

Japanese Missions to Tang China

Between 630 and 838, the Japanese court sent 19 official missions to Tang China, the most advanced civilization in East Asia at the time. In addition to cultivating diplomatic and commercial ties, the envoys on these missions, known as *kentoshi*, were tasked with studying Chinese government, economy, culture, and religion. The knowledge they brought back to Japan formed the basis for land and administrative reforms, the creation of population registers, and even the layout of the capital cities of Heijokyo (in present-day Nara Prefecture) and Heiankyo (later Kyoto), which were modeled on the Tang capital of Chang'an.

Two of the most notable Buddhist priests in Japanese history, Saicho (767–822) and Kukai (774–835), were part of the *kentoshi* mission of 804. Based on their studies and experiences in China, they established, respectively, the Tendai and Shingon schools, which had a profound influence on Japanese philosophy and aesthetics, as well as religious thought and practice, for centuries.

Each *kentoshi* mission consisted of four ships carrying a delegation of several hundred diplomats, scholars, artists, and traders. The embassies initially traveled by sea past Iki and Tsushima and along the coast of the Korean Peninsula to the Shandong Peninsula, where they disembarked to begin the overland journey to Chang'an. This route was abandoned in the 660s, and from the year 702 *kentoshi* ships took the shorter but far more dangerous route from the Goto Islands directly across the East China Sea to the mouth of the Yangtze River and on to the mercantile city of Yangzhou.

Goto was the envoys' last port of call, where they waited for favorable winds before sailing across the open sea. There are numerous sites associated with the *kentoshi*, both in northern Goto around the Aokata and Aiko areas and in the south on and near the Mimiraku Peninsula.