Wu of the Zhou dynasty designated Jizi (K. Kija) governor of the Korean peninsula, and that was the start of civilization there (*Shangshu zhengyi*, 12.296). Ending his poem with the legendary tributary relationship between the Korean peninsula and the continent in the ancient period, Zhang Lei was expressing a typical China-centered opinion by praising Koryŏ for having continued a tradition passed down from Jizi.

To sum up, when Japanese folding fans first appeared in China during the Northern Song dynasty, they were rare and exotic objects—almost exclusively for high scholar-official circles. China and Japan did not have official diplomatic relations then, so the fans were either expensive commodities in markets or favored gifts among Chinese scholar-officials. The Korean peninsula played an intermediary role in the passage of Japanese folding fans to the continent, which also prompted the development of their manufacture on the peninsula. Due to their low availability and high level of craftsmanship, the exotic fans were of high commercial value and therefore almost unaffordable to many literati. But when the literati wrote about the fans they avidly pursued, they never forgot their cultural value and used many political metaphors from a China-centered view.

### **Imported Commercial Commodities and the Start of Domestic Production: Folding Fans in Southern Song and Yuan China**

In 1127 Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty, fell to the nomadic Jurchen army, and Emperor Huizong and his son Emperor Qinzong 欽宗 (1100–1161; r. 1126–27), along with many imperial family members and officials, were



taken to the far north by the invaders. Zhao Gou 趙構 (1107–87; r. 1127–62), Emperor Qinzong's brother, managed to escape and established a new capital in Hangzhou in southeastern China. Although the Song court never recovered its northern territory, the import and consumption of exotic luxuries grew apace (Shiba 1993: 202–6). Prosperous commercial districts with a high level of commodity specialization developed in the capital of Hangzhou, and the domestic production of folding fans in China also started. The domestic production to some extent increased the availability of folding fans but did not decrease the commercial or cultural value of imported fans. Chinese scholar-officials continued to praise the craftsmanship of imported folding fans while at the same time using them to express their understanding of the relationship between China and Japan, which more than once failed to reflect the real situation.

The art critic Deng Chun 鄧椿 (active 1127–67) followed the model of Guo Ruoxu and wrote another treatise on the history of painting, titled *Huaji* 畫繼 (*Continued History of Painting*). Like Guo Ruoxu, Deng Chun also described imported fans in detail, probably because they were the few painted images by foreign artisans that circulated in China at the time. The Japanese folding fans Deng described were just like the cypress folding fans presented to Emperor Taizong by the Japanese monk Ka'in. Deng wrote: “Wo Japanese fans were made of two-finger-width pine-tree slips piling up on each other, just like the folding fans. . . . Landscapes, figures, pine trees, and bamboos, as well as flowers and grasses, were drawn on the wooden slips, which are quite lovely” (*Huaji*, 10.424). Deng further mentioned that Wang Xuan 王軒, a relative of Emperor Huizong's first empress, once served in a post related to maritime trade in Mingzhou (modern Ningbo), so he received two fans of that type.

Deng Chun himself grew up in a four-generation scholar-official family. His grandfather Deng Xunwu 鄧洵武 (1055–1121) once served as the military chancellor for Emperor Huizong (*Songshi*, 329.10599–601). Deng Chun's family background and connections gave him convenient access to elite circles, as well as rare and valuable artworks. Deng's record suggests that Japanese-made folding fans were still very precious in China at that time. He directly related obtaining Japanese folding fans with serving in the Maritime Trade Office (*shibosi* 市舶司), indicating that acquiring those exotic fans was a rare opportunity and a privilege available only to a small circle. Mingzhou was the most important port in Sino-Japanese trade during the twelfth century, and Wang Xuan probably received the fans from merchants from Japan in exchange for favor, as the maritime officials in Song China held great power over merchants' commercial activities (Xu Song, *Songhuiyao jigao*, zhiguan 44.24, 44.27; Schottenhammer 2016: 158–62).

In the same account, Deng Chun recorded important information regarding the domestic production of folding fans in China. When Deng mentioned imported paper folding fans, he said: “Some other [fans] are made of paper, using zither-lacquer bamboo as the handle. They are like the folding fans made in our city markets, but the Chinese-made ones could not reach their level of delicacy. [The fans] are as wide as one foot and three or four inches when open, and only two-fingers wide when closed” (*Huaji*, 10.424).<sup>8</sup>

Accounts of urban life in the capital of Hangzhou provide more evidence. For example, *Mengliang lu* 夢梁錄 by Wu Zimu 吳自牧 (ca. thirteenth century) has a long list of hundreds of different specialized shops in the commercial district in Hangzhou, including medicine shops, clothing shops, jewelry shops, and even shops for scarves and needles. Three fan shops appear on the list: “Comb-Like-Skeleton Bamboo Fan Shop under the Tan Bridge” 炭橋河下青篛扇子鋪, “Painted Round Fan Shop of the Chens” 陳家畫團扇鋪, and “Zhou’s Folding Fan Shop” 周家摺摺扇鋪 (13.117). These three fan shops each sold a specific type of fan, which indicated a highly specialized commerce at the time. Since imported folding fans were still very precious in the Southern Song, it is unlikely that Zhou’s Folding Fan Shop could sell only imported fans, so it must have relied on the domestic production of folding fans. Furthermore, *Mengliang lu* (7.60) also mentions a “Fan Alley” 扇子巷 in Hangzhou, outside the commercial district. Perhaps that was an area where many workshops making fans were concentrated.

Chinese artisans even innovated when producing folding fans. To satisfy wealthy buyers, Chinese-made folding fans were sometimes more extravagant than Japanese and Korean ones. The scholar-official Zhao Yanwei 趙彥衛 (fl. 1195) wrote, “Nowadays people are using folding fans, which are made of bamboo and damask silk. Some of the wealthy families are using ivory as the fan skeletons and decorate the fans with gold and silver [paints]. [Folding fans] perhaps originated from Koryŏ . . . and the Chinese people are making fans in a more luxurious style” (*Yunlu manchao*, 4.68).<sup>9</sup> Neither written records nor visual evidence shows that Japanese or Koreans made folding fans with ivory prior to the twelfth century, so it is most likely that, just as Zhao Yanwei said, using ivory as the fan bones was a practice initiated by rich Chinese buyers. As the availability of folding fans increased after domestic production developed, the rich probably wanted to further distinguish themselves from others by using more expensive materials. Interestingly, this practice was further encouraged by European buyers several centuries later (Irŏns 1981: 59; Huang 2017: 84).

While the domestic production of folding fans was already taking shape in China, importing folding fans from Japan had never stopped, and similar to the previous century, intellectuals in China were still using imported folding fans to express their understanding of the relationship between China and its surrounding states. Gong Xingzhi 貢性之 (dates unknown), a literatus in the Mongol Yuan 元 dynasty (1276–1368), wrote a poem titled “Japanese Wo Fans” 倭扇 with a strong political implication:

The outside barbarians have mastered marvelous skills, while the paints under their brushes show inexhaustible cleverness. / [Their sending of the fans] is just like the state of Yuechang sending the feathers of kingfishers, which shows that they are following China under the breeze of benevolence.

外番巧藝奪天工，筆底丹青智莫窮。好似越裳供翡翠，也從中國被仁風。(Nanhu ji, 2.30a)

Yuechang is a legendary state that most ancient scholars located in modern Vietnam. *The Book of Documents* 尚書 recorded that the state of Yuechang once sent

white pheasants as tribute to the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty (1046–771 BCE; *Shangshu dazhuan*, 2.86–87). Thus, in this poem, Gong Xingzhi was clearly equating Japanese fans with other tribute that had been presented to Chinese emperors, while the “wind of benevolence” once again served as a symbol connecting folding fans with China’s cultural supremacy.

The Japanese archipelago and the Chinese continent, however, were not in a tributary relationship at all during the Yuan dynasty. After the establishment of the Yuan, Kublai Khan (1215–94) tried to make Japan submit to the Mongol Empire by launching two invasions in 1274 and 1281. Both attempts failed, and Japan managed to retain its independence (Conlan 2001: 254–59). Meanwhile, military conflict did not hinder commercial exchange between the continent and the archipelago. Sea merchants kept transporting ceramics, copper coins, and sandalwood from China to Japan and brought mercury, paper, raw silk, and luxuries, such as folding fans, from Japan to China (von Verschuer 2006: 84, 90, 99). Thus, as much as Gong Xingzhi tried to relate the Japanese fans with tribute, they were simply commodities during that period.

Another scholar-official in the Yuan, Wu Lai 吳萊 (1297–1340), depicted a more realistic picture of Sino-Japanese relations in his poem on Japanese folding fans. After praising the delicacy of the folding fans like other poets, Wu Lai wrote, “The descendants of Xu Fu boarded the speedy ships, while Chōnen’s family has possessed Sanskrit sutras for generations” 徐市子孫附飛舲，裔然家世雜梵經 (*Yuan ying ji*, 2.30a). Wu Lai was emphasizing the long history of exchange between the continent and the archipelago in this sentence: from Xu Fu 徐市 (also known as Xu Fu 徐福), who lived in the second century BCE and was said to have led five hundred young couples from the continent to Japan and thus became one ancestor of the people on the archipelago, to Chōnen, the Japanese monk whose disciple brought folding fans with other gifts to Emperor Taizong of the Song. Wu Lai further wrote a crucial sentence regarding Sino-Japanese exchanges during this period: “The exotic objects from the distant region should be presented to the court, while the wealthy merchants boarded enormous ships, reading the stars in the sky [to find their way to China]” 殊方異物須陳廷，富賈巨舶窺天星 (2.30a; Lü 2013: 143).

Unlike Gong Xingzhi, Wu Lai did not try to fabricate a tributary relationship between the Yuan and Japan but, rather, admitted that it was the merchant group who played a key role in bringing Japanese folding fans, along with other “exotic objects,” to Yuan China. Wu Lai was actually an expert on Sino-Japanese relations, and his poem embodied his opinion of how the Yuan court should maintain its relationship with Japan. Around the year 1315, when the Yuan court was debating whether to attack Japan again, Wu Lai wrote an essay titled “Discussing the Wo Japanese” (“Lun Wo” 論倭) that received wide recognition among his contemporary scholar-officials. In this essay, Wu argued that instead of deploying troops, the Yuan court should just allow the Japanese to come to trade. Since the Japanese people were pursuing profit, they would naturally come to China and behave properly (*Yuan ying ji*, 5.1a–6b).

From the early fourteenth century until the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, the real situation between China and Japan was close to what Wu Lai envisioned.

The Yuan court did not launch another invasion but permitted ships from Japan to land, as long as they genuinely intended to trade (Song Lian, *Yuan shi*, 10.206, 132.3217; Enomoto 2007: 106–7). With more direct merchant activity between China and Japan, Japanese folding fans did not have to pass through the Korean peninsula to enter China. Although China's domestic production had already started, the scale and techniques of folding fan manufacturing in China seem to have been underdeveloped. Chinese statesmen, on the one hand, admired the advanced craftsmanship manifested in the imported fans. On the other hand, they interpreted the symbolic meaning of the fans as they saw fit, occasionally pretending that the exotic commodities were tribute. The meaning of the fans, however, would undergo dramatic changes soon after, since the Sino-Japanese relationship underwent major changes in the coming Ming dynasty.

### **Tributary Goods and the Brand of “Japan”:**

#### **Folding Fans in Early Ming China**

In 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–98; r. 1368–98), a low-born Han Chinese, overthrew Mongol governance and became the founding Hongwu Emperor 洪武 of the Ming dynasty. Soon after he established the new dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang dispatched envoys to Southeast Asia and Japan to announce his enthronement and invite tribute, with the purpose of legitimizing his authority (Yutani Minoru, *Nichimin kangō bōeki shiryō*, 16; Brook 2010: 220). But the political situation in the Japanese archipelago at that moment was complicated, with a Northern court in Kyoto coexisting with a Southern court in Yoshino in modern Nara Prefecture. Only after the Hongwu Emperor sent another envoy to Japan in 1370, urging it to pay tribute, did Prince Kaneyoshi 懷良親王 (1329–83), the king of the southern court of Japan at the time, send a delegation in 1371 to present a letter and Japanese local products to Hongwu. The emperor reciprocated with fine fabric and a Chinese calendar (Zhang Tingyu, *Ming shi*, 322:8342; Yutani Minoru, *Nichimin kangō bōeki shiryō*, 17–18). The exchanges between the Hongwu Emperor and Prince Kaneyoshi were much simpler than those during the previous tributary era in the eighth and ninth centuries, and although Hongwu bestowed a Chinese calendar on Prince Kaneyoshi, Kaneyoshi seems never to have used Chinese reign years in any documents or letters to the Ming emperor (Murai and Hashimoto 2015: 30–34). However, with economic profit as the major goal, Prince Kaneyoshi dispatched missions to the Ming court in 1376 and 1379, and many Japanese folding fans were exported to Ming China in this way (Yutani Minoru, *Nichimin kangō bōeki shiryō*, 20–21).

These folding fans appeared in many high officials' poems, since the Hongwu Emperor distributed them to the officials as gifts. For example, Zhang Yu 張羽 (1333–85), who served Hongwu and was well known for his calligraphy and poems, wrote at least four poems on the Japanese folding fans he received from the emperor (*Jingju ji*, 1.52a, 3.11b, 6.4b, 6.24b). Like his predecessors in the Song dynasty, Zhang Yu mentioned the foldability of the fans,<sup>10</sup> but more interestingly, he kept emphasizing how useless the folding fans were to Ming China: “Japan offers a tribute of fans every year. / But since our imperial capital city does not have hot summers, [the emperor] just bestows the fans on us to brush off dust

and dirt” 萬國扶桑外,年年貢扇來。皇都無酷暑,賜與拂塵埃。(Jingju ji, 6.4b). He also wrote: “The emperor received the tribute [of folding fans] but they are of no use to him, so he bestowed the fans to share with his officials. / . . . The Wo fans come from the eastern barbarians, and the imperial winds have already pacified the four seas” 尚方受貢應無用,分頒徧與群臣共。 . . . . . 倭扇來東夷,平揚皇風四海清。(3.11b).

The fans that Zhang Yu received from the Hongwu Emperor were essentially tribute from Japan. Thus, Zhang’s poems displayed only the fans’ cultural and political value and dismissed their commercial value completely. The poems present a typical view on tribute among Chinese officials, which was that China did not need anything from foreign countries and that the tributary relationship was simply a generous gesture from the Chinese emperor to his subordinates. Zhang Yu was so eager to prove the “uselessness” of imported folding fans that he was outright dishonest about the weather in the Ming capital. During Hongwu’s reign, the capital was modern Nanjing in the lower Yangzi Delta, a city famous for its steamy, hot summers. It is interesting to compare Zhang Yu’s writing with the aforementioned Song dynasty literatus Zhang Lei’s poem on the pine fans: Zhang Lei specifically mentioned that “everyone is bathed in sweat in the capital [Kaifeng] during the sixth lunar month” (Zhang Lei, *Zhang youshi wenji*, 12.105) to express his gratitude at possessing an exotic fan.

Pacifying Japan with the wind of imperial benevolence did not go as well as the Hongwu Emperor wished. In 1380, Hongwu rejected the Japanese mission on the grounds that it did not carry the correct documentation (Brook 2010: 221). And in 1386 he ended the relationship with Japan altogether, using a fabricated charge that a Ming military officer had colluded with the Japanese to rebel against the emperor (J. Wang 2018: 64). Meanwhile the so-called Japanese pirates—many of whom were actually ethnically Chinese—kept raiding and disturbing the social order on the southeast coast of China.

Thus, to the Hongwu Emperor, the Japanese-made folding fans suddenly embodied Japanese unruliness. Hongwu composed a long poem titled “The Japanese Wo Fans” 倭扇行:

There is a peculiar region located in the wide sea, where the people have a custom of admiring fans. / The fans, which can be folded and opened, are in a shape neither square nor round. The valiant soldiers [of my country] presented the fans [they confiscated from Japanese pirates] to me. / The king of Japan does not follow the right way, while his subjects became thieves. They have disturbed the living beings, so both the deities and the ghosts resented them.

滄溟之中有奇甸,人風俗禮奇尚扇。卷舒非矩亦非規,列陣健兒首投獻。國王無道民為賊,擾害生靈神鬼怨。(Zhu Yuanzhang, *Ming Taizu wenji*, 19.221)

The most intriguing aspect of the poem is that the Hongwu Emperor connected the shape of the folding fans with Japanese insubordination and failure to pay tribute to China. In Chinese, the term “the shape of square or round” (*guiju* 規矩)

also means “rules.” This is why the emperor specifically mentioned the shape of the Japanese folding fans: he viewed it as a manifestation of Japanese kings’ and people’s lack of respect for rules. To the Hongwu Emperor, one of the most important of these was to pay tribute to China. Later in this poem, he continued criticizing certain Japanese customs, such as shaving the head and not wearing proper shoes, and even ridiculed the Japanese language, saying it was like the sound of frogs. He ended this poem by using another pun related to fans: “Now I know that it only needs a single flourish to be all in my hand. The Japanese Wo slaves will have to adapt to the changes someday” 今知一揮掌握中,異日倭奴必此變 (Zhu Yuanzhang, *Ming Taizu wenji*, 19.221). Since the folding fans could be closed very easily, they literally could be held in one’s hand after a single motion of the hand. Meanwhile, “in one’s hand” also means “in one’s control,” and because the Japanese also used fans to signal their troops, Hongwu was probably indicating that, as the new emperor of China, he could easily order his troops to assert his authority over Japan soon.

The Hongwu Emperor’s aspiration was realized by his son, Emperor Yongle 永樂 of the Ming (1360–1424; r. 1402–24). The formal tribute trade between China and Japan officially resumed when Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408), the third shogun of the Ashikaga shogunate, accepted the title “King of Japan” from Emperor Yongle and dispatched a delegation of more than three hundred people to China in 1403 (Zuikai Shūhō, *Zenrin kokuhōki*, 112). Folding fans remained important commodities that Japan exported to China via tribute trade. The contents of the tribute in 1403 included 20 horses, 10,000 pounds of sulfur, 32 agates weighing over 200 pounds in total, 3 folding screens with gold backgrounds, 1,000 spears, 100 swords, a suit of armor, an ink stone with a box, and 100 fans (Zuikai Shūhō, *Zenrin kokuhōki*, 112). As a component of the tribute trade, Chinese emperors reciprocated after they received tribute, and usually the return gifts were of a higher value, making the tribute trade profitable for the subordinates. Ming records did not provide a full list of the exact amount of the return gifts from Emperor Yongle in 1403. But in 1405, when Yoshimitsu again sent envoys to present tribute, Emperor Yongle in return gave Yoshimitsu 500 strings of copper coins, 5,000 monetary notes worth another 750–1,000 strings of copper coins, 378 bolts of fine fabric, and a court robe (Yutani Minoru, *Nichimin kangō bōeki shiryō*, 84). Folding fans were continuously on the list of Japanese tribute to China. Almost every tribute delegation brought more than one hundred fans to the Ming court. For example, in 1433 the Japanese tributary mission brought 2,200 fans to China, in 1453 they brought 250, and in 1468 the number was 380 (von Verschuer 2006: 128–29, 159; Miyajima 1993: 34).

Similar to the Koryō envoys to the Song court, when the tribute envoys and their companion merchants traveled from Japan to the Ming court, they were allowed to bring their own commodities to sell there, and folding fans made up an important portion of such commodities for private trade (Yutani Minoru, *Nichimin kangō bōeki shiryō*, 83, 87; Lü 2013: 147). The list of imported commodities from Japan during the Yongle reign in Ningbo local gazetteers recorded various types of Japanese folding fans, including fans with gold foil or silver foil on one or both



sides, fans with gold painted images, and paper fans (Gao Yutai, *Jingzhi lu*, 20.460; Lü 2013: 147). Given that the tribute gifts were sent to the capital at Beijing, and Ningbo was the trade port where ships from Japan arrived, the Japanese fans listed in Ningbo gazetteers were most likely commodities brought by the embassy members themselves. A miscellaneous account from 1583, *Shuyu zhouzi lu* 殊域周咨錄, recorded an incident regarding a Japanese named Tōshigorō 湯四五郎, who came to Ningbo with a Japanese tribute mission in 1496. Tōshigorō had brought Japanese fans and swords with him and entrusted local trade agents in Ningbo to help him sell these commodities (Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhouzi lu*, 2; Csaba 2008: 321–22).

The tribute trade and companion private trade by the envoys created a steady flow of Japanese folding fans into China. The number of folding fans increased so dramatically in the Ming that some Ming and Qing (1644–1911) literati even mistakenly thought folding fans originated with the Ming (Wang T. 2001: 66). The production of paper folding fans in Japan started growing from the late fourteenth century (for an example of a paper folding fan produced during that period, see fig. 2). Increasing demand for exportation probably contributed to the further development of folding fan production in Japan—many more workshops making paper folding fans appeared, and the manufacturing procedures became more and more specialized (Miyajima 1993: 34–41).

Even though some scholar-officials demeaned the value of Japanese folding fans in the tributary framework, the commercial value of the Japanese fans in Chinese markets held steady. A long, humorous poem written by Wang Fu 王紱 (1362–1416), a scholar-official and painter in the early Ming, provides crucial information about the trade in Japanese folding fans, the domestic production of folding fans in China, and more important, how “Japan” itself became a brand with value in markets:

The Japanese Wo people folded the silk-paper making fans, on which the crescent is shining, as the fans are covered with silver foil.

The court receives tribute every year, while the people in the capital fight to pay high prices for the leftover fans.

The craftsmen in Hangzhou are skilled and guileful, and they want to compete for the profit: the folding fans they make are in general no different from the Japanese ones.

The prices are much cheaper; the Chinese people, however, are not satisfied with [the locally made folding fans] because they think only the Japanese-made folding fans are authentic.

When the Japanese arrive in China, they pass by Hangzhou and buy Hangzhou-made fans at a low price.

Please do not be surprised at Japanese buying Hangzhou fans, since in no time you will see them selling these fans at a higher price at the other end of the street.

Those who have bought the fans from the Japanese brag how authentic those folding fans are after they return home, and their reason is that they have bought the fans from real Japanese people.

倭人繭紙折為扇，缺月生輝銀滿面。闕下年年多貢餘，都人重購何紛如。  
 杭工巧黠思爭利，效倭為扇渾無異。價廉百十人不嫌，說是倭來方地道。  
 倭來道便經杭州，廉價卻將杭扇收。倭收杭扇堪驚怪，轉眼街頭高價賣。  
 買扇還家誇扇真，街頭持賣真倭人。（Wang Sheren shiji, 2.103）

It seems from the poem that the domestic production of folding fans in China reached a new level in the early Ming, especially in the lower Yangzi Delta, which had a long tradition of communicating with Japan. As mentioned in the previous section, fan shops had already appeared in Hangzhou in the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties. According to the poem, to most people the Hangzhou-made fans were almost indistinguishable from the Japanese-made ones.

Lang Ying 郎瑛 (1487–1566), a literatus from Hangzhou, specifically mentioned how the Chinese craftsmen learned certain techniques from Japan that they applied to fan making. Lang said that Chinese traditional craftsmanship included the skill of attaching gold foil for decoration but did not include painting gold outline (*miaojin* 描金) or sprinkling gold dust on a paper or lacquer surface (*sajin* 洒金). Because Ningbo hosted Japanese envoys often, Lang said, the people there learned about these techniques from the Japanese, although the artisans in Ningbo still could not sprinkle gold dust in a perfectly round shape. The techniques mentioned by Lang Ying were primarily for lacquer manufacturing, but given that high-quality Japanese folding fans also used gold or silver for decoration, as mentioned in various records and shown in figure 2, these techniques were also important in fan making. The artisans in Ningbo thus possessed an advantage in producing fans that most closely resembled the original Japanese ones. “As a result, the fake Japanese *Wo* fans were also made by the people in Ningbo” (Lang Ying, *Qi xiu lei gao*, 45.476). Ningbo and Hangzhou are geographically proximate, about 150 kilometers apart, and the frequent contact with Japanese visitors accounted for the ability to make high-quality folding fans at workshops in this region of the lower Yangzi Delta.

A more intriguing point from Wang Fu’s long poem is the value of the brand “Japan” to the consumers. Likely as Wang Fu depicted, most of the buyers could not tell the difference between a Chinese-made folding fan and a Japanese-made one, but they would rather pay much more money for the “Japan brand.” Although Wang Fu’s poem made it look like it was the mass consumers who fell for the trick, during his years the price of imported Japanese fans was probably beyond the reach of commoners. For example, the Japanese monk Shōun Zuikin 笑雲瑞訢 (dates unknown) said that when he traveled to Ming China in 1451, he only brought four fans with him, and he used one of the fans to trade for a whole set of *Hanmo quanshu* 翰墨全書, a 125-volume encyclopedia edited and published in the late Yuan dynasty (Zuikai Shūhō, *Gaun hikkenroku Batsuyū*, 107). The art historian Shi Shouqian 石守謙 (Shih Shou-Chien) also points out that probably only until the late sixteenth century, folding fans—domestically made ones—were not exclusive to literati (Shi 2010: 32).

Folding fans were indeed widely accepted and used in literati life. Many folding fans—usually of domestic manufacture—were excavated from tombs of Ming literati



**Figure 3.** Folding fan with bamboo skeleton and silk paper. 32 × 55 cm. Excavated from the tomb of Zhu Yiyin, King Yixuan of the Ming dynasty 益宣王朱翊鉞 (1537–1603). Courtesy of Wenwu Press. See Jiangxi sheng bowuguan 江西省博物館, ed., *Jiangxi Mingdai fanwang mu* 江西明代藩王墓 (*Ming-Dynasty Prince Tombs in Jiangxi*). Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2010, pl. 62.6.

and imperial family members in the lower Yangzi Delta. At least sixty-five folding fans were found in seventeen Ming tombs, and they were commonly placed near the tomb occupants. Many of the fans were in the Japanese style, with a solid gold ground or with many gold dots spread across the paper surface (see fig. 3; Xia 2008: 79).

As a famous painter, Wang Fu had a reputation for being unwilling to sell his works for money, which aligned with his satire toward the buyers in his poem. Wang himself was from the lower Yangzi Delta region, so he may have witnessed or heard stories about such scenes. The enthusiastic buyers Wang depicted were most likely literati—and might have included some wealthy people who endeavored to adopt the literati lifestyle. Therefore, although some statesmen portrayed Japanese fans as useless, outside the tributary framework Japanese folding fans were still the exotic objects that literati pursued as passionately as four centuries before. On the market, “Japan” meant a guarantee of superb quality in objects that could be used to lift one’s social status or to attract the envy of others, rather than a region to be pacified by the Chinese emperor’s benevolence. A comparison with another type of regular tribute good from Japan, swords, further shows how the literati’s zeal made a significant difference. Unlike folding fans, swords were not particularly compatible with literati life and consequently were not in great demand. In 1432, a Japanese tribute mission brought 3,052 swords, and the Ming court paid 10,000 coins per unit in return; in 1478, the price for each sword that the Ming court paid fell to 3,000 coins; and in 1511, among the 7,000 swords that Japan presented, the Ming court even returned 4,000 of them, as they did not want to pay for them (von Verschuer 2006: 158).

The increasing popularity of folding fans in China together with improved Sino-Japanese relations prompted the domestic production of folding fans. Emperor Yongle, unlike his father, “was very fond of folding fans, because they are easy to



**Figure 4.** Landscape painting on paper folding fan, by Li Liufang 李流芳 (1575–1629), 1627. 16.5×51.7 cm. Collection of Tokyo National Museum. Image accessed from webarchives .tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/C0088331.

open and close, and he ordered [palace] artisans to make fans following that model” (Lu Rong, *Shuyuan zaji*, 5.53). Fan-making workshops were thus established to produce more fans that Yongle liked, and perhaps also to follow the new fashion trend. They were not limited to the lower Yangzi Delta region. Palace artisans and regions with a long tradition of producing round fans and good natural resources for doing so, such as Sichuan in southwestern China, also joined in. According to an early seventeenth-century source, Sichuan was at first designated to send 11,540 folding fans to the imperial court as local tribute, and by 1551 the number had already increased by 2,100 (Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 26.662). Some Ming literati also started drawing landscape paintings just for paper folding fans, and this practice gained increasing popularity in intellectual circles (see fig. 4). Later, the albums containing folding-fan-sized paintings were even exported to Japan and became references for Japanese craftsmen (Shi 2010: 19–40).

### Conclusion

Folding fans were one of the few types of handicrafts for which Japan possessed better manufacturing skills than China over a long period of time. They provide a unique lens through which to investigate Sino-Japanese relations, since these can be examined within the tributary-relationship framework and the private-trade framework at the same time. Chinese scholar-officials, who generally admired the delicate Japanese-made folding fans, chose to emphasize different values of the fans in different contexts. Taken together, their writings depicted a seemingly self-contradictory image of the fans. When the scholar-officials wrote for public display, such as in poems thanking the emperor or diplomat friends for presents, Japanese folding fans were symbols of a neighboring country under Chinese influence, or they were tribute items of no practical use in China. When the scholar-officials took miscellaneous notes recording their daily experience, some of them did not hide their longing for the exotic fans, while some ridiculed their contemporaries’ avid pursuit of the “Japan” brand.

The tribute relationship between China and Japan had been suspended during the tenth to fourteenth centuries. But as the circulation of Japanese folding fans shows, Japanese products still found their way to China, either via a detoured official conduit through the Korean peninsula or via private maritime traders. Foreign objects were a channel that gave Chinese scholar-officials access to the world beyond China. The records of their real-life experience indicate that many of the scholar-officials were quite willing to accept fine foreign products, and furthermore, they did not hesitate to admit that countries like Japan, which were supposed to be culturally inferior, could manufacture items surpassing Chinese products. The vivid, detailed accounts about the delicacy of the folding fans and people's passion toward them suggest that scholar-officials were not ignorant of the world and its products outside their "Middle Kingdom." On the contrary, the rhetoric of tribute in their public writings was probably a way for the scholar-officials to reconcile the reality that in technique the Japanese fans were better, but their cultural value was low. As Wang Gungwu (1983: 62) points out in his study of the Song dynasty, Song scholar-officials also used the rhetoric of tribute when they were fully aware of the reality, simply because it was "immensely comforting and reassuring."

The separation of Japanese folding fans' commercial value and cultural value probably contributed to their domestic production in China. One and the same type of commodity could be both useless tribute and desirable exotic simultaneously. The development of domestic production of folding fans in China was driven by the Japanese fans' commercial value, which did not depreciate even when they were indeed imported as part of tribute goods in the fifteenth century. To some extent, being "useless tribute" legitimized the Japanese folding fans as "desirable exotics" among Chinese literati consumers.

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## NOTES

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1. Some earlier scholars' claims that folding fans were invented in China were proved to be wrong by more recent studies (Iröns 1982: 38).

2. Wang Y. 1996 (in Chinese) focuses on how folding fans were invented in Japan and how they were copied in China, while Shi 2010 (in Chinese) pays particular attention to the landscape paintings on folding fans. Von Verschuer 2006 (English version, originally in French)

mentions folding fans as one popular commodity in Sino-Japanese trade. Lü 2013 (in Japanese) examines the circulation of fans in East Asia between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. My article reexamines some historical records by putting them in a larger context and aims to shed new light on this topic.

3. For more examples about tribute missions engaging in commercial transactions, see von Verschuer 2006: 11–13, 16–20.

4. For example, see the sentence in the poem by Gong Xingzhi in this article, “following China under the breeze of benevolence” 也從中國披仁風, and another by Zhang Yu, “the imperial winds have already pacified the four seas” 平揚皇風四海清.

5. Some records show that the pine fans were in fact made of willow bark, but because the wood texture resembled that of pine trees, they were called “pine fans” (Deng Chun, *Huaji*, 10.424).

6. Some scholars have mistaken pine fans for folding fans and thought some paper folding fans imported to China were made in Korea (see, e.g., Lü 2013: 141). But given that Xu Jing had firsthand experience with both Japanese folding fans and pine fans in Koryō, his record should be quite reliable regarding this point. He made it fairly clear that folding fans in Koryō at that time were imported from Japan, and the detailed procedures of making pine tree fans that he related also suggest that the pine fans were likely not foldable. For the point that pine fans were not folding fans, see also Yang 2000.

7. For the relationship between the Song and its neighbors and the distortions of imperial rhetoric, see G. Wang 1983.

8. Since this passage appears right after that on pine fans, some scholars have mistaken it as also being about pine fans (e.g., Lü 2013: 141). See note 6 for the differences between pine fans and folding fans.

9. Zhao Yanwei was wrong about where folding fans originated, but this may be because more Koryō folding fans were available then or because he mixed up their origin with the source of importation.

10. This would have made them “easy to hide in one’s sleeves.” “Wo shan,” in Zhang Yu, *Jingju ji*, 1.52a.

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### Abbreviations

SKQS, *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 [Complete library in the four branches of literature].

CSJC, *Congshu jicheng* 叢書集成 [Comprehensive collection of book series].

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