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# Comparison of Two Premodern Trade Manuals from England and China

Kiyoshi Yamauchi

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## Introduction

Nowadays global companies operate all around us, and shopping centers everywhere are filled with their products. Japanese corporations have followed European and North American multinationals down the road to globalization, building plants and setting up sales networks all over the world. In recent years, a growing number of Southeast Asian firms have advanced on the world scene and are doing business in the international marketplace.

It was not all that long ago that international business operations first started to take root as a sphere of corporate management and then as a topic of scholarly research. To be sure, some American and European corporations began to internationalize their production sites as many as 50 or even 100 years ago, but the vast majority of today's global companies have expanded overseas since the 1960s, incrementally changing their business domain.

The beginning of transnational business activities, however, can be

traced back to the Middle Ages. Commercial transactions began with the beginning of civilization and often extended beyond the confines of national borders. The main players at the time were sometimes Europeans, sometimes Asians. Merchants from the Islamic world also had a major role to play.

## Premodern trade manuals — East and West

The starting point of my present research was an encounter with two old books. The first is *The Marchants Avizo* by John Browne, an English merchant engaged in the Mediterranean trade during the Age of Exploration. First published in English in 1589, it is a kind of manual on trade between England and Spain and Portugal<sup>1</sup>. The second book is the *Yingya Shenglan*<sup>2</sup>, written by Ma Huan in 1451, nearly 50 years before the “Great South Voyage” of Vasco da Gama and the European discovery of a sea route to India.

Although I will discuss the contents of these two volumes in more detail somewhat later, generally speaking, the English work in today's terms might be described as a code of behavior for merchants trading in the Mediterranean, whereas the Chinese book is a commercial overview of the social systems (currencies, standard business practices, social customs, etc.) of China's trading partners. The impression it gives is that of the information services provided today by the Chamber of Commerce or by the economic sector of an embassy or legation abroad.

Information and its effective dissemination have become indispensable for managing today's global enterprises. In Japan, individual companies and entire industrial sectors make assiduous efforts to collect and

control the information they need to conduct their businesses. Before entering into a careful examination of these two premodern works, I would like to review the types of manuals being prepared in our own times. Back in 1973, a set of guidelines for overseas investment behavior<sup>3</sup> was compiled jointly by several influential Japanese economic groups including the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren), the Japan Committee for Economic Development (Keizai Doyukai), the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Nihon Shoko Kaigisho) and the Japan Overseas Enterprise Association (Nihon Zaigai Kigyo Kyokai). A revised edition appeared in 1987. This document makes express reference to the importance of trying to understand local conditions and to blend into local society, advising member companies to “make every effort to protect the natural and living environments of the country you are investing in . . . and be careful to fit into the local community.” More recently, the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations’ Charter of corporate conduct,<sup>4</sup> enacted on December 17, 1996, stated that when operating overseas, business people should “respect local customs and culture and do business that will contribute to local development.”

Organizations in individual countries are not the only ones to draw up rules of this kind ; international organizations whose membership crosses national borders also do so. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publishes guidelines in the form of a code of conduct for global companies ; and the Caux Round Table, which is made up of business leaders from Europe, North America and Japan, gives policy advice to businesses and industries to help them maximize their corporate commitments.<sup>5</sup> A growing number of individual companies are also formulating their own corporate philosophies, management commit-

ments or company Credos, which can be easily accessed on the home pages of their Web sites. In short, instead of simply adopting the standards of some large multinationals, companies and industrial sectors are all clearly trying to discern for themselves “not who but what is correct” and to convert these insights into a universal standard of behavior. My own feeling is that the wisdom and resourcefulness that can be gleaned from these two premodern texts from China and England will be of great benefit in the preparation of future policies and guidelines.

### A premodern Chinese trade manual

As I mentioned earlier, the *Yingya Shenglan* was written by Ma Huan in 1451. Despite its many passages of geographical description, the work can be described as a trade manual. China at the time was ruled by the Emperor Yongle of the Ming dynasty. Meanwhile, in Europe, full-scale efforts were under way to open up a sea route to Asia in search of the business opportunities that trade in the specialty products of the East would bring.<sup>6</sup> These efforts would have a momentous impact on human history.

Around this time, Yongle, who became emperor in 1402, dreamt of establishing a world order centered on China and sent out missions to neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup> One such mission was the seven “voyages of the Great South Sea from the East” made between the years 1405 and 1433 by a fleet of ships under the command of the Muslim Zheng He. The *Yingya Shenglan* is an account of this mission written by Ma Huan, who served as an interpreter on the fourth, sixth and seventh voyages. Ma Huan records the manners and customs, social systems and commercial prac-

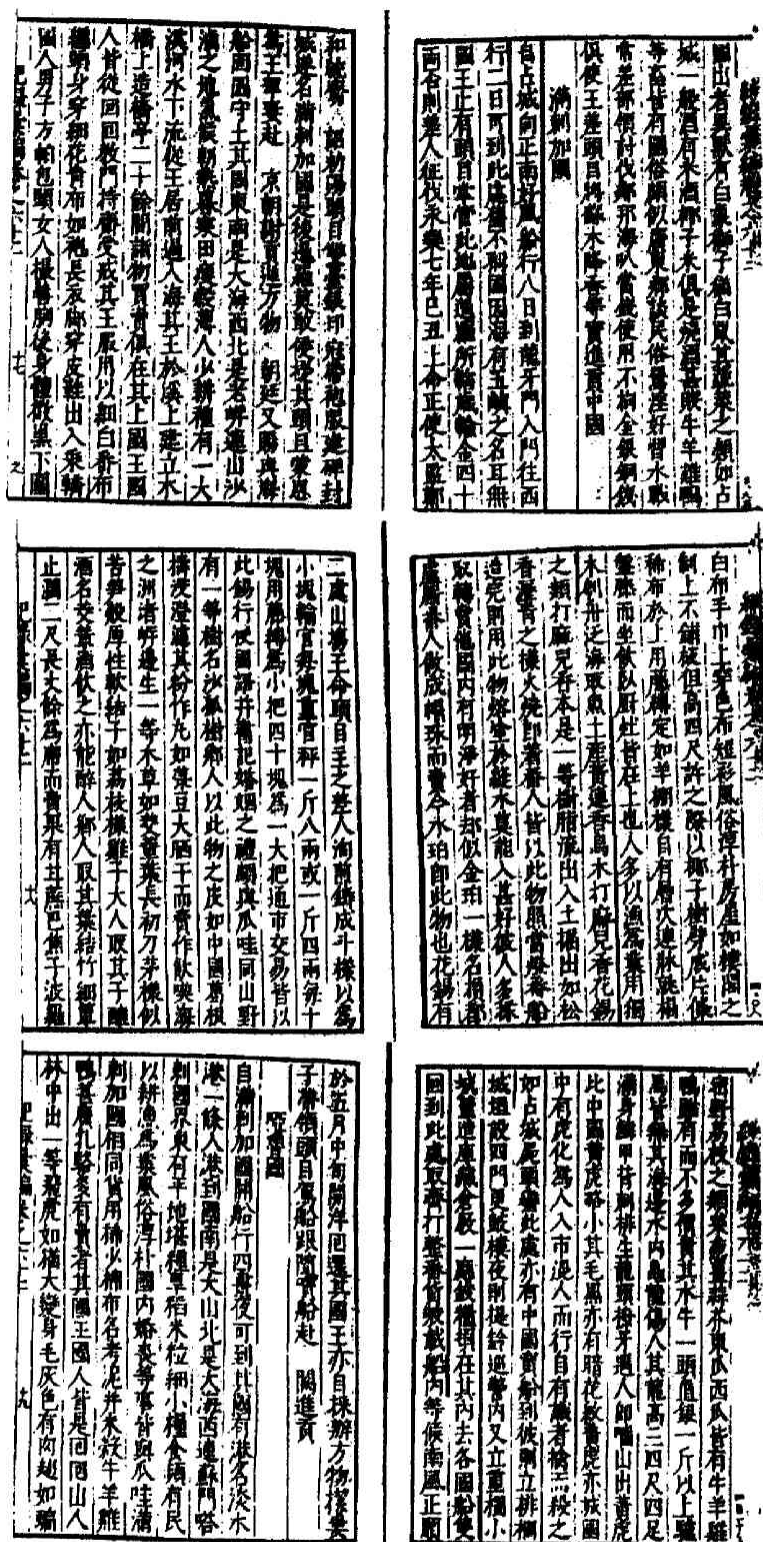


Fig. 1. Ma Huan's account of Malacca



Fig. 2. Boluomi fruit, or jack fruit, sold on the roadside, Malacca. Photo by author

tices in the ports on the way to Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, Jedda on the Red Sea and two or three ports in East Africa, the most distant places the fleet visited.

Let us look at Ma Huan's account

of Malacca in Malaysia (Fig. 1), one of the ports of call along the way. The passage in the original text can be translated as follows: "Eight days due south by ship from Champa [part of present-day Vietnam] one arrives at Longyamen [perhaps the entrance to the strait between Bintan Island and Batam Island]. Malacca is two days west from here." Since information about indigenous products is essential both for the consumers at home and for merchants engaged in trade, Ma Huan writes that, in addition to *huanglianxiang* (a perennial used as a digestive and also as a dye), *wumu* (ebony) and *huaxi* (tin), there were agricultural products such as sweet potatoes, bananas and *boluomi* (jack fruits, a type of breadfruit) (Fig. 2). Cattle, sheep, chicken and ducks were scarce and expensive. The trading currency was tin, and the local language and writing system resembled the language of Java. Another work from around the same period<sup>8</sup> reports that the trading goods from Ming China included blue-and-white ware, colored beads and silk.

Ma Huan also writes that the Malaccans "build storehouses into



which they put all their coins and foodstuffs. When a ship bound for other lands comes there, they take out their trading goods and load them on board.” From this we can deduce that Malacca was a transit port for the East-West trade.

### A premodern English trade manual

In 1589, nearly a hundred years after Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India, an Englishman named John Browne wrote *The Marchants Avizo*. The book’s full title is *The Marchants Avizo: Verie Necessarie For Their Sonnes and Seruants, when they first send them beyond the seas, as to Spayne and Portingale or other countreyes*. As the title indicates, the book is a manual that sets out to explain what the sons and employees of merchants need to know when they travel to Spain, Portugal and other foreign lands.

As we did with its Chinese counterpart, let us sample some of this book’s lessons on doing business abroad. Unlike the Chinese work, many parts of which might be called geographical in nature, the descriptions in Browne’s book are mostly “Dos and Don’ts” to be observed by those who engage in trade. Some of these business lessons are found in the chapter entitled “A Generall Remembrance for a Servant when he first trauelleth to the Sea, as to Spaine or Portingale, or other Countreyes.” When an employee first reaches his destination, Browne writes, he should (1) give thanks to God, (2) search for a ship on its way home to the motherland that will carry messages back to England, and (3) secretly collect business-related information. Then, Browne gives a list of items (4) that in modern terms might be called an employee’s code of conduct, that is,



# A GENERALL REMEMBRANCE FOR A SERVANT WHEN HE

first travelleth to the Sea, as to  
Spain, or Portugall, or other  
Countreys.

Emanuel.



Generall remembrance  
for you my servant J. P.  
that forasmuch as now  
it is my good will & de-  
termination, to employe  
you (by the grace of  
God) in traualle beyond  
the Seas: I doo thinke  
it therefore convenient,  
to recommend vnto  
your carefull obseruation,  
these lewe exhorta-  
tions and instructions fol-  
lowing. First, and  
principallie I doo earnestlie  
exhort you, to  
have a most especiall care  
and regarde to the  
performance of your daylie  
duetie of prayer:  
and thanksgiving to God:  
not omitting pre-  
sentlie vpon your safe  
arrivall at your Port, to  
render

*The Marchants*  
render vnto GOD most humble and  
thankes for his gracious protection of you,  
by saying as in token of your thankfulness,  
some godlie prayer of thanksgiving, or say ondie  
(with reverence vpon your knees) the Lordes  
Prayer, giving him withall thankes in some  
words of your owne spirit.

Secondly, doo you remember, that pre-  
sentlie vpon your arrivall at your Port: to make di-  
ligent inquirie whether any ships be bound ei-  
ther to this Port of Brisflowe, or to any part of  
England. And then have especiall care, that by  
the nearest that cometh to this Port, you  
write letters vnto mee, and to them that you  
have to deale for, of the arrivall of your ship:  
according to this plaine and brieve forme of  
inditing, as I will hereafter shewe you. And so  
write likewise by your first letters, of the state  
of your businesse, and of the newes of the  
Countrey, according as that time passeth. And  
when you have learned of any ship that com-  
eth for England, doo not your selfe make it  
knowe to any body: all: but write and de-  
liver your letters secretly, for it shall sounde  
much to your especiall credit and good liking,  
when your diligence shall bee so serue, that  
your letters shall shew the first arrivall of your  
Ship: because it is the thing that euery Mar-  
chant doth especially long after to vnderstand.  
Thirdly, deale close and secretly in all  
your

*It is to be  
promised  
more care and  
diligence in a  
young.*

Fourthlie, in any case shew your selfe low-  
ly, curteous, and seruiceable vnto euery per-  
son: for though you and many of vs else may  
think, that too much lowlinesse bringeth con-  
tempt and disgrace vnto vs: yet assuredly (it is  
well knowne by experience) that there spring-  
eth of no one vertue so great fruite vnto vs, as  
of gentienesse and humilitie: for it will both  
appease the anger and ill will of our enemies,  
and increase the good will of our friends. Also  
in no wise bee not seduced by any person, to  
play at any kinde of game, especiallie dice or  
cardes, nor to vse feasting or banketing, or kee-  
ping companie with women, nor to goe fine

B 2

and

and costlie in apparell: for all these things are  
especiallie noted, and doo bring any young be-  
ginnet to vnto discredit and vndoing.

Fifthly, carie this for an especiall note, that  
whensoever you have dealings for anie Mar-  
chants: you doo in every point obserue accord-  
ing to their commission and direction. For al-

Fig. 3. Part of The Marchants Avizo



rules on how to blend into local community as a business person and as a good member of society. Let me quote just three of many such items (Fig. 3).

1. "In any case be humble, courteous and serviceable to everyone" because "it will . . . appease the anger and ill-will of our enemies."
2. "Never let anyone tempt you to play any kind of game, especially dice or cards, or to indulge in feasting and banqueting or to keep company with women."
3. "Whenever you do business for other merchants, do everything in accordance with their orders and directions."

These quotations are only a small part of the original, but the advice they contain would be just as valid today as it was 400 years ago. In any age, failure to behave in accordance with local business practices or to avoid friction with the local society can jeopardize the amicable conclusion of a commercial transaction.

## **Conclusion — Some premodern lessons for today's world**

Last autumn I conducted a survey of the current state of globalization at 76 representative Japanese global companies. From the responses I received, it became clear that a number of innovations are being introduced in the areas of organization, business routines and employee training to achieve more effective communications between the head office and local subsidiaries.

Despite the differences between the premodern and modern worlds resulting from recent remarkable advances in communications technology, the secret of successful international operations remains the same.

Simply put, it is essential to find a common ground with one's business partners and to make constant and conscious efforts to discover shared values. In particular, we must have the wisdom to develop symbiotic relationships despite East-West differences in spiritual climate, standards of judgment and social structures. These old books from the premodern world give us a glimpse at the wisdom we need to do so.

In addition to the topics I have just touched on, much research remains to be done on premodern trade manuals, including the two books that are the topic of this paper, and, I suspect, many further discoveries to be made. I intend to pursue my studies in the hope of learning more of the secrets they have to offer.

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#### Notes

1. Professor Kazuyoshi Inatsu of the Faculty of Economics at Kanagawa University kindly provided me with a copy of *The Marchants Avizo, 1591 edition*. I also referred to his essay "Eigo tsushinbun no rekishiteki kosatsu (2)" (Some historical observations on English correspondence [2]) in *The Kanagawa University Bulletin of Commerce and Economics* 9 (1996) 79–82. A reproduction of the 1607 edition of Browne's book was published in 1969 as number 98 of the The English Experience series by the Da Capo Press.
2. Ma Huan, *Yingya Shenglan* (one of the 100 books collected and edited by Yan Yiping) Yiwen Yinshuguan Publishing. For a Japanese translation, see *Bakan, Eigai shoran-Teiwa seisei kenbunroku* (Ma Huan, *Yingya Shenglan* a record of Zheng He's voyages to the West), an annotated translation by Hiroshi Ogawa, Yoshikawa Kobunkan Publishing, 1969. An annotated English translation was made by J. V. G. Mills and published in 1970 by the Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society under the title *Ying-ya sheng-lan—'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores' [1433]*.

3. The 1973 version was entitled “Hatten tojokoku ni taisuru keiei kodo no shishin” (Guidelines for business conduct in developing countries) ; the 1987 revised edition had a different title : “Kaigai toshi kodo kijun” (Standards for overseas investment behavior). The document contains 13 articles.
4. The “Kigyo kodo kensho” (Charter of corporate conduct) was first published on September 20, 1991 ; a new version came out on December 17, 1996. It consists of ten principles.
5. The Japanese version of “Principles for Business” was published by Japanese members of the Caux Round Table in December 1994.
6. Yasuyuki Aoki, *Umi no michi to Tozai no deai* (The sea lanes and the encounter between East and West), Yamakawa Publishing, 1998, and Yasuyuki Miura, *Mantetsu to Higashiindo kaisha, sono ubugoe* (South Manchuria Railways Company and the English East India Company—the beginnings), Wedge, 1997. These two volumes provide a useful overview of East-West trade.
7. Masakatsu Miyazaki, *Teiwa no nankai daiensei* (Zheng He’s great voyages to the South Seas from the East), Chuko Shinsho, 1997.
8. Fei Xin, *Xingcha Shenglan*, 1436.