“Kamikaze” is a Japanese word used for the Japanese navy pilots and their suicide missions they carried against the U.S. targets, especially towards the end of the Second World War. The hopes for a decisive Japanese victory was diminishing as the US forces continued their advances towards Kyushu. The word, meaning “The Wind of the Gods” was an open reference to the famous Kamikaze, the typhoon which had rescued Japanese archipelago from an inevitable invasion by the Mongols in 1281. It was assumed to be a miracle that had destroyed the whole Mongolian armada together with a large army it was carrying. The term chosen for the suicide missions was, therefore, of no coincidence but reflect a deliberate choice implying both the expectations and the divine nature of the deed.

Indeed, in 1274 and 1281, the Mongolian army had twice attempted to invade Japan. Both attempts had ended up in failure, and the armies of Khubilai Khan had to return back empty handed. Although these attempts were studied by both Japanese and western scholars, not much is said about the reasons behind these ambitious enterprises. Frequently stated scholarly opinions refer to the expansionist nature of the Mongol state, or Khubilai’s ambitions and his desperate need for legitimacy, both as the Khan of Khans
of his *Ulus* and as the emperor of China. Though these claims may have some degree of truth in them, I believe they fall short in assisting the students of history to have a complete picture of the incidents and the context within which they occurred. This paper will concentrate on the possible rationale behind the invasion attempts and Khubilai’s insistence to subdue the “Eastern Barbarians” (東夷) of the “king of the little country” in the Eastern Sea. Thus, we will focus on the questions: “Why was Khubilai so interested in Japan?” and “Did Japan have anything that made her an object of desire?”

**The Outlook of the Region at the Beginning of Yuan Dynasty (1271)**

**China**

Continuous expansion of the Mongols under the leadership of Chinggis and his successors had finally come to a temporary halt at the shores of the Yellow River. To the south was the land of the prosperous Southern Song, a dynasty which seemed highly organized and capable of putting a fierce defence against the Mongolians, as opposed to the rather loosely structured states of Northern China. The Song dynasty was in fact established in the north in 960 with its capital at Bianjing (modern Kaifeng). This dynasty (which later was to be called the Northern Song, 北宋) had lasted until 1127 when it was destroyed by the marching Jurchen, Jin dynasty. Having lost the control of their northern territories, the remnants of the Song dynasty moved to the south of Yangtze River and re-organized themselves as the “Southern Song” (南宋, 1127-1279) around its new capital Lin’an (now Hangzhou). Mostly owing to the limitations imposed by the Jurchens on international trade via the traditional northern routes, the Southern Song soon rose as a naval power in Southeast Asia.² During the course of the 12th and the first half of 13th centuries, the empire of the Song was unrivalled in its capacity to produce high quality products and to sell them abroad unhindered.

Following the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227, Ogedai Khan collaborated

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with the Southern Song and annihilated the Jurchens. When the Jurchen threat was finally over in 1234, Mongols made a treaty with the Southern Song and shared the former territories of the Jin dynasty between them. But the uneasy peace did not last long and the two powers inevitably collided with each other. Hostilities that would lead to the collapse of the Southern Song in 1279 had started. Mongolian nomad cavalry tactics were of little use against the manoeuvring capabilities of a strong navy. Heavily fortified towns and cities did not easily yield themselves to continuous Mongol attacks either. In 1259, the war at the fort of Fishing Town\(^3\), costed Great Khan Mongke his life. His death had opened the way for his brother Khubilai. Soon after he was declared the new Great Khan (though some obviously had reservations against this declaration) in 1264, he started employing new tactics against the Song. His tactics included persuasion of powerful Song adherents to change sides, and increasing the pressure on its trading partners, mainly Korea and Japan, in an attempt to seize its economy depending on naval transactions.

**Korea**

The Kingdom of Goryeo (918-1392) had also offered fierce resistance against the Mongolian invasion attempts. Chinggis in 1218 and Ogedai between 1231-33, had dispatched expeditionary forces against the de facto rulers of the country, the Cho'e family who refused to submit. The resistance continued. Later in 1253, Mongke Khan sent a new army into Goryeo and finally

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\(^3\) Fishing Town: 釣魚城遺址. A fortress town located on a small peninsula (near Hechuan, Chongqing settlements and at junction of Qu, Fu and Jialing rivers) which resisted numerous Mongolian sieges between 1243-1279.
in 1258, his commander Cha·la-er-tai was able to suppress the rebels and take the crown prince Chon back as hostage.⁴ But within a year, the news of Mongke’s death coupled with the death of the Goryeo king, Khubilai had the chance to employ his own strategy. He sent the crown prince to Goryeo and enthroned him as King Wonjong (r.1260-1274). In spite of the new king’s loyalty or the military presence of the Mongols in Korea, it was not possible to wipe out the insurgents from the peninsula. For complete control Khubilai had to wait until 1273, the year which he finally could crush the remaining insurgents in their last resort, the Cheju island.⁵ Soon, he consolidated his power over Goryeo by betrothing his daughter, Hu·tu·lu· Chieh-li-mi-shih [Kutlu Chilemish?] to the Goryeo crown prince.⁶ It was the year before the first attack against Japan.

**Japan**

The developments in the Korean peninsula and the final establishment of Mongolian suzerainty of the kingdom of Goryeo had, no doubt, deeply affected the military government (bakufu) residing in Kamakura, since Goryeo had traditionally been both a tributary and a trading partner for Japan. The shogunate was aware of the fact that the threat posed by Khubilai was gradually getting closer. Founded at the end of the twelfth century, the shogunate itself had domestic legitimacy problems, and the ruling elite seemed confused by Khubilai’s insistent embassy dispatches, not to mention the growing possibility of a large scale armed conflict.

The shogunate was established following a five year civil war (Gempei War: 1180-85) between the Taira and Minamoto clans. The victor, general Yoritomo of Minamoto (1147-1199) had himself declared “shogun” (military dictator, Marshall General) by the emperor and transferred the focus of power from Heian-Kyoto to Kamakura, a place where his forces used to station during the war. With this move, he had virtually started the “Age of the Samurai” in Japanese history (1192). Yoritomo had reduced the emperor to a mere head courtier with symbolic power reserved for Shintoist rituals.

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⁴ Rossabi, Morris, “Khubilai Khan – His Life and Times”, (Los Angeles, University of California, Press, 1988), p.96
⁵ Sambyeolcho rebellion (1269-1273): Rebellion initiated by Im Yon, a former commander in the Goryeo army.
⁶ Rossabi, p.97
But soon after his death, this time his father-in-law Hojo Tokimasa was to usurp the shogunal power and start yet another de facto situation where the Hojo family would rule in the child shoguns' stead. This rather confusing political situation in the form of a triumvirate would last until the end of Kamakura shogunate in 1333.

Therefore it is not a surprise to see the several embassy missions sent repeatedly by Khubilai returning empty handed. The shogunate was keeping silent simply because it did not know what to do against such a big threat. If they had accepted to become a tributary, the Mongols could (and possibly would) interfere with the domestic affairs using rival clans to change the hardly attained, fragile balance within the country. On the other hand, an open refusal might draw the fury of Mongols before they could do anything to stop it. They were trying to gain time.

The Attacks
The first of the Mongolian embassies had reached Japan in late 1267. Important information on these missions are recorded in the *Zenrin Kokuhōki* (An Account of Good Neighbourly Relations as a Treasure of Our Country; completed in 1470) by Zuikei Shuho (1391-1473), a Zen priest in Shōkokuji temple, Kyoto. Zuikei, commissioned by the shogun for the job, had access to the official documents of the Kamakura period and a historian's sensitivity to try to be fair. Reffering to a copy of Yuanshi available to him he quotes the text of Khubilai first letter to Japan:

*We, emperor of the great Mongol empire, present a letter to the king of Japan. In our opinion, since ancient times, the ruler of the little country [Japan] has shared with us the border of his country, and he has endeavored with sincerity to uphold good relations with us. Needless to say, our sovereign ancestor [Genghis Khan?] received the mandate of heaven to rule over the empire. Countless distant foreign regions fear our authority and admire our virtue. When we came to the throne, we allowed Korea, whose guiltless populace were weary of the long-continuing warfare [from 1231 to 1259], to leave aside its arms, regain its territory, and let its young and old [soldiers] go home. With gratitude the ministers of Korea,
our vassals, have come respectfully to our court to present tribute. While fulfilling the duty of a vassal towards the sovereign, they enjoy a relationship [with us] like that of father and son. The ministers of the king [of Japan] must already know this. Korea is our vassal state of the eastern marches, and Japan is close to Korea. Since the founding of the country, Japan, too, on occasion has paid [courtesy] visits to China. But in the time of our own rule, not a single envoy has come to establish friendly relations with us. We fear that the kingdom [of Japan] has not yet fully grasped the situation. We therefore are sending a special envoy with a letter to inform you of our will. We hope that henceforth communications and friendly ties will be established and that we will enter into a close relationship. The sages regarded all lands between the four oceans as their dwelling. Without good relations, how can we preserve the principle of a common dwelling? Who would prefer to resort to arms? The king [of Japan] should consider this.\(^7\)

The imperial messengers carrying this letter from Khubilai were not allowed to go any further than the local government center at Dazaifu. After five months of waiting, the envoys were sent back without any answer given in response. Of course Khubilai’s adress “the ruler of the little country” was not helping when the proud nature of the Japanese who had refused the usage of the Chinese character “倭” (Wa; meaning dwarfs with bending backs) used by the Chinese to describe them and stated they should be called “日本” (Nihon; the country where the sun rises) or “和” (Wa; peace, harmony).

Although, he was infuriated Khubilai went on sending envoys almost every year but all in vain. None were received by neither Kyoto court nor the Kamakura shogunate. Some even were returned directly from Tsushima island (an island in midway between Korea and Japan). It was more than obvious that the Japanese were not inclined to establish any sort of relation with the Yuan dynasty. A punitive expedition was inevitable and

preparations were already under way. After finally consolidating his power over Korea, Khubilai had already ordered the Korean king to do the necessary arrangements (construction of ships and recruitment of soldiers) for his enterprise. In November 1274, an armada of 300 large ships and 4-500 smaller vessels, carrying 15,000 Mongol, Jurchen, Chinese; 6-8,000 Korean troops and 7,000 Korean sailors departed the port of Happo (near modern Pusan; the closest point to Japan). They landed at the Hakata bay in northern Kyushu and headed quickly inland. They were facing only sporadic and weak attacks by the defenders. The Japanese were caught in surprise. The Mongolian way of fighting in group formations was nothing like what the samurai were accustomed to. They were also using different weapons like grenades. An eye-witness account in an contemporary source *Hachiman Gudōkun*, tells how the small ceramic bombs thrown by the Mongol invaders were confusing the Japanese defenders:

*The commanding general kept his position on high ground, and directed the various detachments as need be, with signals from hand drums. But whenever the Mongol soldiers took to flight, they sent iron bomb shells flying against us, which made our side dizzy and confused. Our soldiers were frightened out of their wits by the thundering explosions, their eyes were blinded, their ears deafened, so that they could hardly distinguish east from west.*

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Everything seemed working perfectly well but suddenly they retreated and went back as fast as they came. This first expedition was more like a show of force or a blitzkrieg to gather information about the capabilities of the enemy, rather than being a full-scale invasion attempt.

Khubilai’s next move was to send yet another envoy a year later in 1275, but this time Buddhist priests, as a sign of good intentions. Actually, these five monks were the only Mongol emissaries who could reach Kamakura, but only to be executed by the Japanese authorities. It was an outrageous act of enmity, a one-sided declaration of war. Obviously, they were aware of the consequences of their decision because the shogunate started building fortifications around the Hakata bay, where the next Mongol raid was expected to land. The Japanese would spend the coming six years in vigilance and Khubilai’s army would not attack until the war with the Southern Song would come to an end in 1279. Then he was finally ready to turn his attention towards Japan, which he considered an unfinished job. He could now utilize the famous Southern Song navy for his own purposes and create an armada suitable for his ambitious plans.

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10 Rossabi mentions a storm which had caused the Mongol fleet to return without any reason or source. He possible confuses the second (1281) mission with the first (1274).
Japanese scribe Zuikei quotes Yuanshi (History of the Yuan) on the decision taken by the Yuan court to attack:
In the second month, because Japan [previously] had executed the official envoy Du Shizhong, and others, Xindu and [Hong] Tagu, generals of the eastern expeditionary force [who were then in Korea], requested permission to lead an army to attack [Japan]. [Kubilai’s court] held a council and deliberated the situation for some time. In the fifth month [the court] summoned Fan Wenhu to consult him about the attack on Japan. In the eighth month an imperial edict ordered that an army be assembled to attack Japan.11

Preparations of a fleet of 900 fighter ships was summoned to Goryeo. The expeditionary force was called the Eastern Army and consisted of 40,000 soldiers and 17,000 sailors. Another 3,500 large ships (mainly cargo) were summoned to the shipyards of former Song navy. A 100,000 soldiers and 42,000 sailors formed the Southern Army. 12 According to the tactical plan, the two armies were to meet in mid-June 1281, at the island of Iki close to Kyushu. Then a combined attack and invasion would start with landfall at Hakata. Everything went wrong from the very beginning. The Southern Army was late, the landing was a failure due to 2m. high defence walls on Hakata bay, Japanese were eager to fight the enemy even while on boats, and finally a strong typhoon hit the armada causing its destruction.

A survivor from the disaster who could find his way back home conveyed what happened during those unfortunate days for the Mongol army, in the Yuanshi, as follows:

The [Jiangnan] army embarked [from Qingyuan, Ningbo] in the sixth month. In the seventh month we reached the island of Hirado and proceeded to the island of the Five Dragons [i.e., Takashima, northeast of Hirado]. On the first day of the eighth month, a storm destroyed the fleet.... On the seventh day, Japanese [warriors] came and fought. Many men died. The twenty thousand to thirty thousand who survived were taken prisoner and taken away.... Among the original one hundred thousand, there were only three survivors who managed to come back.13

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11 Zuikei & Verschuer
12 Randall, p.21
13 Zuikei & Verschuer
Likewise, a contemporary account on the Japanese side also mentions the incident:

In the year Kanotomi [1281], the Mongolian army attacked our country. [The Mongol forces] landed in Kyushu and fought fiercely. But the gods, revealing their awesome might, appeared in material form and defended [the country] from the invaders. A great storm suddenly arose, and the hundreds of thousands of the invaders' ships were blown out to sea and destroyed. Although we may live in a latter-day era (masse 末世), the awesome power of the gods is not to be doubted.14

Nearly 30% of the Eastern Army from Goryeo and between 60-90% of the Southern Army was reportedly lost. It was a total disaster for the Yuan. The samurai killed anybody they could find alive after the typhoon. Only the ones who came from the newly subdued Mongol territories, that is the Southern Song adherents were saved and enslaved instead. 15

Khubilai, on the other hand, was not disheartened by this defeat and announce yet a third invasion against Japan but this time his was to meet strong opposition from all his commanders and vassals alike. Finally he was forced to abandon his dream to subdue the defiant samurai of the “little” Eastern country.

15 Turnbull, p.72
The Rationale Behind Khubilai’s Invasion Plans

In order to understand the rationale behind Khubilai’s repetetive attempts to invade Japan, one first has to ask the question: “Why did the two attacks aimed at the Hakata bay? This question becomes especially valid for the second attack, when the strong fortifications around the shoreline is taken into account. Why didn’t the Yuan armada chose another bay to land, and insisted on Hakata? Likewise, why did the Japanese chose to built their defence lines around Hakata and not anywhere else? The answer to this question is rather enlightening because Hakata area was the lively center of foreign trade especially with China, that is to say with the Southern Song.
Throughout the thirteenth century, with the improvements in shipbuilding and manufacturing technologies achieved by the Southern Song had boosted the economic livelihood in the region. New harbours were constructed together with many shipyards capable of constructing large-scale cargo ships. The delta of Yangtze and its environs flourished. The main items of export from Southern Song included silk textiles\textsuperscript{16}, ceramics \textsuperscript{17} (including gilded

\textsuperscript{16} Most advanced technologies in both sericulture and weaving (like treadle operated machinery) were invented and used by the Northern Song. Then in the twelfth century with the collapse of the Northern Song, the technology was transferred to the south. [Dieter Kuhn, \textit{Silk Technology in the Sung Period (960-1278 A.D.)}, \textit{T'oung Pao, Second Series}, Vol. 67, Livr. 1/2 (1981), pp. 48-90]

\textsuperscript{17} Excavation results in Japan demonstrate the fact that the Song ceramics for exports can be categorized in four distinct groups: three-colour wares (found in palace excavations); heirloom wares (high quality celadons, tenmoku and white wares found in temples); sutra mound ceramics (green and white wares found in mounds), and highly popular trade ware (found in large quantities at sites in northern Kyushu ports like Hakata). [M. Tregear, \textit{Chinese Ceramic Imports to Japan between the Ninth and Fourteenth Centuries}, \textit{The Burlington Magazine}, Vol. 118, No. 885 (Dec., 1976), pp. 816-818-825]
ware\textsuperscript{18}, lacquerware\textsuperscript{19} among other items. Yet we also come across an especially interesting export item: the copper coins. Already during the Northern Song, the economy was more monetized than the previous Tang period and the main means for trade transactions had become copper coins. Moreover, the Song copper coins were also highly demanded for payments in international trade. A certain Su Ch’e, the Vice President of the Board of Revenues during the Ching Li period (1041-48) was forwarding his complaints about the situation as follows:

\textit{Along the northern frontiers, no other currencies are used except for our coins. It seems impossible to stop this, in spite of strict prohibitions, for the profit [for smuggling Chinese coins out of the country] is enormous. We mint millions of strings of cash each year and yet there is always a shortage of money. The reason is that our coins flow into barbarian regions.}\textsuperscript{20}

The efflux of copper coins continued to be an acute problem during the Southern Song period. Especially so, because international trade volumes were steadily increasing due to the flourishing maritime trade with new partners in southeast Asia and Japan; and also because copper mines in the north were both depleted and lost to the Jurchens. The Southern Song government was trying its best to find new mines in the east of the country but still, shortage of supply was remaining unsolved. On the demand side, it kept issuing prohibition orders to stop the outflow of copper coins but all were in vain (i.e. restrictive orders prohibiting usage of copper coins in the frontier areas and seaports were issued in 1198, 1212, 1216, 1234, 1244, 1250, 1252, 1253 etc.) . During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a “Song

\textsuperscript{18}G. St G. M. Gompertz, Gilded Wares of Sung and Koryo, \textit{The Burlington Magazine}, Vol. 98, No. 642 (Sep., 1956), pp. 300-302-308

\textsuperscript{19}A catalogue from 1363, \textit{Butsu-nicb\’an kōmotsu mokuroku}, shows the popularity of Chinese carved lacquer in Japan at least in the early fourteenth century. [Harry M. Garner, \textit{The Export of Chinese Lacquer to Japan in the Yüan and Early Ming Dynasties}, \textit{Archives of Asian Art}, Vol. 25 (1971/1972), pp. 6-28

Coin Area”, quite similar to the modern day “Euro Zone” had been created, albeit the will of the Southern Song court. Tartar (Jurchen) Jin and Japan were the two main absorbers of Song copper coins.\(^{21}\)

For several centuries Chinese merchants were the sole agents of trade between the two countries. But from late twelfth century, more and more Japanese had started sailing to China. Most of them were seeking copper coins since Japan had stopped minting its own money since 958 and Chinese money was in circulation for use in domestic trade. Even the tax payments were made with Song coins. The coin trade was at such a lively state that in 1277, Japanese trade ships were entering the port of Ningbo, in between the two Mongolian attacks. Zuikei quotes:

\[\text{Third year of [Kenji, 1277]: fourteenth year of Zhiyuan [1277]}\]
\[\text{Yuanshi [chapter 208] states: Japan sent merchants [to China]. They brought gold with them and wanted to buy copper coins. It was allowed.}^{22}\]

Zen monks, like Zuikei mentined above, were an important component of Sino-Japanese trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The new samurai elite in Kamakura were inclined towards Zen against other established Buddhist sects like Tendai or Shingon. They were the sects which the nobles and aristocrats adhered and the symbiotic relations between their monasteries and the court had created a mutually benefitable climate for the two. Samurai saw themselves and their system as an alternative. Thus once they toppled the courtiers in their efoorts to grasp power, they found out that the sects in question would not cooperate with them. Adding to their legitimacy problems (in the eyes of the court), they

\(^{21}\) Sung Bronzes.  
\(^{22}\) Zuikei&Verschuer
were illiterate and unable to administer foreign relations with the most important trading partners of Japan, namely China and Goryeo. The answer to this crisis was offered by the newly arrived Zen (Ch’ang in China). The answer was double fold: Firstly, its teachings promoting action against rationality suited perfectly with their warrior spirit and it was a relief to find out that instead of hard-to-memorize sutras Zen was presenting its ideology with kōan, that is Buddhist doctrine wrapped up in parables; and secondly the Zen monks knew how to write and read in Chinese and unlike the priests of the established sects, they were more than ready to offer their services to the new rulers of the country. That’s why the Zen monks became the natural promoters of Sino-Japanese relations during the Kamakura period.23

Hojo regents deployed numerous trading missions led by Zen monks to China. Japanese exports included gold, silver, copper, sulphur, mercury, other minerals and lumber. Japanese lumber [mainly cryptomeria (杉), and cypress (桧)] was highly demanded especially for the renovation of the damaged (by war or fire) Buddhist temples in China.24 On the other hand, although Japan was one of the main importers of Song copper coins, interestingly copper ore (together with gold and silver) was one of its traditional export items, too. The first copper mines were opened in 698 in the Tottori region, while the next was in 708 in Chichibu (both in the central part of the main island, Honshu). 25 Two giant monuments still stand as proofs of the abundance of copper ore in Japan: A gold-plated bronze Buddha statue erected in 752 (Tōdai-ji temple, Nara), and another one in 1252 (Kōtoku-in temple, Kamakura).

Besides copper, (a raw material desperately needed by the Southern Song as mentioned above) Japan had gold and silver deposits. Japanese gold was so famous in those days that even Marco Polo was mentioning the rumours he had heard about the riches of the eastern island, Jipanggu. He was convinced that the palace of Japan’s ruler was covered with two-finger thick gold.26 Indeed, large deposits of gold were found in 759 in Wakuya

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24 Zuikei&Verschuer
25 Nihon no dō (Japanese copper),http://www.copper-brass.gr.jp/shindouhin/history.html
26 J. Homer Herriott, *Folklore from Marco Polo: Japan*, *California Folklore Quarterly,*
(northeastern Honshu), and indeed there was a temple (if not a palace as Marco mentioned) covered in gold at the very mining spot (Konjiki-do temple, built in 1126). An estimate of 30 tonnes of gold was retrieved from the mine until the year 1300. On the other hand, silver mines were operated since the first found in Tsushima island (The same island where the Mongolian armadas used stop at mid-way from Korea to Japan) in 674.

Fig.8: Locations of early precious metal mines in Japanö active during Kamakura and Southern Song periods (Situation before Khubilai's attacks).

Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct., 1945), pp. 398-403

There was a Chinese trading community in Hakata in order to benefit this profitable trade between Southern Song and Japan. The livelihood of the “Song Coin Area” trade zone of Southern Song, Goryeo and Japan is best realized when considered together with the rise of Wakō pirates (mainly Japanese but also Korean and Chinese). The rise of piracy between 1223-1263, coincides with the flourishing of maritime trade in the Sea of Japan.28

I guess, it must now be understandable why Khubilai was so insistent on sending peaceful envoys instead resorting to arms from the start. As he was advancing into the Southern Song territory, he was also becoming more aware of the financial problems of the highly monetized Song economy. Song coins were demanded from all around the region (outflow), there was a shortage in supply due to raw material and that raw material was coming from Japan.

He attacked Hakata because Hakata was the center for this lucrative trade. That was exactly also why the Japanese constructed sea walls in front of Hakata and not anywhere else. The first expedition of 1274 was a mere show of force executed briefly for gathering intelligence on the terrain. But the 1281 attack was a full scale invasion attempt. Interestingly, the Southern flotilla consisted mainly of large cargo ships. Until now, the scholars used to agree on the opinion that the sizes of the cargo ships showed the amount of grains and other supply for the Eastern Army’s usage throughout the invasion, but I believe that time has come to consider the possibility that they were prepared to carry large amounts of gold, silver and especially the much needed copper back to mainland which Yuan was dominating instead of Song.