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Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定, "Nihon kodai shi no naka no fushigi" 日本古代史のなかの不思議 (The Strangeness of Ancient Japanese History). In his *Nazo no shichishitō: Go seiki no Higashi Ajia to Nihon 謎の七支刀 : 五世紀の東アジアと日本* (The mysterious seven-pronged sword: East Asia and Japan in the fifth century), pp. 13-28 (Tokyo: Chūō kōron, 1992).

Abstract: The late historian Miyazaki Ichisada wrote this essay as an introduction to several essays on the famed "seven-pronged sword," said to have been a gift by the kingdom of Paekche to the ruler of Wa. The "sword" is much more famous for its inscription than for its military importance. In his essay, Miyazaki also briefly touches on the even more famous gold seal given by the Guangwu Emperor of the Later Han to an emissary from a statelet on the what is now Japan in the middle of the first century C.E. Like the "seven-pronged sword," it was preserved for many centuries and only relatively recently rediscovered. This essay has the additional advantage of being a fine example of Miyazaki's lucid prose style, self-confidence, and ability to cut to the significant consequences of an issue.

The Strangeness of Ancient Japanese History

Miyazaki Ichisada

Translated by Joshua A. Fogel

[Translator's note. Miyazaki Ichisada 宮崎市定 (1901-95) was one of the great Sinologists of the twentieth century. Over the course of his long life, he was almost always associated with Kyoto University where he first studied in the 1920s, the most famous student in history of Naitō Konan. He was widely known as a ferocious reader of Chinese texts with an unparalleled mastery of them and an uncanny ability to decipher difficult works. Although his work was largely in the fields of social and institutional history, especially of the Song period in China, he also worked far afield—on the Analects of Confucius, the *Shi ji* 史記 (Records of the historian) of Sima Qian 司馬遷, and the Yongzheng Emperor 雍正帝 of the Qing dynasty, just to name a few—and as the following study demonstrates, he had a penchant for research on East Asian comparisons and interactions. His collected works, *Miyazaki Ichisada zenshū* 宮崎市定全集, in twenty-five volumes were published by Iwanami shoten over the course of 1991-1994. For more details of his life and work, see my obituary, “Miyazaki Ichisada (1901-1995),” *Journal of Asian Studies* 55.3 (August 1996), pp. 806-8.]

Two Mysteries

Peering in at the ancient history of Japan, a number of stunningly remarkable facts arise almost miraculously. A matchless pair among them are the following two, the likes of which cannot be surpassed for their mystery: the gold seal, which nearly 2,000 years ago the ruler of the state of Na under Wa received from the Guangwu Emperor of the Later Han dynasty, was discovered along the coast of Kyushu during the Edo period, and remains with us today; and the seven-pronged sword, which was said to have been presented by the kingdom of Paekche at the time of Empress Jingū 神功皇后, has been preserved intact, and has slept soundly in the treasure room of the Isonokami Shrine 石上神宮 of Yamato in Nara.

As is well known, the origins of the gold seal can be found in an entry for the second year of the Zhongyuan reign period (57 C.E.) of the Guangwu Emperor 光武帝, the first emperor of the Later Han dynasty, in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han), the third official history produced by the Chinese. There it states that the ruler of the state of Na in Wa sent an emissary to pay tribute. The same information appears in the entry under “Dong yi zhuan” 東夷傳 (Treatise on the eastern barbarians) in this same text but goes on to note that the Guangwu Emperor responded by presenting the emissary with a seal and a ribbon. There is no mention in the text, however, as to what was carved on the face of the seal.

As is the case for others of the Chinese dynastic histories, the *Hou Han shu* was edited on the basis of court records. On the whole these accounts are trustworthy. Thus, there can be no doubt of the historical facts that an emissary from Na in Wa reached the Later Han capital of Luoyang, probably had an audience with the Guangwu Emperor, and

returned home with a gold seal suitable to the position of a sovereign. Once we get beyond this, though, many questionable areas remain.

First of all there are the opposing points of view regarding the reading of the term “Wo Nu guo” 倭奴國 [translated above as “the state of Na in Wa”—JAF]. Should this be understood as a single proper noun, “Wo-Nu,” or do we read it at two levels, “the state of Nu in [the land of] Wo.” My university professor, Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866-1934), understood the two characters “Wo-Nu” to be read “Yamato,” a view which he published in a famous article entitled “Himiko kō” 卑彌呼考 (A study of Himiko).¹ Naitō’s viewpoint was, as always, innovative and had the power to draw the attention of many back when it appeared, but many also opposed his views. Kuwabara Jitsuzō 桑原隲藏 (1873-1931) and Naka Michiyo 那珂道世 (1851-1908) both accepted the thesis that the two characters were to be understood as “the state of Nu in Wo” [Na in Wa, according to Japanese pronunciation—JAF].

My own view follows the latter thesis, namely that there were over 100 states or communities from Former Han times and that Na was one of them. The single name, “state of Na,” does not appear in the *Hou Han shu*, but it does appear twice in the “Treatise on the People of Wa” in the *Wei zhi* 魏志 (Chronicle of Wei), a part of the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (History of the Three Kingdoms). Although its location has not as yet been confirmed, it is quite clear that there was a great state in northern Kyushu. If we read things in this manner, then the island state in which the people of Wa lived at the time was not as yet a unified regime, but in various places small separate statelets enjoyed a degree of independence, and that among them the fairly powerful ruler of Na was the first in the Later Han to dispatch an emissary to pay tribute, gained recognition from the Guangwu Emperor for that ruler’s position as sovereign, and returned with the gift of a seal and a ribbon.

The Gold Seal of the King of Na in Wa

In the fourth year of the Tenmei reign (1784) in the Edo period, a farmer discovered a gold seal under a large boulder in Kananosaki 叶崎, Shikanoshima 志賀島, in what is now Fukuoka Prefecture. Kamei Nanmei 亀井南冥 (1743-1814), a Confucian scholar of Kuroda 黒田 domain, examined it and claimed that it was clearly the golden seal given by the Guangwu Emperor of the Later Han dynasty to the ruler of the state of Na. He wrote *Kin’in no ben* 金印弁 (Questions about the gold seal) and thus introduced it to the world.

¹ Naitō Konan 内藤湖南, “Himiko kō” 卑彌呼考 (A study of Himiko), *Geibun* 藝文 1.2 (May 1910), 1.3 (June 1910), 1.4 (July 1910), reprinted in his *Dokushi sōroku* 讀史叢錄 (Essays on history) (Kyoto: Kōbundō, 1929), and in *Naitō Konan zenshū* 内藤湖南全集 (Collected works of Naitō Konan) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1976), vol. 7, pp. 247-83. The reprint versions of this essay includes a three-page (pp. 280-83) “addendum” dated December 1928.



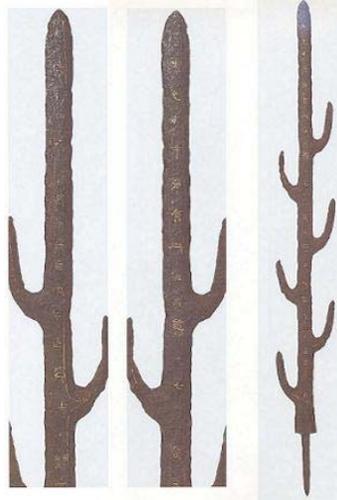
Five characters were inscribed on the face of the seal: 漢委奴國王. All manner of doubts about the shape and the inscription have arisen, and debates over the authenticity of the seal have embroiled the scholarly world, continuing on to our present time. It would appear that the general trend in the academic world at present leans toward accepting it as genuine, but that said it must indeed be regarded historically as one extraordinary mystery. Just imagine: a gold seal given by the emperor of the Later Han to a tribute emissary from the state of Wa in the middle of the first century was discovered with scarcely a blemish on it after the passage of 1,727 years on the coast of Chikuzen domain, which hardly had a castle town.

Of course, doubts that this gold seal was a later forgery have been raised almost continuously. One such man was Nakamura Naokatsu 中村直勝 (1890-1976), a colleague of mine when I was a teacher at the Number Three Senior High School—he was much my senior colleague—who was considered a first-rate scholar of ancient documents. When I once asked him for his opinion on the gold seal, Nakamura nonchalantly replied: “Highly dubious. In any event, there are two of them.” If two genuine gold seals existed, this was surely a remark that could not be ignored, but only later I learned that there was a fitting reason for this statement. In August 1980 the Asahi Newspaper Company sponsored a show at the Kyoto department store Takashima, entitled “Yamataikoku e no michi” 邪馬台国への道 (The road to the state of Yamatai). Had I been a truly attentive observer at the time, I might somehow or other have paid more mind to this. Now, though, there is nothing more I can add.

Legends of the Seven-Pronged Sword

A similar mystery surrounds the case of the seven-pronged sword, though the circumstances differ a bit. An ancient text, the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, fascicle 9), carries the following entry under the ninth month of the 52nd year in the reign of Empress Jingū (252?):

King [Kūn] Ch'ogo [近] 尚古 of Paekche met with Japanese emissaries Chikuma Nagahiko 千熊長彦 and others and presented them with one seven-pronged sword, one mirror with seven small childlike decorations (七子鏡), and various other valuable treasures. He sought friendship.



While the *Nihon shoki* has since antiquity been considered a basic sacred text for Japan and its content criticized both mildly and sharply depending on the age, in the end it is seen as full of awe-inspiring deeds. However, as has been pointed out since the Meiji period, there are numerous entries in the *Nihon shoki* that remain open to doubt. For example, it records that King Kūn Ch'ogo of Paekche died in the fifty-fifth year of the reign of Empress Jingū (255), but according to the Korean text, *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (History of the Three Kingdoms), this king sat on the throne from 166 to 213; the aforementioned year of 252, when he was long dead, corresponds to the nineteenth year in the reign of his younger brother King Koi 古爾, and follows the death both of his son Kūn Kusu 近仇首 and his grandson King Saban 沙伴. However, dates in the *Samguk sagi* are unreliable as is the text overall. Inasmuch as the text was compiled well after the events described, on the orders of the Koryō court to Kim Pu-sik 金富軾 (1075-1151) and others in 1145, corresponding to the Southern Song period for China, meaning a work edited many years later.

Although neither Japanese nor Korean calendrical dating is reliable, the historical fact alone that Paekche presented a gift of a seven-pronged sword to Japan has been demonstrated, for the item itself—the seven-pronged sword—has been preserved in Japan. Yet, the actual item contains an inscription which mentions a “seven-branched sword” 七支刀 rather than one with seven prongs 七枝; because the two characters 支 and 枝 have exactly the same pronunciation (*zhi*¹) and meaning, there should be no obstacle to seeing them as the same. In fact, the expression with the simpler character on the inscription may be a more accurate way to write it.

The Seven-Pronged Sword as Transmitted from Generation to Generation

Isonokami Shrine, located in the city of Tenri within Nara Prefecture, is a shrine of considerable lineage. Its name appears in the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of ancient matters [an eighth-century text]). Despite the fact that the *Kojiki* is full to overflowing with the names of Shinto deities, it contains relatively few names of shrines, and indeed this instance is, if anything, exceptional. The precincts of this shrine are thought once to have housed weaponry brought as tribute, for it now holds a treasure chest of countless weapons, among them the seven-pronged sword. The name attached to it, “seven-pronged sword,” is based on its peculiar shape: three branched blades on either side of the main shaft, which looks like a halberd, making seven blades altogether protruding. On the back and front of the main shaft, it contains in all sixty-one gold inlay characters. With the passage of time, however, these sixty-one characters became covered by rust and disappeared from view, until they were completely forgotten. It was only in the seventh year of the Meiji period (1874) that Suga Masatomo 菅政友 (or Kan Masatomo, 1824-97), chief priest of Ise Shrine 伊勢神宮, discovered and brought its existence to light. If we calculate from the putative date of the tribute given in the *Nihon shoki* of 252, then this revelation came 1,622 later. This, too, would have to be considered a stunning marvel.

Suga Masatomo was born into the family of the Tokugawa shoguns’ doctors. He studied national learning with Fujita Tōko 藤田東湖 (1806-55) and Aizawa Seishisai 會澤正志齋 (1772-1863), before entering the Chōkōkan 彰考館 where he worked on the editing of the annals section of the *Dai Nihon shi* 大日本史 (History of the great Japan). In the Meiji era, he became chief priest of Isonokami Shrine, and while in that position he was inspecting treasures that had been handed down over the years to his shrine. At that time he became aware of the seven-pronged sword, and assuming that there had to have been an inscription beneath the rust, he scraped away the rust and polished the golden inlay characters. Unlike today, at the time it did not dawn on people to use x-rays to penetrate to the text, and thus he had no choice but to use rougher means available. In any event, this hitherto unknown, long inscription was again brought to people’s attention. It appears, though, that in his work he was unable to avoid damaging the gold line of the inlay. In particular, gold dust scattered and adhered to other places, with the original gold lines becoming fuzzy and making it that much more difficult to decipher.

Suga Masatomo’s Investigation

Suga Masatomo died of illness at the age of 73 in 1897, leaving behind as a corpus of his writings three volumes, *Suga Masatomo zenshū* 菅政友全集 (Collected works of Suga Masatomo). Amidst this work is a note he left on an investigation of the seven-pronged sword in an essay written at age 70, and there he surmises that this sword was presented as tribute by the state of Paekche to Japan in the fourth year of the Taishi 泰始 reign period (268) of the Western Jin dynasty and that it is none other than the very same seven-pronged sword mentioned in the *Nihon shoki*. This was his conclusion based on his reading of the first two characters, “Taishi,” of the long inscription which he had polished. In fact, however, while the first character is “Tai,” the next character is missing

strokes and is unclear. And, in this state of considerable doubt and a multiplicity of differing opinions, things have remained until today without a conclusion reached.

While the case of a seven-pronged sword is recorded in the *Nihon shoki*, overall this is not a reliable source; and while there is a long inscription on the sword blade itself, it is difficult to understand the general meaning because so much has peeled off. Thus, we find ourselves in an irritating, tedious state of affairs. While textual criticism of the *Nihon shoki* has no method for pushing beyond where we are today and for all its efforts no results can be expected, we would appear to have no other means at our disposal to pursue the truth than to move forward with understanding and reading the inscription as the seven-pronged sword exists today. For this reason, I have looked at the views of a number of scholars who have published on this topic, remaining as I do highly dissatisfied or uncomprehending of those perspectives. Scholarly studies are like searching for a broken needle which has fallen on the floor. Even after many scholars have searched desperately, looking with a different set of eyes one can find that which has been overlooked till this point in time. No matter how many times it takes, we need to continue to invest in a new set of eyes.

My Study of the Seven-Pronged Sword

In October 1980, when the conception of this book² was more or less settled and most of the contents written, there was a commemorative show for the opening of a new wing of the museum attached to the Kashihara Archeological Institute 橿原考古学研究所. On this occasion, the seven-pronged sword was put on display for an extremely limited period of time by Isonokami Shrine. When I learned of this, I rushed off to see it, as there were places where I wanted to make sure of the readings for two or three characters. When I stood before the glass display case which was taller than I am, I was very disappointed. The lighting was far too dark, making it nigh impossible to discern the gold lines of the inlay. Inasmuch as I could only make out the surface with great difficulty, contrivances like trying to see the back by reflecting it onto a mirror were completely useless. I had to start all over.

In the train on my way home, I was thinking about how best to gain an opportunity to investigate the body of the sword more directly and close up. While it struck me that there were any number of ways for me to rely on an intermediary, I kept turning over in my mind what would be the most effective way to do this myself. Many such methods seemed to be there, and I was apprehensive of inconveniencing anyone I would need to rely on. The more I thought about this, the sillier it seemed to me.

Yes, it would be looking through glass, but the sense I had gained from looking at it was that the inlay cast a faint shadow, such that even if I was able to hold it in my hand and observe it, no final decision about the inscription was likely to be the result. Who knows how many scholars might look at the object repeatedly, but the part they could not understand would remain incomprehensible to them? In understanding a point of view, this would lead to the production of various and sundry perspectives. Was it, then,

² *Nazo no shichishito: Go seiki no Higashi Ajia to Nihon* (The enigmatic seven-pronged sword: East Asia and Japan in the fifth century) (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1992), in which this essay initially appeared (pp. 13-28) as the introduction.

sufficient to simply see the object? Strictly speaking, historical studies basically involve an investigation by taking things seen through the eyes of others as documents. Almost never do we directly become one with the historical events themselves. Furthermore, is not the very essence of historical research observation through the eyes of others and then ultimately grasping the truth of facts from those involved in the events themselves? Even if the people involved wish to conceal their intentions to a certain extent, the historian should have a plan to see through to the important points via the senses of a third party.

I Do Really Want to See the Treasure

There is another point of view I have had for some years past. It involves an erroneous reverence, something I have seen many times over the years, for basic historical documents. For example, when there is a rare discovery such as the ancient tomb mural at Takamatsuzuka 高松塚 in Nara Prefecture, everyone throngs onto the scene trying to outdo themselves. In such an instance, there are items which are of a nature making it impossible to put them on open display to all, such as extremely fragile items where there is a danger that they might easily break. Inasmuch as the administrators hold full responsibility for their preservation, it is only natural that they set limitations on visitors. As often happens, however, this gives rise to the criticism that the privileged few are privatizing these treasures which belong to all the people. Even among scholars, such criticism has been raised, which is terribly unfortunate. The fact of the matter is that many people, who forcibly wedge themselves in to see these easily breakable treasures and glance at the items for a brief moment, have no relationship at all the spread of historical science. For ordinary men and women who are not scholars specifically of paints and coatings, it would be perfectly sufficient to display facsimiles. I myself have never stopped by Takamatsuzuka, nor have I ever been struck by the desire to take a look there.

If, in some sense, direct contact with historical documents can be expected to add weight to one's statements or arguments, such an attitude is not impartial. Scholars working under the same conditions, all endowed with equal opportunities, must have basic operative principles. If one thinks that only he will be offered special advantages, this may be the beginning of scholarly degeneration.

These were my personal reflections while returning home aboard the limited expressed Yoshino line of the Kintetsu Railway.

The Nature of the Inscription on the Seven-Pronged Sword

The inscribed text on the seven-pronged sword contains sixty-one Chinese characters in all, thirty-four on the front and twenty-seven on the back. Although there were characters on the inside which have been completely worn away or peeled off and thus are no longer visible, the characters originally laid out in carved lines on either side at regular intervals, like ruled, parallel lines on stationery. Thus, one can determine the number of characters deemed standard. Originally, the gold was inlaid on the ruled lines, but only a trace amount of this now remains extant. Looked at it from above, this beautiful sight would seem to necessitate a gold border.

As a result of scholarship to date, of the total sixty-one graphs of the inscribed text, forty-nine are readable with a fair degree of certainty, four are completely unreadable, and the remaining eight are readable by surmising from the small number of remaining characters' strokes. Thus, although some portion of the text is missing, it is nonetheless possible to capture the general sense. Actually, discerning both the front and back text, we are able to read and comprehend the meaning to a considerable extent.

What can be said at the present stage of research on the topic is that the front inscription and the back inscription are largely different in nature. The front inscription stunning resembles inscriptions of mirrors which were distributed widely at the time, with the date of production coming first, followed by some conventional language about the forging of the sword, and finally the name of the craftsmen who participated directly in the production.

The inscription on the rear face is altogether different. While words of any momentous import are lacking here, the precise meaning is impossible to discern. Ultimately, though, it states that the item was produced in Paekche to offer as a gift to the ruler of Wa. What needs to be noted is the fact that there are no characters indicating the presentation of a gift to the ruler of Wa. In other words, this is not a diplomatic document but merely a private document of the parties concerned within the state of Paekche. Nonetheless, in content it clearly is related to diplomacy, in my estimation, and is in its objective a diplomatic or semi-diplomatic document.

Therefore, discussion of the nature of the text before deciphering it might lead to the criticism that I have jumped to an erroneous conclusion, though that is not the case. We can economize, though, on the expenditure of useless energy. In other words, if we can see that it resembles mirror inscriptions, the road is opened to understanding the text as conventional language, and if we treat that text as a semi-diplomatic document, we can then proceed with our understanding of it bearing in mind always the diplomatic rituals of the time.

If the content of the inscription possesses a certain consistency, then we should be able more or less to split the sixty-one characters in half. The text, though, is unevenly divided into thirty-one on the front and twenty-seven on the back, and as noted above they are qualitatively different in nature. Taking note of this point is the first necessary step in deciphering the inscriptional text.

Inasmuch as the seven-pronged sword was originally a weapon, research on it should probably treat it as a weapon and consider its shape and material substance an important topic. Although it is called a sword, in actuality it is more like that of a halberd than a sword. It lacks so much as a hole to attach a rivet on its hilt. On the field of battle, it ultimately falls far short of a useful piece of weaponry. More valuable for us today is the inscription inlaid on its shaft. Thus, what gives the seven-pronged sword meaning for us lies precisely in the inscription. Accordingly, in my study of it the inscription will be the main topic. I will refer to the seven-pronged sword, but let me add from the start that it is a seven-pronged sword whose value lies in this inscription.