

Mongol Intentions towards Japan in 1266: Evidence from a Mongol Letter to the Sung

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The Mongol emperor Khubilai first decided to dispatch an envoy to Japan in the year 1265. The *Yüan shih* 元史 implies that this was the first time that the Mongols had heard of Japan, or at least the first time that they had heard that communications with it might be possible: "In the second year of [the reign period] Chih-yüan of Yüan Shih-tsu 元世祖 [Khubilai], because the Korean Cho Yi 趙彝 and others said that the country of Japan could be communicated with, it was decided that an envoy could be sent."¹

Two envoys, Hei-ti 黑的 and Yin Hung 殷弘, set out from the Mongol court with a letter in the eighth month of 1266. They arrived in the Korean capital of Kangdo 江都 three months later, and continued on with two guides the following month. After reaching the island of Kōjedo 巨濟島 in the first month of 1267 they balked at making the crossing to Japan, and they returned without completing their mission.

In the eighth month of 1267 the same two envoys again left the Mongol court for Korea, where they entrusted the letter to a Korean official named Pan Pu 潘阜. Pan Pu arrived in Hakata in the first month of 1268 and presented the *shugo* 守護 of Chikuzen, Shōni Sukeyoshi 少貳資能, with three letters: the Mongol letter, a letter from the king of Korea, and a letter of his own. The *shugo* sent all three letters to Kamakura in the following month, the intercalary first month.

The *bakufu* in turn forwarded the letters to the court, where they arrived in the second month of 1268. The Mongol letter was dated the eighth month of 1266, a year and a half earlier, showing that it was the same letter carried on the original embassy. The court was divided about what action to take, and the debate raged for most of the second month. Finally, the decision was taken not to respond. Instead, the court issued orders for prayers to be recited across the land, while the *bakufu* strengthened the defenses against invasion.²

¹*Yüan shih* (History of the Yüan Dynasty) (Peking: Chung-hua, 1976), ch. 208, p. 4625. The role of Cho Yi is confirmed by his biography in the *Koryō sa* 高麗史 (History of the Koryō Dynasty) (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1972):

Cho Yi, originally named In'yo, of Ham'an. He was once a monk but returned to lay life and studied for the exams and became a *chinsa* 進士 [C. *chin-shih*]. Afterwards he turned and entered Yüan service, where he was called a *hsiu-ts'ai* 秀才. He was able to understand the languages of various countries. Coming and going from where the emperor was, he slandered, saying that Koryō and Japan were friendly neighbors. The Yüan sent envoys to Japan. (130/27a)

²This account is based on Aida Nirō 相田二郎, *Mōko shūrai no kenkyū* 蒙古襲来の研究 (Research on the Mongol Invasions) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1982), pp. 3-8.

Mongol Objectives

It is unclear what the Mongols hoped to accomplish by sending this letter: two interpretations have dominated. The first is that the Mongols were demanding outright capitulation. The court and *bakufu* in Japan apparently concluded that their only choice was to surrender or to fight, since they did not even bother to send a reply. Given the reputation which the Mongols enjoyed, and even cultivated, this is an eminently reasonable interpretation.

The second is that the Mongols were merely requesting peaceful relations. The Mongols were engaged at that time in launching a new invasion of the Southern Sung, with which Japan enjoyed economic and cultural links, and it has also been suggested that the Mongol aim was in fact merely to sever those links and force the Japanese to align themselves with the Mongols. Yamaguchi Osamu provides an example of this line of thinking:

However, Khubilai did notice that a country called Japan was engaged in trade with the Sung empire and that it was strengthening Sung finances [as a result]. Even though it was an oceanic island country, its existence was significant enough that it certainly could not be overlooked when considering its relationship with the Sung. At this point, when he was about to launch the final great campaign against the Sung empire, it would have been wise to at least bring Japan into his own camp.³

If the former view is correct, no possible response would have forestalled a Mongol invasion while preserving Japan's independence. Engaging in diplomacy with the Mongols under these conditions could only have distracted the Japanese from the truly necessary task of strengthening their defenses.

If the latter view is correct, a favorable Japanese response might have satisfied the Mongols without major concessions. Of course, there was no guarantee that the Mongols would not have made further demands on Japan at a later date, after the fall of the Southern Sung freed their attention for other objectives, but surely it would have been preferable to postpone that eventuality in hopes that it might never materialize. After all, Japan by itself never posed any real threat to the Mongols.⁴

In other words, appeasement is counterproductive when an enemy is set on conquest, but a viable alternative when a delay might avert a crisis altogether. One has to wonder, then, whether the Japanese refusal to negotiate was the right decision or not. What were the Mongols after? Were they bent on conquest from the beginning, or did

³Yamaguchi Osamu 山口修, *Môko shûrai—Genkô no shijitsu no kaimei* 蒙古襲来、元寇の史実の解明 (The Mongol Invasions—An Explication of the Historical Realities of the Yüan Attackers) (Tokyo: Kôfûsha, 1988), p. 47.

⁴There is an interesting line in the *Kuo-ch'ao wen-lei* 國朝文類 (Categorized Writings of Our Dynasty) concerning the eventual abandonment of the planned third invasion of Japan late in Khubilai's reign: "The emperor also said that the Japanese had never invaded [Yüan territory], while Vietnam was violating the border, [so] it would be appropriate to set Japan aside and concentrate on the matter of Vietnam" (Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an ed., 41/22b). While Japan was a target, it was never a threat, even after it had been antagonized.

they initially have more limited objectives? Any answer to these questions has to begin with the text of the 1266 letter.

The Text of the 1266 Letter

A copy of the 1266 letter is preserved in the Tōdaiji 東大寺 library; it is virtually identical to the version included in the *Yüan shih*.⁵ The letter reads as follows:

Favored by the decree of Highest Heaven,⁶ the emperor of the Great Mongol Nation⁷ sends this letter to the King of Japan.

Since ancient times, the sovereigns of small countries whose territories adjoined each other have taken it as their duty to cement peaceful relations by upholding good faith. How much more so [should this apply in this case], since Our ancestors received a clear mandate from Heaven and controlled all of China, and those from distant places and other regions who fear Our awesomeness and embrace Our virtue have been countless.

When We first ascended the throne, as the innocent people of Korea had long suffered from spearheads and arrowheads, We immediately disbanded the soldiers and returned their frontier fortresses⁸ and sent their old and young back [to their homes]. The Korean sovereign and subjects came to Our court to express their thanks. Although in righteousness we were sovereign and subject, we were as happy as father and son. We believe that your subjects⁹ also already know this.

Korea is Our eastern frontier. Japan is close to Korea. From the founding of your country you have also occasionally had contact with China, but to Us you have not sent even “an envoy with a single cart”¹⁰ to communicate friendly [intentions].

⁵A photograph of a thirteenth-century copy of the letter is included in *Dai Mongoru 3: ôinaru miyako, kyodai kokka no isan* 大モンゴル3：大いなる都、巨大国家の遺産 (Yeke Mongghol 3, the Great Capital, the Legacy of the Great Nation) (Tokyo: Kadogawa, 1992), pp. 56-57; the other version of the letter is found in *Yüan shih*, ch. 208, pp. 4625-26.

⁶This phrase is derived from the *Book of Documents*, II.I.4: “August Heaven favored you with its decree, and you obtained all within the four seas, and became sovereign of the empire.” See James Legge, *The Chinese classics, volume II: the Shoo King* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970 reprint), p.54. This and similar phrases in this letter are stock phrases from the Chinese literary tradition and should not be construed as evidence of any particular grandiosity on the part of the Mongols. See also the opening of the 1260 letter below.

⁷The Chinese “Ta Meng-ku kuo” 大蒙古國 is a direct translation of the Mongol “Yeke Mongghol ulus.” The word “ulus” refers to a political unit—dynasty, empire, or confederation—with particular emphasis on the people who comprise it.

⁸The *Yüan shih* has “and returned their frontier regions.”

⁹The phrase translated here as “your subjects” is literally “the sovereign and subjects of the king” (*wang chih chün-ch'en* 王之君臣) in both versions. Since “the king” is the “king of Japan” to whom the letter is addressed, it is unclear why the letter should refer to his “sovereign and subjects.”

¹⁰Pan Ku 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty) (Peking: Chung-hua, 1962), ch. 34,

Fearing that your kingdom knows this but has not considered it [carefully], We have specially dispatched an envoy with a letter to proclaim Our intention. We hope that hereafter we will exchange greetings and establish friendly [relations] in order to have mutual affection and friendship. The sage treats all within the four seas as family; could it be the principle of a family not to mutually exchange friendly [greetings]?

As for using soldiers and weapons, who would want that?

King, consider this.

[This] does not fully express [Our meaning].¹¹

The letter is quite short and somewhat ambiguous. It threatens the use of force, presumably in the event that the Japanese refused to answer, but it does not specify what sort of answer was expected, or what the consequences of a given answer might be. There is neither a demand for submission, at least none for total submission as opposed to *pro forma* diplomatic submission, nor a demand that the Japanese end their relations with the Sung. While this letter does not supply an answer to the question of Mongol intentions, perhaps a comparison with other Mongol diplomatic letters will clarify some of the ambiguities.

Other Mongol Diplomatic Letters

Mongol diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Japan did not end with the delivery of the letter of 1266. Hei-ti and Yin Hung visited Korea yet again in the eleventh month of 1268, and the king of Korea sent envoys to Japan before the end of the year. These did not carry a new letter on this mission; they were still seeking an answer to the previous one. This time the court wanted to send an answer, but the *bakufu* did not want to, and none was sent. The envoys kidnapped two islanders from Tsushima and returned to Korea.

Another group of Korean envoys arrived in Tsushima in the ninth month of 1269. They returned the two islanders and presented a communication from the Central Secretariat in Peking. The text of this communication has apparently not survived. The court prepared an indignant response, but this too was vetoed by the *bakufu*.

Khubilai then decided to send Chao Liang-pi 趙良弼 on a fourth mission in the twelfth month of 1269. Mistrusting the intentions of the Koreans, he ordered him to make the trip to Japan personally. He arrived in Korea in the first month of 1271, and then in Japan in the ninth month, apparently preceded by a letter. Once again, it appears that the Japanese refused to send an answer. Chao Liang-pi returned to Korea empty-handed in the first month of 1272.

p. 1871.

¹¹The phrase *pu hsüan* 不宣 or *pu hsüan po* 不宣白 is a polite expression found at the end of state letters; it can be considered a *pro forma* apology for the inability of a letter to convey everything the writer would like to express. See below, note 29.

Chao Liang-pi returned to Dazaifu in the third month of 1273, at the head of the fifth and final mission. Unable to proceed on to Kyoto, he returned to Peking in the fifth month. The first Mongol invasion finally came in the following year.¹²

It is clear that the Mongols were determined to achieve their aims through diplomacy if at all possible, and that they only launched an invasion after having exhausted that option. However, none of the subsequent letters have survived, so it is impossible to gain any further insight into their intentions from these sources. We could, however, turn to Mongol diplomatic letters to other rulers to provide a framework for comparison.

Mongol letters to other rulers varied in the explicitness of their demands. These letters sometimes demanded that those rulers submit personally at the Mongol court or that they allow censuses to be taken of their populations (for the purposes of taxation and conscription). For example, the Persian text of the 1246 letter from Güyüg which John of Carpini brought to the Pope closed in this fashion:

Thou in person at the head of the kings, you must all together at once come to do homage to Us. We shall then recognize your submission. And if you do not accept God's command and act contrary to Our command We shall regard you as enemies.¹³

On the other hand, such letters were sometimes vague in their practical implications. William of Rubruck carried a letter from Möngke to King Louis of France in 1255 which closed, according to William, in the following manner:

And when you shall have heard and believed, if you will obey us, send your ambassadors to us; and so we shall have proof whether you want peace or war with us. . . . But if you hear the commandment of the eternal God, and understand it, and shall not give heed to it, nor believe it, saying to yourselves: "Our country is far off, our mountains are strong, our sea is wide," and in this belief you make war against us, you shall find out what we can do.¹⁴

Like the letter of 1266 to Japan, the 1255 letter to France demands that envoys be sent to tender submission. However, there is a critical difference even between the 1255 letter to France and the 1266 letter to Japan: the Japanese were part of the classical-Chinese-language cultural area, so the 1266 letter has to be interpreted in light of the traditional practices of that cultural area. Such countries as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam already had a long tradition of ritual submission to China, so a demand for submission would not necessarily have the same meaning as a similar demand directed at European

¹²Aida Nirô, pp.8-14.

¹³Translated by J. A. Boyle and included in Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), pp. 213-14. See also pp. 102-05 for discussion of the Latin version of the same message.

¹⁴*The journey of William of Rubruck to the eastern parts of the world, 1253-55*, tr. William Woodville Rockhill (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), pp. 250-51.

rulers. The best comparison, then, would be with letters sent by the Mongol rulers in China to other rulers within this same cultural area.

Khubilai sent two letters to the king of Korea and the emperor of the Southern Sung immediately after his enthronement in 1260. Korea had already submitted to the Mongols, so the contents of that letter are somewhat different. The Southern Sung, however, like Japan, was both within the classical-Chinese-language cultural area and outside of the Mongol empire. An examination of the structure and content of that letter should provide some clue as to the intentions of the Mongols towards Japan in 1266.

The Text of the 1260 Letter

The text of the 1260 letter to the Southern Sung is included in the literary collection of Wang Yün.¹⁵ It reads as follows:

Favored by the decree of August Heaven, the emperor of the Great Mongol Nation sends this letter to the emperor of the Southern Sung.

Since the pacification of the Chin dynasty [in 1234], the Shu 蜀, Han 漢, Ching 荆, and Yang 揚 regions¹⁶ have been troubled by soldiers for nearly thirty years. Visits have been exchanged more than once, but in the end without any agreement being established. Recently the Ch'uan-Shu 川蜀 region has been devastated and the Ching-Hu 荆湖 region has been throttled.¹⁷ The people have [experienced] the bitterness of suffering, while the warriors have [experienced] the rigors of the elements. We greatly pity them.

For this reason, We wish to discuss a cessation of hostilities now, at the beginning of Our enthronement. By demonstrating impartial humanity and manifesting encompassing love, Our hope is [to gain] a respite for the people thereby, that all under Heaven might together enjoy the happiness of being alive, that is all.

On your south are Chiao 交 and Kuang 廣, and on your west Pa 巴 and Shu 蜀;¹⁸ on your north is the Yangtze River, and on your east the blue ocean. Dividing your soldiers to guard the strategic points is what you rely on to maintain your country (*kuo* 國). Now ten thousand warships will cross the [Yangtze] River and seize the ocean, and a thousand groups of armored horsemen will again traverse Kuang and appear in

¹⁵Wang Yün 王惲, *Ch'iu-chien hsien-sheng ta ch'uan wen-chi* 秋澗先生大全文集 (Great Literary Collection of Mister Ch'iu-chien) (Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an ed.), 96/6b-7b.

¹⁶These include Ssu-ch'uan, Hu-pei, Hu-nan, and the Chiang-nan region, or the valleys of the Yangtze and Han Rivers, once comprising the frontier between the Chin dynasty and the Southern Sung, now the frontier between the Mongols and the Southern Sung.

¹⁷This is a reference to the Mongol campaigns of 1259, when Möngke led an army into Ssu-ch'uan ("Ch'uan-Shu") and Khubilai another army into Hu-pei ("Ching-Hu"). Möngke's death on this campaign precipitated the crisis which allowed Khubilai to claim the throne.

¹⁸"Chiao and Kuang" are present-day northern Vietnam and the regions of Kuang-tung and Kuang-hsi. "Pa and Shu" are again Ssu-ch'uan. Vietnam was not part of Sung territory, but it is included here because the Mongols tried in the 1250s to conquer it to surround the Sung. Further below, the letter threatens a renewal of this operation.

Shu. That your four borders lack even a flimsy defense, and your six armies have the might of broken bamboo,¹⁹ are things that everyone knows, and there is no need to raise every point [concerning your weaknesses] at this time.

It is not that we cannot master the difficulties²⁰ and dash ahead, advancing on both water and land. In the autumn wind, the guard commanders will watch²¹ the tides of the Che River 浙江;²² in the spring dew, with whale-sized cups they will talk and laugh, and sift the jade of Mount Wu 吳山.²³ For good troops to be unfortunate was originally what We disliked, and to protect Our throne with humanity is today Our basic intention.

Moreover, why should this be like the Ching-k'ang 靖康 period, with enmity between north and south?²⁴ In the beginning there was no intention for the misunderstandings to grow so large. Thus we are not like the Jurchens or Hsi Hsia 西夏, with whom your hatred had accumulated and your enmity deepened [to the point that] it could not be resolved. The matters of your²⁵ victories and defeats and the words of falsehood and truth you exchanged in the past, each has its dangers; we should put these aside and not discuss them.

Henceforth we should make a fresh start and take everything anew. Thus I advance it with a trusted emissary and express it with happy phrases, announcing Our accession to the precious throne, making it clear that Our mind is already settled. Only princes and high ministers are able to respond. As soon as a visit [from your emissary] arrives, then you will have protected your dynasty and pleased Heaven; you will certainly have achieved both humanity and wisdom. If you complete the rituals of subservience²⁶ then naturally you will have an everlasting alliance [with us].²⁷

¹⁹“Flimsy” is literally “woven grass,” the kind of shelter which a hut of woven grass offers against the elements. The reference to bamboo comes from Fang Hsüan-ling 房玄齡, *Chin shu* 晉書 (History of the Chin Dynasty) (Peking: Chung-hua, 1974), ch. 34, p. 1030: “Today, [our] military might has already been shaken. It can be compared to broken bamboo: after several joints, it splits when it meets the blade.”

²⁰Literally, to “hold [the legs and grasp] the horns” of a deer which one tries to capture.

²¹Corrected to *k'an* 看, “to watch,” from *cho* 着, “to move, to apply,” on the basis of the Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu edition (96/9a).

²²The *hu-pen-shih* 虎賁氏 and the *lü-pen-shih* 旅賁氏 were guard units named in the *Chou-li* 周禮 (Rites of the Chou). The Che River, from which the province of Che-chiang gets its name, flowed through the Southern Sung capital at Lin-an (Hang-chou).

²³Mount Wu was located in the southwest corner of the Southern Sung capital at Lin-an; it was one of several mountains in China by that name.

²⁴The Jurchens overthrew the Northern Sung during the Ching-k'ang reign period (1126). This marked the beginning of hostilities between the Chin and the Sung. The Hsi Hsia, mentioned below, was the name of a dynasty founded by the Tanguts who had fought with the Northern Sung earlier.

²⁵The Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu edition has “your and our” (96/9a).

²⁶This phrase is derived from *Mencius* I.II.III.1. “Only the benevolent are able, with a large [state], to serve a small one. . . . Only the wise are able, with a small [state], to serve a large one.” See James Legge, *The Chinese classics, volume III: the works of Mencius* (Hong Kong: Hong

If, however, you worry that your position will be difficult to pass on [to your descendants] and you think of the many methods of trickery and so fail to take any action and are content to break off dialogue, then please repair and dredge your walls and moats and add to and increase your weapons and armors to await the provisioning of horses and arming of soldiers which we will raise in large numbers. As for the climate, we are not at all afraid if it is hot and pestilential; as for the terrain, the rivers and oceans are all things about which we have become knowledgeable. It is certain that we will use our soldiers to the utmost and chastise you with the greatest effort. Your survival or destruction will be decided at once, and Heaven alone knows how much farther our strength will extend afterwards.

Disaster is up to you to choose [or reject]; here there is nothing of which you can complain.²⁸ [Incumbent] upon us is the utmost sincerity which can be maintained; [incumbent] upon you is to rely on whatever you choose. Do not follow precedent and merely write empty words [in reply]. The times call for orderly administration; goodness settles good fortune.

[This] does not fully express [Our meaning].

This letter is much longer and more explicit than the letter to the "King of Japan" in 1266, but it follows much the same form, and does appear to be comparable.

The Letters Compared

The opening lines in the two letters are virtually the same. The Sung ruler is addressed as "emperor" and the Japanese ruler as "king," which were their respective titles according to Chinese diplomatic usage. The term "emperor" for the Sung ruler implies equality with the Mongol emperor, although the identification of his dynasty as the "Southern Sung" emphasizes his position as ruler of the lesser part of the empire. The title "king" implies a degree of subordination to the Chinese (or here, Mongol) emperor, but nothing more than the degree of subordination which the Japanese had previously accepted in their dealings with China; it does not imply outright submission. Both titles are respectful, or at least appropriate. Khubilai is still called the ruler of the "Great Mongol Nation" at this point, as the dynastic title "Yüan" was not adopted until 1271.

Each letter professes Khubilai's peaceful intentions. The letter to the Sung deplores the decades of fighting which occurred between the two sides, and calls attention to the suffering of the people on the borders of the Sung territory, where most of the fighting took place. The letter to Japan cannot cite similar incidents, but it uses the example of Korea to demonstrate Khubilai's love of peace.

The letter to the Sung goes on to point out the weakness of the Sung defenses. It talks of warships which are prepared to cross the Yangtze River and East China Sea, and

Kong University Press, 1970 reprint), p. 155. Note the references in the previous sentence of the Mongol letter to achieving benevolence and wisdom.

²⁷Literally, an alliance which "[remains unchanged] in cold weather [like the pine and oak]."

²⁸The Ssu-k'ü ch'üan-shu edition has *ch'ien* 歉, "regret," in place of *ch'ien* 慊, "resent" (96/9b).

cavalrymen prepared to invade Ssu-ch'uan and Kuang-hsi "again": a clear reference to earlier Mongol attempts in the 1250s to outflank the Yangtze defenses from the west by taking Yünnan as a base from which to invade southwest China. The letter states openly that the Sung armies are weak, as indeed they were, that this is common knowledge, and that even the Sung must recognize this fact. This section has no counterpart in the letter to Japan, in part because Japan was in a much more secure geographical position, and in part because the Mongols did not have similar intelligence on possible Japanese weaknesses.

The letter to the Sung also suggests that the two sides do not have a long history of enmity and that it is not too late to bury the hatchet. The examples of the Tangut Hsi Hsia dynasty and the Jurchen Chin 金 dynasty are significant for two reasons. First, the Mongol conquest of both of these peoples can be taken to imply that the Mongols were doing the Sung a service by destroying their enemies. Indeed, the Mongols had been allied with the Sung in the destruction of the Jurchen Chin dynasty, although the Sung subsequently broke that alliance by trying to retake former Chin territory which had been occupied by the Mongols. Second, mention of the Mongol conquest of these peoples clearly implied that the Mongols were more powerful than the Sung, since the Sung had never succeeded in accomplishing this itself. Again, the letter to Japan has no corresponding section, since there was no corresponding history of relations between the Mongols and the Japanese.

Both letters then request the exchange of emissaries. Both letters state that the mere arrival of an emissary will be enough to ensure peace. The letter to the Sung speaks of "the rituals of subservience" (*shih-ta chih li* 事大之禮), that is, the rituals by which the small serve the great. This clearly implies a lessening of the position of the Sung emperor, who could not submit to another ruler without abandoning his own claims to be ruler of all under Heaven. The letter to Japan does not make any reference to such rituals, but since the ruler of Japan was clearly in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the ruler of China, here Khubilai, as a mere king in relation to an emperor, there was no special need to call attention to such rituals. They would have been carried out as a matter of course upon the arrival of Japanese emissaries, or the emissaries would not have been accepted.

Next, both letters threaten war as the consequence of a refusal to send emissaries in return. Here again the letter to the Sung is more detailed than the letter to Japan. The Mongols and the Sung alike both knew that the climate and terrain of the south were obstacles to a Mongol invasion; the Mongols suffered from the unfamiliar heat and the unfamiliar diseases as they advanced south, and they were hindered by the rivers which cut across south China and made the terrain less suitable for cavalry warfare. Nevertheless, the letter states that the Mongols do not fear the former and have become experienced with the latter, and promises that their armies will not falter. The letter to Japan makes no mention of the obstacles to a Mongol invasion or the preparations which might be taken to overcome them, but simply hints that the failure to send a reply could result in war.

Both letters call on the ruler to consider the matter carefully; the letter to the Sung ruler explicitly enjoins him to send a substantive reply. Finally, both letters end with the same formulaic phrase.²⁹

Conclusions

Neither letter explicitly requested anything more than the exchange of emissaries. In either case, the emissaries would have had to express the correct degree of ritual subordination to the Mongol emperor. The stakes were higher for the Sung emperor, however, because his political legitimacy would have been directly affected by such an act. The Japanese emperors had previously accepted the designation as "King of Japan" from the Chinese during the T'ang dynasty, and the Ashikaga shōguns would accept it again from the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century; in neither case was Japan's political independence compromised.

Of course, Khubilai did not necessarily understand the proposed relationship in the same way that the T'ang emperors had understood it or that the Ming emperors would later understand it. The Mongols exerted direct control over their vassals; Yüan control over Korea was a completely different matter from the purely nominal control exerted by the T'ang or the Ming. It is highly unlikely that Khubilai would have been satisfied with mere ritual subordination, at least in the long run.

The letter of 1266 can be interpreted as either the first step in a program to subjugate Japan or a simple attempt to detach Japan from its relationship with the Southern Sung. The strongest argument in favor of the latter interpretation is the international situation facing Khubilai in 1266. In the midst of the preparations for the greatest campaign of his life, about to embark on a course to conquer the richest, most populous, and most advanced state in the world, he could ill afford to divert resources to other fronts. No matter what the Japanese did in response to the 1266 letter, one could argue, Khubilai could not have afforded to invade Japan at that time. Would it not be more reasonable to interpret the letter then as an attempt to accomplish the deed in front of him—by neutralizing a Sung ally through diplomacy—rather than another venture which would distract his attention from the goal at hand?

However, the example of the letter of 1260 to the Southern Sung shows that Mongol diplomatic offensives preceded Mongol military offensives by many years. We know that the Mongols were not prepared to invade south China in 1260. A long-planned invasion had just ended in disarray with the death of Möngke in Ssu-ch'uan in 1259, and Khubilai had just managed to withdraw the remnants of those forces and negotiate a cease-fire with the Sung commander Chia Ssu-tao 賈似道. Khubilai then challenged his brother's claim to the throne, and the steps he took to consolidate his rule in north China eventually triggered a rebellion by the warlord Li T'an 李璫 in the second month of 1262.

²⁹The letter to the Sung ends with the characters *pu hsüan po*. The copy of the letter to Japan found in the Tōdaiji collection is missing the character *po* 白, but this is likely to have been included in the original. While the *Yüan shih*, as is customary, deletes the formulaic phrase entirely, the *Kuo-ch'ao wen-lei* actually deletes the contents and merely gives the formulaic phrases at the opening and closing of the letters to Japan. The closing of the letters to Japan is recorded here as having been *pu hsüan po* (41/22b).

It was not until 1264 that Khubilai was secure on his throne, and not until several years later that another invasion of south China could be launched. In other words, the letter of 1260 to the emperor of the Southern Sung was sent at a time when Khubilai had no credible threat to invade the south. However, there is no serious question that Khubilai always intended to conquer the Southern Sung.

In short, the letter of 1266 is best interpreted as the first signs of a long-term Mongol interest in subjugating Japan, rather than a short-term interest in changing Japan's foreign relations. Therefore, it is unlikely that appeasement on the part of the Japanese would have succeeded in deflecting Mongol intentions, and it appears that the Japanese decision to concentrate on military preparations instead of diplomatic efforts was the correct one after all.