Chinese Understanding of the Japanese Language from Ming to Qing

Generally speaking, there have been four periods in which heightened Chinese interest in Japan has led to the development of scholarship concerning Japan: the late Ming (principally the Jiajing and Wanli eras); roughly the decade between the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05); the 1930s and early 1940s, from the Manchurian Incident until the end of World War Two; and the present, post-Mao era. Concerning the first period it has been argued that, while the Ming years witnessed the compilation of hallmark Chinese texts on Japan, in the Qing period, by contrast, there was a decline in Chinese learning about Japan. This essay will examine this phenomenon by focusing on the specific issue of changing Chinese perceptions of the Japanese language from the Ming to the Qing.

Although mention of and efforts to represent the Japanese language in Chinese texts long predate the Ming, it was only at that time that Chinese scholars for the first time wrestled with characteristics of Japanese that sharply distinguished it from Chinese. Ming-period texts confronted and analyzed the kana syllabaries, explained Japanese grammar by parsing sentences, and offered lengthy word lists of Japanese terms. Language is, of course, not a transparent vessel, but reflects the social and political contexts of its speakers and writers. Prior to the twentieth century, educated Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and others from East Asian states no

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1 This is a generally accepted and unobjectionable view. See Wu Anlong and Xiong Dayun, Chūgokujin no Nihon kenkyū shi, pp. 14–16; Watanabe Mitsuo, “Chūgoku kobunken ni mieru Nihongo: Kakurin gyokuro to Shoshi kairyō ni tsuite,” Komazawa daigaku kenkyū kiyō 15 (March 1957), pp. 155–56. The late-Ming period is, however, distinguished in several important ways: it is the first such era of intense Chinese attention focused on Japan; it is longer than the other periods; and the nature of contact between China and Japan associated with the past century (late-nineteenth to late-twentieth) which has been made increasingly convenient by modern transportation and communications was completely absent at that time. In one significant way, the four are strikingly similar: all are related to the rise of perceived or real Japanese might (military and economic). Wang Yizhong cites eighty-one Chinese works from the Ming period about Japan, and there were many others as well. See his “Mingdai haifang tuji lu,” Qinghua zhouchan 37.9–10 (May 1932), pp. 141–62.
longer in existence (such as the state of Bohai) who looked to China for moral, political, and cultural guidance all sought to master the literary Chinese language. Knowledge of Chinese for non-Chinese East Asians was itself an index to erudition, and inasmuch as knowledge and morality were so closely interwoven in cultures which shared China’s Confucian heritage, to one degree or another, it was as well an important component of self-cultivation and elite social cohesion. By contrast, few Chinese ever bothered to learn a foreign language before the late nineteenth century. The obvious exceptions to this general rule concern the conquest dynasties of late imperial history, namely, the acquisition of Mongolian by Chinese during the Yuan dynasty and the Manchu language during the Qing; these instances again point to the political importance of language. It would be difficult to find many Chinese who learned either language out of intellectual curiosity before the conquest of the Central Plain.

Borrowing a concept from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we have a situation here in which there was enormous cultural capital for non-Chinese East Asians to acquire greater talent at the Chinese literary language, but there was almost no cultural capital in Chinese society associated with the acquisition of a foreign language. Within the distinctive linguistic habitus of early modern China, knowledge of Japanese was neither desired nor seen as necessary. Chinese literati appreciated and, indeed, understood Japanese culture exclusively through the erudition its own elites reached in literary Chinese composition and through contributions to the evolving Confucian tradition (such as commentaries on Confucian texts, also written in literary Chinese). Only rarely did they seem to have any interest in the intrinsic value of the Japanese language or culture.

The issue of language in this Chinese context was not simply a linguistic or political one, but was also ultimately closely tied to culture. The relative lack of concern on the part of the Chinese elite prior to the twentieth century bespeaks a sense of cultural seclusion or, at least, cultural self-sufficiency. For the most part, foreigners who wanted to interact with the Chinese empire had to do so within the parameters of the Chinese cultural universe by learning Chinese. In Ming times, the government created a corps of translators for diplomatic relations and local officials commissioned studies of Japan to combat the threat of Japanese piracy along the coast. In these contexts, the study of foreign languages was largely driven by political, not cultural, motivations.

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2 E.g., Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 81–89. I have gained some insight from this work by Bourdieu, but the fit with the East Asian cultural setting still remains uneasy, requiring theory—as yet unwritten—of its own.