The Comma at the End of the Silk Road:

*Magatama* and the Development of an Early Eastern Eurasian Ornamental Motif

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The Comma at the End of the Silk Road:
Magatama and the Development of an Early
Eastern Eurasian Ornamental Motif

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A B S T R A C T

Scholars remain divided concerning the origin and meaning of the ancient, curved or comma-shaped jade ornaments known in Japanese as magatama 勾玉/曲玉 and in Korean as gogok 골옥 or kobûnok 골운옥. Magatama are found in elite Japanese tombs dating mostly between the late Jōmon 縄文 and Kofun 古墳 periods (c. 1000 BCE–600 CE), and consist of jadeite quarried in Japan's Itoigawa region, while gogok/kobûnok appear in Korea mostly in sites from the Three Kingdoms (Samguk 삼국) period, especially between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, and typically are composed of what appears to be Japanese jadeite. Nonetheless, some Japanese researchers have argued for their continental (Chinese and/or Mongolian) origin — in terms of design if not physical provenance — while some Korean researchers insist that they were the product of (Korean) peninsular influence. In the meantime, some European scholars see magatama as part of an “elite-exchange system” or “North Asian–Peninsular cultural flow” that linked material and ritual culture across ancient Eastern Eurasia from early China through Scythian nomadic polities of Central and Northeast Asia and Korean kingdoms to the Japanese archipelago. Solving this riddle entails thinking about both early China and early Japan as distinct but connected zones of a much larger Eastern Eurasian pre-modern cultural arena. In other words, a history of magatama — however tentative or speculative it must be — can provide a kind of micro-history of Eastern Eurasian cultural exchange.
The vast land mass of Eurasia was a vehicle by which tides and eddies of information swept back and forth in antiquity, not only through migration and trade, but often simply through a complex network of contacts passing seemingly at random with increasing modifications over time and distance.¹

From earliest times, jade has been a prestigious and cross-culturally exchanged resource in Eastern Eurasia.² The pioneering Sinologist Berthold Laufer (1874–1934)³ may have been the first Western scholar to register curiosity about the apparent similarity between ancient comma-shaped jadeite⁴ ornaments known in Japanese as magatama 勾玉/曲玉 and in Korean as gogok 곡옥 or kobūnok 곡은옥 (Fig. 1), on the one hand, and the comma-shaped nephrite ornaments from early China (Fig. 2) that they resemble, on the other hand:

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⁴ Jadeite or NaAlSi₂O₆ — widely used in ancient Japan, Burma, Britain, and Mesoamerica — is one of two mineral deposits known by the nonscientific term “jade” (Chinese yù 玉, Korean ok, Japanese tama/gyoku). The other is nephrite or Ca₂(Mg, Fe)₅Si₈O₂₂(OH)₂, which is more abundant than jadeite and accounts for most of the “jade” worked in China as well as in New Zealand, Alaska, and British Columbia. See Gina L. Barnes, “Understanding Chinese Jade in a World Context,” Journal of the British Academy 6 (2018): 1–3.
In 1912, Laufer despairingly wrote that “such a coincidence of types cannot be brought forward,” but he was more right than he apparently knew. More than a century later, it turns out that, both materially and conceptually, the production and meaning of Japanese *magatama* appear to have been related to ancient China, albeit not quite directly. Like commas punctuating an extended sentence, *magatama* and their analogs and precursors may be found in a long sequence that links the iconography of early Chinese royal ideology, Iron Age Central Asian nomads, and ancient Korean shamanism to the rise of civilization in the Japanese archipelago. Thus, solving Laufer’s riddle entails thinking about both early China and early Japan as distinct but connected zones of a much larger Eastern Eurasian pre-modern cultural arena. In other words, a history of *magatama* — however tentative or speculative it must be — can provide a kind of micro-history of Eastern Eurasian cultural exchange.

Before the origins of *magatama* designs can be explored, a word or two about *magatama* materials and their natural distribution is in order. What routinely is called “jade” usually turns out to be one of two mineral substances, each known by the nonscientific term “jade” (Chinese *yù* 玉, Korean *ok*, Japanese *tama* or *gyoku*). Jadeite or NaAlSi₂O₆ — widely used in ancient Japan, Burma, Britain, and


Mesoamerica — is one of these, and nephrite or \( \text{Ca}_2(\text{Mg, Fe})_5\text{Si}_8\text{O}_{22}(\text{OH})_2 \) — which is more abundant than jadeite and accounts for most of the “jade” worked in China as well as in New Zealand, Alaska, and British Columbia — is the other. But regardless of whether early artisans chose jadeite or nephrite as their medium, such “jade” is uniquely difficult to work and hence has been a popular cross-cultural choice of material for ritual objects and other prestige goods. Only communities that were sufficiently stratified and affluent enough to support the development of sophisticated artisanal skills and the investment of significant labor hours could afford to produce jade items: “For example, 8 hours of sawing [jadeite or nephrite] using a stone knife and sand will cut a groove only 11-mm deep, and 1 hour of drilling using a hollow bamboo with sand and water will cut only 10 mm below the surface.” This helped to boost demand for jade items across prehistoric East and Southeast Asia. This, in turn, makes traffic in jade a useful phenomenon to examine when considering cross-cultural exchanges in antiquity. The distribution of ancient jade objects across east and southeast Eurasia suggests that prehistoric jade trade routes may have developed in parallel with the spread of agriculture (Fig. 3) throughout the region, including early human settlement of what now is Japan (Fig. 4):


Moreover, evidence of “the existence of large-scale obsidian exchange networks in the prehistory of Northeast Asia ... testifies to long-distance migrations or contacts in the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic, beginning at least at ca. 25,500 BP,” which suggests that jade, too, might have been a familiar commodity on the far-flung trade routes of prehistoric Northeast Asia (Fig. 5).

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Was Laufer correct in hypothesizing an ancient Chinese origin for *magatama*? The Chinese have long regarded jade as symbolic or productive of longevity and immortality.\(^{14}\) Jade (nephrite) items appear in what now are coastal Chinese sites as early as 3500 BCE,\(^ {15}\) and Elizabeth Childs-Johnson has dated the “Jade Age” in China to approximately 4000–2000 BCE, with its “second peak in working true jade” occurring from the late Warring States period (c. 481–221 BCE) through the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).\(^ {16}\) But early China — defined geographically by the borders of the Yellow River valley — was jade-poor, with its major sources of jade located in the Yangzi River delta region and what now is the province of Inner Mongolia, both of which were viewed as culturally marginal, if not “non-Chinese”

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13 Figs. 3–5 in Kuzmin, 4.


16 Childs-Johnson, 16.
by Chinese elites at least as early as the Western Zhōu 周 dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE).\(^{17}\) As early as 5000 BCE, at least some of the jade that eventually was valued by early Chinese elites was quarried and worked in Scythian kingdom of Khotan (Yútián 于闐, modern Xinjiāng 新疆),\(^{18}\) which also was the source of the jade items found in the tomb of Shāng 商 dynasty general and queen Fù Hǎo 婦好 (c. 1200 BCE).\(^{19}\) Another ancient source of jade was Fēngtián 豐田, Táiwān 台灣, where nephrite has been quarried and worked since 2500 BCE\(^ {20}\) and distributed to other regions in East and Southeast Asia since 500 BCE.\(^ {21}\)

Not only was jade a familiar commodity in Neolithic East and Northeast Asia, but so were comma-shaped ornaments — some made of jade, and others wrought from ceramics or other materials (Fig. 6). Hongshan culture (Hóngshān wénhuà 红山文化, c. 4700–2900 BCE) sites in what is now northeastern China (Inner Mongolia to Liáoníng 辽宁) include not only many jade (nephrite) items, but particularly jade pendants with comma motifs (Fig. 7), often zoomorphic (Fig. 8) if not embryonic (Fig. 9) in form.


\(^{18}\) Frances Wood, The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 151.


The “larval” Hongshan jades (Fig. 10) may have influenced the development of the “fetal” jades found in late Shāng sites (c. 1200 BCE; Fig. 11), and both of these jade motifs resemble early graphs for two terms meaning “dragon” — qíu 蟠 (Fig. 12) and lóng 龙 (Fig. 13).

22 After Fig. 37.2 in Hung Hsiao-chun, “Cultural Interactions in Mainland and Island Southeast Asia and Beyond, 2000 BC – AD 200,” 636. The comma-shaped clay items on top were found in a Neolithic site in Nagsabaran, northern Luzon, the Philippines, while those on the bottom were recovered from a Neolithic site in Thac Lac in Ha Tinh province, Viet Nam.


Western Zhōu “burial masks” (Fig. 14) include comma-shaped jade components that resemble both Hongshan pendants and *magatama*, which raises the possibility that such jade forms may perhaps be more detailed originals of more versions found in later Korean and Japanese sites — originals that may have been mediated by later developments in the art of the Liáoníng region, such as the gold tigers and leopards produced there between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C.E (Fig. 15):

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30 Qian Yang, “The Circulation of Jades in Early China (Late Neolithic-Eastern Zhou, ca. 4500–221 B.C.)” (M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 2014), 71. See also Childs-Johnson, 129, no. 27. Childs-Johnson interprets the piercings in these jade pieces as evidence that they were originally attached to wooden funeral masks, as was the case with the masks associated with Shāng dynasty rulers.

31 Yang, 75.

It always is unwise to disregard or discount cultural connections between early China and its nomadic neighbors, however. Comma-shaped motifs are found in association with representations of power across a huge swath of Central and Northeast Asia as early as 600s BCE. This area of Scythian cultural presence and influence extended from what now are Ukraine and Georgia in the west to what now are Mongolia, northeast China (Manchuria), and North Korea in the east (Fig. 16):

Comma-shaped pendants and brooches found in fifth-third century BCE Scythian tombs in Pazyryk, Siberia (Figs. 17 and 18), may be stylized versions of the teeth of predator animals such as tigers and bears. In the case of the pendant seen in Fig. 18, an actual bear tooth is incorporated into the

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35 The persistence of tiger symbolism in East Asia far surpasses the duration of the animal's existence in East Asian habitats. While bears still may be found in wilderness areas of East and Northeast Asia, tigers became extinct in the region in prehistoric times, although their range extended from the Indian subcontinent to northeast Siberia during the Late
design. Unlike the nephrite or jadeite items found in early Chinese sites, comma-shaped items found in Sythian tombs in what now are Siberia (Figs. 17 and 18) and Kazakhstan (Figs. 19 and 20) tend to be made of, or with, gold:

Much like the “jade road” and “obsidian road” trading networks mentioned earlier in this essay, in prehistoric and ancient times there also existed a “gold road” that connected Bactria (a territory corresponding to parts of modern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), renowned for its hordes of gold coins and other gold objects, to the Central Asian steppes and the Korean peninsula. As Frank L. Pleistocene (c. 126,000–11,700 years ago) and early to mid-Holocene (from 11,650 years ago up to about 6,000 years ago). See David M. Cooper, *et al.*, “Predicted Pleistocene–Holocene Range Shifts of the Tiger (*Panthera tigris*)” *Diversity and Distributions* (September 2016): 1–13.


37 Antonini and Bajpakov, 170, fig. 255.

38 Antonini and Bajpakov, 205, fig. 415. This fifth-third century BCE item comes from the Zalauli site in the Almaty region of Kazakhstan.

39 Antonini and Bajpakov, 202, fig. 404. This fifth-third century BCE item comes from the Zalauli site in the Almaty region of Kazakhstan.

Holt puts it, “globalism was born in Bactria,” and it was the commodity of gold that helped to catalyze early globalizing developments across Eurasia. However, as is well known, most early Chinese elites differed from their counterparts in West and Central Eurasia by prizing most highly not gold, but jade, even though they were consumers of gold, a metal not mined in China proper until the Táng dynasty (618–907 CE). Until then, the ancient Chinese relied on the Bactrians and other West Eurasian societies for sourcing gold, just as they relied upon jade-producing regions in areas that were peripheral to classical Chinese cultural zones. The convergence of China’s trade in gold and jade with the prehistoric and ancient Chinese love of comma-shaped ornaments — a taste that may have originated wholly in China, or may have been influenced by Scythian cultures, or may have been the product of Sino-Scythian interactions in prehistory — appears to have led to the production of comma-shaped pendants in the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago early in the Common Era. Staffan Rosén argues that these pendants — magatama — “constitute another tangible evidence of the longstanding existence of the north–south axis in the North Asian–Peninsular cultural flow during the millennium here under discussion ... the northeastern cultural–religious complex, which found its perhaps most refined expression in the Silla culture of the fifth and sixth centuries.”

As early as the eighth century BCE, comma-shaped beads and pendants (gogok 곡옥, qūyù 曲玉) began to appear in elite tombs on the Korean peninsula. By the first century CE, comma-shaped beads and pendants were customary grave goods interred in tombs of Samhan 삼한 (Proto-Three Kingdoms, c. 1000 BCE–300 CE) rulers in the Korean peninsula (Fig. 21). Nearly contemporary tombs dated to the Yayoi 弥生 period (c. 1000 BCE–300 CE) in Japan are filled with similar objects (Fig. 22).

41 Holt, 2.
42 Bunker, 27.
In the kingdom of Silla 신라 (Xīnluó 新羅, 57 BCE–935 CE), in particular, royal tomb finds reveal a decided preference on the part of southeastern Korean elites for comma-shaped ornaments (Fig. 23), which formed part of both shamanic headgear and the crowns and girdles (Fig. 24) worn by Silla rulers. The connections between shamanism, possibly of Scythian or other Central Asian origin, Korean rulership, and comma-shaped ornaments manifest in a particularly striking way in a pair of gold-ensheathed jade gogok recovered from the tomb of a Baekje 백제 (Bǎijì 百濟, 18 BCE–660 CE) ruler (Fig. 25), which strongly resemble the Scythian bear's-tooth ornament seen in Fig. 18 above.

46 After fig. 13.12 in Gina L. Barnes, Archaeology of East Asia, 328.
47 After fig. 13.12 in Barnes, Archaeology of East Asia, 328.
48 See Rosén, 5; Kenneth B. Lee, Korea and East Asia: The Story of a Phoenix (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 27;
As was the case in early China, elite Silla political and religious culture does not appear to have made a very clear distinction between the executive and shamanic functions of its rulers.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps, as Arthur M. Hocart has argued, “there never were any gods without kings, or kings without gods ... [since] the earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings.”\textsuperscript{53} In Silla, however, queens were as likely as kings to wield the politico-religious power associated with comma-shaped treasures of jade or gold; female rulers seem to have enjoyed equality with, if not greater status than, male rulers, at least prior to the Silla state’s Confucianization under Chinese influence late in its history.\textsuperscript{54}

Be that as it may, by the time that comma-shaped ornaments or \textit{magatama} began to appear in the Japanese islands, it seems that all of the pieces of their complex and considerable Eurasian heritage were in place:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Fifth c., Image: 2013. Comma-shaped Jades. [South Korea, North Gyeongsang Province; Silla (57 BCE – 935 CE); National Museum of Korea, Gyeongju] http://library.artstor.org.berea.idm.oclc.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_33241896.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Angela Jean Haugen, “Mounded Tomb Cultures of Three Kingdoms Period Korea and Yamato Japan: A Study of Golden Regalia and Cultural Interactions” (M.A. thesis, Ohio State University 2010), 62.
\item \textsuperscript{51} \textit{Baekje Sculpture and Crafts} (Baekje Cultural Development Institute, 1992), 178.
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{Kingship} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 7.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Sarah Milledge Nelson, \textit{Shamans, Queens, and Figurines: The Development of Gender Archaeology} (London: Routledge, 2016), 79–82, 84.
\end{itemize}
• a deep symbolic association of both comma-shaped forms and jade materials with power in multiple forms — animal, vital, royal, and supernatural

• an extensive and longstanding Eurasian trade network that connected Central Asian steppe cultures with both jade- and gold-producing regions across Asia and emergent societies in peninsular and insular East Asia

• an institution of shamanic rulership that emphasized female authority in Silla Korea — arguably, the most significant early cultural influence on emerging polities in Japan during the late Yayoi and Kofun 古墳 periods (c. 300–538 CE)

That early regimes in the Japanese archipelago would become associated with jade artifacts is not surprising. Jadeite was quarried and worked in the Itoi 糸魚 River basin of coastal northwestern Honshū 本州 (more or less parallel with Silla territory) in what now is Niigata 新潟 prefecture as early as 3000 BCE, during the early Jōmon 糸文 period (c. 4000–2500 BCE).\(^\text{55}\) This is the chronological point at which magatama — comma-shaped jadeite beads or pendants — begin to appear in the Japanese archaeological record. However, they do so in ways that differ from their later, more significant role in early Japanese culture: they are found in residential sites, not in elite tombs, and they are few in number, both in terms of how many might be found in a particular domestic site as well as in terms of how many such sites include magatama. What magatama meant to early Jōmon people is unknown; what is clear is that magatama were rare and few at this time, and were not differentiated from ordinary household life. Nishimura Yoko 西村陽子 argues that the sudden burgeoning of magatama in late Jōmon (c. 1500–900 BCE) tombs is best explained as the result of a shift in their meaning from quotidian, if scarce, domestic items to abundant and individualized markers of social status suitable for offering as grave goods.\(^\text{56}\) This shift in meaning, in turn, may have been the result of newfound affluence that owed its origin to a sudden infusion of migrants and material culture from the Korean peninsula near the end of the Jōmon period: “The abundance and the presence of these body ornaments in individual graves


\(^{56}\) Nishimura, 145–146.
indicate that the Late Jōmon inhabitants of northern Japan enjoyed a relatively comfortable material culture. Magatama and the jadeite required to produce them became so popular and available, in fact, that some jadeite quarries in what now is Niigata prefecture appear to have hoarded their supply in order to increase demand for their product, which seems to have greatly enriched the local elites, who then were able to assemble massive ritual structures of wood and stone near the production site. Other magatama-producing regions, such as Izumo, in what now is Shimane prefecture at the opposite extreme of the western Honshū coast from Niigata, enjoyed a monopoly on magatama and other precious artifacts of worked stone and glass well into the Nara period (710–784 CE), becoming a major center of kami worship and thus political power in the process. Elite tombs from the Middle Yayoi through the Kofun period contain a great many magatama alongside artifacts of both Korean and Chinese origin, such as ritual swords and mirrors associated with Daoist traditions in mainland East Asia (Fig. 26), all of which eventually became symbols of the unifying Yamato polity that emerged in what now is Nara prefecture in central Honshū around the end of the Kofun period.


58 Bausch, 58.


By the Kofun period, elite tombs began to contain both magatama strung on necklaces (Fig. 27) and haniwa (terracotta figurines) depicted wearing such necklaces (Fig. 28):

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61 Koji Mizoguchi, “The Yayoi and Kofun Periods of Japan,” in *Handbook of East and Southeast Asian Archaeology*, ed. Junko Habu, Peter V. Lape, and John W. Olsen (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2017), 572, fig. 34.7. Note the jadeite magatama alongside early Hán dynasty jiàn 鑲 (bronze mirrors) and bì 璧 (nephrite disks) in this Middle Yayoi 弥生 (c. 100 BCE–100 CE) jar burial site. Mizoguchi identifies the sword found in this tomb as “indigenous,” but other scholars argue for its Korean origin.


63 Nishimura, 117, fig. 3.
Gina L. Barnes hypothesizes that “the sudden exuberant production of magatama ... in the early Kofun period” is related to the symbolic association, well-established in early China, between tigers’ teeth and the Daoist deity known as Xiwángmǔ 西王母 (“Queen Mother of the West”). Like jade, Xiwángmǔ was connected to both immortality and regions west of China. In fact, there is strong evidence for the theory that Xiwángmǔ was a Chinese amalgam of mixed Western Eurasian heritage: (Shakyamuni Buddha (from what now is India, the divine queen Nanā/Nanania (from what are now Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq), and the mother goddess Cybele (from what is now Turkey). Brought to China from the western terminus of the Silk Roads just prior to the Common Era, it seems that these disparate figures were integrated with the cult of a female directional deity that dated back to Shāng times and was revived during the Warring States period. Notably, Nanā/Nanania not only was a divine queen, but she also was associated with feline predators (particularly lions) and lunar crescent motifs that look rather like magatama (see Fig. 29). By the late Hán dynasty, Xiwángmǔ also was associated with lunar symbolism and was paired with a solar male counterpart, Dōngwánggōng 東王公 (King Father of the East), although she remained the primary deity in this pairing.


66 Carter, 123. Carter speculates that Nanā/Nanania’s lunar crescent motif was borrowed from the cult of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the moon, wild animals, and hunting.

67 Knauer, 63.
Like the queens of Silla, Xiwángmǔ represented a fusion of sacred and political authority in the person of a shamanic female ruler. According to chapter two of the Shānhǎijīng 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas, a kind of mythological tour of Chinese geography compiled early on in the Hàn dynasty), she is even said to reside on “Jade Mountain” (Yùshān 玉山), elsewhere identified as Mount Kunlun (Kūnlún Shān 崑崙山):  

Another 350 lǐ 里 [approximately 175 kilometers] to the west is a mountain called Jade Mountain. This is the place where the Queen Mother of the West dwells... Her appearance is like that of a human, with a leopard's tail and tigers' teeth... She wears a shèng 胜 headdress.

68 Fig. 15 in Carter, 123. This second-century CE depiction of the goddess Nanā/Nanania was engraved on a Parthian clay jar found at Assur, Iraq.

69 From fig. 1.3 in Nicholas Zufferey, “Traces of the Silk Road in Han-Dynasty Iconography: Questions and Hypotheses,” in The Journey of Maps of Images on the Silk Road, eds. Philippe Forêt and Andreas Kaplony (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 21.


71 Qtd. in Suzanne E. Cahill, Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 15–16.
Late Hán dynasty depictions of Xiwángmǔ (Fig. 30) typically include a shèng headdress\(^\text{72}\) atop her head, which closely resembles the headgear worn by magatama-bedecked haniwa "shamans" such as the one seen in Fig. 28 above, as well as on the Parthian/Scythian goddess Nanā/Nanania in Fig. 29. The magatama themselves already bear a striking resemblance to the tigers' teeth with which Xiwángmǔ was associated in Chinese lore, not to mention the lunar crescents seen in the iconography of Western mother goddesses.

When the first Chinese chronicler to describe Japan, the Western Jìn dynasty official Chén Shòu 陳壽 (233–297), discussed the islands’ “ruler,” he did so using terminology and imagery that is redolent of both Xiwángmǔ and Daoism. In the Wōrén zhuán 倭人傳 (Account of the Dwarfs) section of his Wèizhì 魏志 (Records of Wèi), Chén famously describes a woman called Bēimíhū 卑彌呼 (Japanese Himiko or Pimiko, c. 170–248 CE), who he says ruled the land of Wō 倭 (J. Wa) using “magic and sorcery [guǐdào 鬼道, J. kidō].”\(^\text{73}\) By the third century CE, the Chinese had already been curious about the Japanese archipelago for some time. In 219 BCE, the emperor Qín Shǐhuáng is said to have sent the fāngshì 方士 (occult specialist) Xú Fú 徐福 in search of shényào 神藥 (“divine medicine”),\(^\text{74}\) in pursuit of which he is thought to have explored the fabled eastern islands inhabited by Daoist immortals. There is no evidence, however, that either of Xú Fú’s two recorded voyages resulted in contact with Japan, much less discovery of immortality elixirs.\(^\text{75}\) There is, however, evidence which suggests that at least some aspects of Daoist traditions — deity cults, apotropaic practices, even liturgical and scriptural texts — arrived in Japan as “stowaways” (that is, as haphazardly, episodically transmitted items of cultural exchange) closer to the time of Himiko/Pimiko if not Xú Fú.\(^\text{76}\) Some have speculated that the distinctive

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\(^{72}\) Knauer argues that what appears to be a headdress, labeled as shèng, is actually a vestige of the high-backed throne on which Western prototypes of this mother goddess, such as Cybele and Nanā/Nanania, are depicted as sitting. See Knauer, 75.


\(^{74}\) See Shǐjì 史記, ch. 6 (Qínshǐhuáng bēnjì 秦始皇本紀), sec. 45. A similar episode in ch. 118 (Huáinán héngshān lièzhuàn 淮南衡山列傳), sec. 19, describes the object of Xú Fú’s quest as “divine alien things” (shényìwù 神異物).


\(^{76}\) Michael Como, “Daoist Deities in Ancient Japan: Household Deities, Jade Women and Popular Religious Practice,” in
royal tomb mounds after which Japan’s Kofun period is named were introduced in conjunction with Chinese contacts during this era, while more cautious researchers conclude that all that really can be said about the third century in Japan is that it was a period of “pivotal importance ... in Japanese religious history.”

Be that as it may, Chén Shòu’s use of the phrase guǐdào to describe the ideological apparatus of an exotic female ruler is intriguing. Like fāngshì and wū巫 (“shaman,” but probably better understood as “spirit-medium”), guǐdào is not a neutral term; rather, it is an epithet — a term used “to express mild disapproval of people unlike oneself ... varieties of religious operative that well-born authors despise.” This epithet, for which the standard English translation now is “Ghost Daoism,” combines two notoriously nebulous terms: gui鬼 (which usually denotes a disembodied human spirit, often vengeful or malevolent) and dào道 (which runs the semantic gamut from mere roadway to concepts as grandiose as a religious tradition or the cosmic source of all being and meaning). By the late Hàn dynasty, guǐdào seems to have become a catch-all term used to describe ideas, images, institutions, and practices related to the pursuit of immortality through both architectural and ritual manipulation of symbolic imagery and space in elite tombs, as seen in the famous T-shaped silk banner found in Mǎwángduī 马王堆 Hán Tomb No. 1 as well as in numerous examples of late Hán mortuary art and architecture.

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79 This may be due to the influence of fifth-century compilers of tales involving “anomalies” (zhiguài志怪), who used guǐdào to describe the realm of troublesome “hungry ghosts” (èguǐ饿鬼), where unfortunate, disembodied spirits were thought to wander unhappily between Buddhist rebirths.


81 For both a summary of previous scholarship on this banner and a new interpretation of it, see Eugene Y. Wang, “Ascend to Heaven or Stay in the Tomb? Paintings in Mawangdui Tomb 1 and the Virtual Ritual of Revival in Second-Century B.C.E.
the third century CE, guǐdào appears to have taken on a more precise sectarian and political meaning, denoting the Daoist sect known variously as the Celestial Masters (Tiānshī Dào 天師道) or Way of the Five Pecks of Rice (Wǔdǒumǐ Dào 五斗米道) — the Sichuān 四川-based religio-political movement led by male members of the Zhāng 張 family, who themselves seem to have used guǐdào to describe “popular” (sú 俗) or “perverse” (yín 淫) occult activity, said to be carried out by women and blamed for causing epidemics.⁸² Chén Shòu, however, attributes the Zhāng family’s supernatural power to the guǐdào taught to founding theocrat Zhāng Lù 張魯 (d. 216 CE) by his mother.⁸³ Perhaps there is some confusion here in the sources, and it is unclear whether these meanings were exclusive of one another, even for one group of users. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to ponder how and why this particular epithet — used both by the Chinese imperial state to describe a subversive ideology and by proponents of that ideology to describe their own subversives — happen to come to the mind of Chén Shòu when the occasion arose for him to describe the topsy-turvy heterotopia of Wō/Wa, where a mysterious woman was said to rule over a primitive paradise using supernatural means. Barnes argues for a connection between guǐdào and Xiwángmǔ as a partial explanation of why both the Chinese and the Japanese chose to represent Bēimíhū/Himiko/Pimiko as a mystical, vaguely-Daoist theocrat.⁸⁴ Chén also mentions that Bēimíhū/Himiko/Pimiko received one hundred Chinese-made “deity-beast mirrors” (shénshòujìng 神獣鏡, J. shinjūkyō), presumably in order to cement the tributary relationship between China and what someday would become Japan. Among extant mirrors discovered in Kofun period sites as well as in

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82 See Miura, 459; Christine Mollier, Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 66 n. 30; and Thomas E. Smith, Declarations of the Perfected, Part One: Setting Scripts and Images into Motion (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2013), 52 n. 130.

83 “以鬼道教民自號師君” By means of guǐdào, he instructed the people, styling himself “Teacher and Lord.” See section 1 of the Zhāng Lù zhuán 張魯傳 in the Wèizhì as well as section 1 of the Liú’èrmù zhuán 劉牧傳 in the Shǔshū 蜀書, which describes Zhāng’s mother.

contemporaneous Chinese caches, Xiwángmǔ is a consistent and prominent decorative motif.\textsuperscript{85} Moreover, the appeal of Daoist ideas, institutions, and practices to both Chinese and Japanese during the third century appears to have been strongly related to concerns about illness, in particular the epidemic diseases that tend to accompany cross-cultural exchanges — disequilibrating episodes that everywhere and always tend to enhance the power of regimes or those who would supplant them.\textsuperscript{86}

The earliest Japanese chronicle, \textit{Kojiki 古事記} (\textit{Record of Ancient Matters}, c. 712 CE), does not mention Himiko/Pimiko or discuss any connection between Xiwángmǔ and Japanese rulers. It does, however, list mirrors and \textit{magatama} among the sacred objects used to entice the \textit{kami} to inhabit a special tree.\textsuperscript{87} By the medieval period, at which time esoteric Buddhism had supplanted \textit{kami} worship (not quite yet transformed into Shintō at that point) as Japan's premier religious tradition, a \textit{magatama} (alongside a mirror and a sword) was understood not only as a sacred emblem of imperial power, but also as Japan's manifestation of the “wish-fulfilling jewel” (\textit{J. hōju 宝珠}, literally “precious bead”) of Buddhist lore as well as a kind of Daoist visual parable about the relationship between \textit{yīn} 隱 and \textit{yáng} 陽:

\begin{quote}
[T]he Tendai 天台 monk Jihen 慈遍 (fl. fourteenth century) ... wrote ... that there is a direct connection between the [imperial] regalia, the wish-fulfilling jewel, and Buddha relics.... The jewel \textit{[yasakani no magatama 八尺瓊勾玉, one of the three items in the imperial regalia]} ... constitutes an object that accords with the intentions of the original \textit{kami}. In its \textit{yang} aspect, it rains myriad gems from the sky without exhaustion, and is a transformation of the relics of Buddha of old. In its \textit{yin} aspect, it is a “sea jewel” said to be possessed by dragon kings. The wish-fulfilling jewel, in other words, unites \textit{yīn} and \textit{yáng} and is thus identical with the one mind of heaven and earth and, uniting the
\end{quote}


powers of the inner and outer shrine of Ise 伊勢 [to the sun goddess and imperial ancestor, Amaterasu 天照], is only passed down to the descendants of the royal line.  

Still later, the ascetic, healer, worshiper of Mt. Fuji 富士山, and syncretic religious teacher Kakugyō 角行 (1541–1646) taught that human sexual intercourse united

the sun and the moon, resulting in the creation of a sacred jewel (magatama), which is at once a child and the female cosmic deity Sengen 浅間 Bosatsu (bodhisattva), the representation of Mt. Fuji. He also celebrated menstruation, which had a cosmic significance in connection with lunar cycles, and ... expressly told women that they should not refrain from attending meetings of his devotees because of menstruation.  

The Japanese conflation of magatama with female power, the spirits of nature, and exotic antiquity may have found its culmination in the contemporary commercialization of Himiko/Pimiko. As described by Laura Miller, the ancient Japanese shaman-queen has become a popular culture icon, used to brand and market enterprises and products as diverse as the Jade Garden Himiko’s Garden café and shop near the Hashihaka Kofun 笠墓古墳 (a third century CE burial mound in Nara prefecture that is popularly regarded as the tomb of Himiko/Pimiko), magatama (produced in Niigata, naturally) sold at Shintō shrines as omamori 御守 (amulets — see Fig. 31), female diviners who claim to be Himiko/Pimiko reborn, and even manga 漫画 (comic books) that depict Himiko/Pimiko wearing magatama and something like a sheng headdress, looking for all the world like a cross between a haniwa  


shamaness and Xiwángmǔ (Figs. 32 and 33).90 Perhaps most bizarre is the character of Toga Himiko 渡我被身子, who appears in Horikoshi Köhei 堀越耕平’s manga series Boku no Hirō Akademia 僕のヒーローアカデミア (My Hero Academia) and its anime アニメ (animated cartoon) adaptation (Fig. 34).91 Although this Himiko is a villain rather than a heroine, her abilities include a vaguely Daoist shape-shifting power, and she wears a sort of necklace composed of tooth-like knives that is somewhat reminiscent of magatama necklaces and invokes the terrifying aspect of Artemis and other possible prototypes for the mother goddess imagery that reached early Japan from China via Daoist traditions.

“The meaning of objects,” remarks Barnes, “can change through time in different social


92 Contemporary Japanese depiction of Tamanari/Tama no oya no Mikoto 玉祖命 or Ame no Akarutama 天明玉命, deity of jade, engaged in magatama production. https://yaoyoro.net/玉祖命.html.

93 Fig. 13 in Miller, “Searching for Charisma: Queen Himiko,” 52.

94 Cover of an historical manga depicting Himiko/Pimiko with magatama necklace, Chinese mirror, and stylized headdress. Photo from the collection of the author.

95 https://bokunoheroacademia.fandom.com/wiki/Himiko_Toga?file=Himiko_Toga_Villain_Costume_Profile.png
Consider the following set of images (Fig. 35), each of which is familiar to contemporary Japanese audiences:

The *magatama* could easily be a schematic representation of a Scythian bear’s-tooth pendant, or a Hongshan jade, or a *gogok* from a Silla shaman’s or queen’s diadem. The *mitsudomoe* — three *magatama* swimming in a spiral, if you will — could be interpreted as an iconographic depiction of the Daoist *Sānqīng* ("Three Pure Ones" who function as a kind of cosmological trinity), or as a Japanese cousin of the Celtic triskelion motif. And while the *taikyoku* or *futatsudomoe* is easily recognized as a classical Chinese depiction of cosmic balance, in its contrasting halves one might also glimpse a pair of twinned *magatama*. None of these identifications is necessarily mistaken, but each requires a specific cultural and historical context in which to make sense of what one sees (or thinks that one sees). If one regards a given motif or object as the pure product of only one cultural and historical context, then it becomes impossible to see within it possibilities that belong to other such contexts. But if one disregards these multiple contexts, one runs the risk of blinding oneself to the very

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real and complicated tableau that leads from both early China and ancient Central Asian steppe cultures through the Korean peninsula into the Japanese archipelago, culminating in the stunningly multivalent objects known as *magatama*. And even this way of visualizing the story told by these stones simplifies the facts, for seeing both early China and early Japan as distinct but connected zones of a much larger Eastern Eurasian pre-modern cultural arena necessarily entails connections to regions and institutions outside of Eastern Eurasia proper: the jade-producing areas of Southeast Asia and Turkestan, the shamanic traditions of Siberian nomads, and perhaps even the Celtic migrations from Central Asia in prehistoric times. In other words, a history of *magatama* — however tentative or speculative it must be — can provide a kind of micro-history of Eastern Eurasian cultural exchange.
Richey, “The Comma at the End of the Silk Road”

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