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GLOBAL MEDIEVAL AT THE “END OF THE SILK ROAD,” CIRCA 756 CE: THE SHŌSŌ-IN COLLECTION IN JAPAN

JUN HU

There is no museum of antiquities in the world, so far as I know, half so instructive to the European as this rare collection at Nara. ... Where else could we see these strange connecting links between the arts of Egypt, India, China, and Japan, that we find here?¹

WHEN CHRISTOPHER DRESSER (1834–1904), Scottish designer and theorist, travelled to Japan in 1876 as a representative of the South Kensington Museum in London (later to become the Victoria & Albert Museum), little prepared him for what the ancient Japanese capital of Nara held in store. His tour of “the Mikado’s treasures” preserved at the repository at the Shōsō-in 正倉院 filled him with awe and disbelief (Figure 8.1). This repository, first assembled in the mid-eighth century, encompasses artifacts that were created, traded, and (in some cases) made to order along the Silk Road. It was hardly known outside Japan at the time of Dresser’s writing. It would take the work of Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), the first curator of Oriental Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, for the Shōsō-in to be properly introduced to readers and museum-goers in the West.² By his reckoning, the repository proves that “the seeds of civilization in Japan were sowed during Alexander’s conquest of Asia, and were in turn imparted to Japan via China and Korea.”³ This language of “globalism” continues to inform both public and scholarly discourses on the Shōsō-in to the present day. Within Japan, the collection has been customarily labelled as the “final destination of the Silk Road.”⁴ The Lithuania-born

1 Dresser, *Japan*, 101.

2 The modern discoveries of the Shōsō-in in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are beyond the scope of this essay and merit a study of their own, not least because Fenollosa and Dresser’s universalizing discourse of “art” quickly became strained by a highly charged language of nationalism in the works of Japanese scholars. For the larger historical backdrop, especially institutional changes, which gave rise to the modern notion of “art” and “national treasure” in Japan in this period, see Guth, “Kokuhō,” 313–22.

3 Fenollosa, “Nara,” 156. The discussion of the Shōsō-in in his *Epochs* (110–15) is filled with speculations about the Persian, Greek, and Chinese origins of the objects.

4 Yoneda, *Kiseki no Shōsōin hōmotsu*.

Figure 8.1. "Sketch of a glass ewer ... undoubtedly an early Arabian work." Reproduced from Dresser, *Japan*, 100, Figure 29.

Fluxus artist George Maciunas (1931–1978), who took classes on Asian art at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, recuperated the Shōsō-in as a token of artistic catholicism and exquisite craftsmanship when he named the group's first mail-order set the "Shosoin warehouse of today" in 1965.⁵

Less acknowledged is the fact that this prodigious collection of global art first came into existence owing to concerns that were ultimately local, religious, and maritorious. As the various routes these objects travelled converged in Japan, their collective identity as an ensemble also became significant. This essay focuses on the beginning of this contingent history of the Shōsō-in collection within Japan, when the personal collection of Emperor Shōmu 聖武 (r. 724–749) was first donated posthumously to the Buddha Vairocana at Tōdai-ji Monastery in 756. I argue that the global nature of the collection was circumscribed by the emphatically local construction of the religious, imperial, and personal identities of this Japanese emperor: identities whose apparent tension was at once articulated and safely contained in the language of the collection's inventory and dedication.

The Shōsō-in: An Overview

The Shōsō-in collection first took shape at a time when Buddhism was being embraced in Japan, both at the court and beyond. This is a period that culminated in the completion of the Tōdai-ji Monastery in Nara in the mid-eighth century, roughly two centuries after Buddhism had been first introduced to Japan

⁵ Kellein, *Dream of Fluxus*, 109.

via the Korean peninsula.⁶ The Great Buddha Hall of this monastery housed a seated bronze statue 52 feet (16 metres) in height, which took more than three years to cast.⁷ A project of this stature required perseverance and unflagging faith in equal measure. Both qualities were found in the Great Buddha’s imperial patrons, two larger-than-life characters who ensured Buddhism its place in the cultural history of Japan: Emperor Shōmu and his consort Kōmyō 光明 (701–760). Shōmu was the first Japanese emperor to join the monastic order. Like him, Empress Dowager Kōmyō was a devout Buddhist believer.⁸ Both played fundamental roles in the history of the Shōsō-in, as did their daughter Abe, who was to reign twice as emperor, first as Kōken 孝謙 (749–758) and again as Shotōku 稱徳 (764–770).

Many of the instruments and paraphernalia used during the consecration ceremony for the Great Buddha became part of the Shōsō-in collection and survive in good condition today. But what first brought the collection into being was a gift of a personal nature. When Shōmu passed away in 756, Kōmyō donated a large number of artifacts that were treasured by the emperor to the Tōdai-ji Monastery, for the spiritual deliverance of Shōmu and his subjects.⁹ A timber structure (Figure 8.2), the Shōsō-in itself had been built shortly before, most likely to house Kōmyō’s anticipated gift.¹⁰ While the objects have since been moved to storage buildings constructed in the 1950s and ’60s, the original structure still stands within the precincts of the Tōdai-ji Monastery today.¹¹

More donations were made after Kōmyō’s time, and the inventory came to span a millennium of artistic endeavour. The earliest of many dated artifacts is an

6 Yoshida, “Revisioning Religion,” 1–26.

7 The structure was burned down twice. Of the statue, only the original pedestal survives. The current building is an eighteenth-century restoration. For this monumental project, see Piggott, “Tōdaiji,” especially 126–65.

8 Mikoshiha, “Empress Kōmyōshi,” 21–37. On Kōmyō’s sponsorship of scripture-copying projects, see Lowe, “Texts and Textures,” 9–36, and *Ritualized Writing*.

9 The language of Kōmyō’s vow and the inventory it preceded will be discussed later in this essay.

10 The generic terms *Shōsō* (“main repository building”) and *In* (“a precinct”) have come to refer, in modern parlance, to this specific structure. In fact, most major monasteries would have had a *Shōsō*. For a history of such log cabins in Japan, see Shimizu, “Azekura.”

11 Dendrochronological studies spanning over a decade (in three phases between 2002 and 2014), during which timber samples from all three chambers inside the current structure were taken and analyzed, produced conclusive evidence that the Shōsō-in was built between 752 and 756: that is, between the consecration of the main Buddha Hall and Kōmyō’s donation. Despite repairs made to the building over the centuries, no substantial structural change was introduced. See Mitsutani, “Nenrin nendaihō (3),” 81–88.

Figure 8.2. Shōsō-in repository building, Tōdai-ji Monastery, Nara (Japan). First constructed ca. 756 CE. The Shōsō-in Shōsō, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

anthology of works by the Chinese poet Wang Bo 王勃 (ca. 650–ca. 676) that bears an inscription from 707; the last is a wooden cabinet dated to 1693.¹² An inventory from the 1950s lists 794 objects. The total number of artifacts in the collection far exceeds this number, however, as some objects were singled out in the inventory while others such as folding screens or bronze mirrors that pertain to the same function were counted as a single item.¹³ Together, they span the media of painting, calligraphy, lacquerware, ceramics, metalwork, glass, and textile. Their origins were equally varied, with examples coming from Byzantium, Persia, China, and the Korean peninsula.

The Shōsō-in collection attests that, at the end of the trade routes collectively labelled “the Silk Road,” Japan enjoyed the relay effects of this “global” material culture, even if its participation was largely mediated through China. The four examples to be discussed below constitute only a small sample of this tremendous wealth of artifacts. Together, they showcase the range of media and techniques of production that the collection encompasses. For each, there is a range of comparanda to locate Shōmu and his court within a broad circle of shared artistic preferences. However, it is important to note that this globalism was conditioned by

¹² See Matsushima, ed., *Shōsōin*, 1:3, 154. Some undated artifacts may have much more ancient pedigrees: see below.

¹³ Hayashi, *Silk Road*, 154.

modalities of acquisition, exchange, and appropriation that were both diverse and deeply local in nature. Some of these artifacts may have arrived in Japan as accessories to religious implements, as wrappers of Buddhist scriptures or containers of relics; others came through formal diplomatic channels, brought to Shōmu's court as gifts from Tang China or Silla Korea. The routes these objects travelled were as diverse as the places that produced them. Hence, this article pushes back on earlier efforts to ascribe a singular function or motive to the establishment of the repository, either by framing it—as Fenollosa and Dresser did, in the nineteenth century—as a precocious museum of global art¹⁴ or writing it into a political history of incursions on imperial power, as when it was established as a weapons depot by Fujiwara no Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂 (706–764) or when it was later deemed a talisman by Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 (1534–1582) and Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543–1616) during the Warring States period.¹⁵ As tempting as the ensuing certainty may be, I choose not to draw a line in the sand between art and politics, or even between art and religion. Doing so, as the argument goes below, would certainly reduce the complexity and multivalence of the collection and its initial donation. Instead, I embrace the collection's diversity and acknowledges that we still know woefully little about when and how most of its artifacts arrived in Japan. The textual and epigraphic records, for the most part, document only the final leg of their journeys, leaving out all the stops and gaps that preceded it. In some cases, the material context of an artifact helps us chart its possible trajectory, as the four examples demonstrate below. However, as contingent and heterogeneous as the collection is, it is equally rewarding to look at these discrete artifacts as an ensemble, to understand how their collective identity underwent change when the Shōsō-in was established by Kōmyō in 756.

“Outside-In”

Nothing better illustrates the relay effects of the Silk Road than silk itself.¹⁶ There are currently more than five thousand pieces of silk in the Shōsō-in collection, according to one recent study, though they mostly survive in fragments; and the number continues to rise as more specimens come to light, thus presenting

¹⁴ See Hayashi, *Silk Road*.

¹⁵ Yoshimizu, “Shōsōin.”

¹⁶ The term *Seidenstrasse*, “silk routes,” first coined by the German geographer/geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, was as much a figment of imperialist imagination as the baron's charged task of building a railroad to connect Germany and Shandong in China. See Waugh, “Richthofen's ‘Silk Roads’”; Bloom, “Silk Road or Paper Road.”

Figure 8.3. Detail of brocade with hunting motif on blue ground silk, eighth century: Shōsō-in, Nara (Japan). The Shōsō-in Treasures, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

scholars with both an accounting and a jigsaw problem.¹⁷ Many were part of the original donation by Kōmyō in 756, and a considerable number were made especially for occasions associated with Shōmu and the Tōdai-ji.¹⁸ Not all were locally manufactured, and even among those made by local artists, many of the designs were inspired by those from afar. On one well-preserved brocade (**Figure 8.3**), a mounted archer is seen turning to aim his arrow at a prancing tiger. This same scene is repeated four times within an area enclosed by a pearl roundel. Hugging the fringe of the roundel, an acanthus scroll completes the design. A motif known as the “Parthian Shot,” this hunting scene is also found on such exotic vessels as a silver goblet uncovered from an eighth-century hoard in central China,¹⁹ and a large silver jar in the Shōsō-in repository.²⁰ These echoes of what was originally a Persian royal symbol resonated with ruling elites across Eurasia.²¹ Further to the west, the emperor Justinian (r. 527–548) can be seen donning a robe displaying the same pearl roundels (enclosing birds) on the mosaic program of San Vitale in

¹⁷ Ogata, *Shōsōin senshokuhin*, 7. If one counts individual fragments, then the number amounts to almost twenty thousand.

¹⁸ Ogata, *Shōsōin senshokuhin*, 17.

¹⁹ Shaanxi Lishi bowuguan, *Hua wu da Tang chun*, 59.

²⁰ It was donated by the then reigning emperor of Japan, Shōmu’s daughter Kōken, in 767. See Shōsō-in jimusho, ed., *Shōsōin no hōmotsu*, vol. 2, plate 63.

²¹ Canepa, *Two Eyes*. See also the articles by Alicia Walker and Heather Badamo in this collection.

Figure 8.4. Detail of ceiling slope, Mogao Cave 249, ca. 500 CE: Dunhuang (China).
Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.

Ravenna. In East Asia, the same motif also became imbricated in larger religious mural programs, as at Dunhuang in northwestern China, inside an early sixth-century Buddhist cave temple (**Figure 8.4**); on the ceiling of a fifth-century tomb on the Korean peninsula;²² and as late as in the thirteenth century on the ceiling plank of a temple building in Ladakh in West Himalaya.²³ The motif's ubiquity attests to the fluidity of meaning and the resilient power of such images to retain their association with power over the *longue durée*, although we do not know how such a motif was interpreted in eighth-century Japan. If silk is a shorthand for (the illusion of) an unbroken thoroughfare connecting China and Rome,²⁴ the “Parthian Shot” is an emblem woven into the rich fabric of an interconnected medieval globe, a world in which the emperors Justinian and Shōmu, almost exactly two centuries apart, could have shared the same taste for medallion-studded robes.

On the flip side (and literally so), these designs of foreign origin had to adapt to local needs. An eighth-century Buddhist sutra wrapper recovered from Dunhuang in northwestern China (**Figure 8.5**) presents a parallel that sheds light on the

²² Kim, ed., *Koguryo Tomb Murals*, 79. For a discussion of a North Asian corridor through which such images spread during the post-Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), see Steinhardt, “Changchuan Tomb No. 1,” 225–92; see also the article by Bonnie Cheng in this collection.

²³ Papa-Kalantari, “Art of the Court,” plate 18.

²⁴ On the piecemeal and regional nature of trade, see Hansen, *Silk Road*.

Figure 8.5. Sutra wrapper of woven silk backed with paper; originally from Mogao Cave 17, eighth century: Dunhuang (China). Currently in the Stein Collection, British Museum, courtesy of the British Museum.

possible trajectory by which many of the textiles arrived in Japan. It displays the same pearl roundels as the contemporaneous Shōsō-in fragment, cut up to form a pearl border. In place of the mounted archer is a dismembered lion whose head, torso, and tail are found on different parts of the wrapper. Textiles must have arrived in Japan through the mediation of local networks. We might imagine them changing hands between merchants and/or Buddhist missionaries. As the example from Dunhuang suggests, sometimes such changes also led to physical alterations. The large quantity of fabrics in the Shōsō-in collection—the largely fragmentary nature of which are signaled by the fact that they are collectively referred to as Shōsō-in *gire* 裂 (Shōsō-in *rend*)—may have been as much a fashion statement as the result of creative tailoring work.

Other examples within the Shōsō-in corpus, however, suggest fewer degrees of separation and indicate direct traffic between imperial courts through diplomacy. A *biwa* lute (Figures 8.6a–b)—the only extant example from this period with five strings and once thought to have been manufactured locally—may have been brought back from China as a diplomatic gift. A bronze mirror with very similar

Figure 8.6a–b. Two sides of a five-string *biwa* made of chestnut wood with mother-of-pearl inlay, eighth century: Shōsō-in, Nara (Japan). The Shōsō-in Treasures, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

mother-of-pearl inlay was found in a Tang-period tomb (Figure 8.7). The inlay was embedded in a thick layer of lacquer on the bronze surface, and a similar method would have been used to create the *biwa*'s ostentatious texture.²⁵ The instrument's associations with both the Tang court and Buddhism made it, in many ways, an exemplar of the kind of material culture that Shōmu tried to amass in Japan: for although this instrument may have originated in Persia, through its travel across South and Central Asia, it gradually became associated with Buddhism.²⁶ In late

25 This tomb was excavated between 2001 and 2002. The owner has been identified according to an inscription as Princess Li Chui 李倕 (d. 736), a fifth-generation descendant of Li Yuan 李淵 (r. 618–626), the founder of the Tang. For a preliminary report of the excavation, see Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, “Tang Li Chui mu fajue jianbao.” Some of the artifacts recovered from Li Chui's tomb are discussed in Greiff et al., *Tomb of Li Chui*.

26 Kishibe, “Origin of the P'i P'a.”

Figure 8.7. Bronze mirror with mother-of-pearl inlay, lacquer, and turquoise from the tomb of Princess Li Chui (d. 736): near Xi'an, Shaanxi Province (China). Reproduced from *Kaogu yu wenwu* no. 6 (2015), pl. 1.

fifth-century murals at Ajanta in India, it is rendered together with a half-bird, half-human creature called Kinnara, one of the eight classes of beings that originated from Indian mythology but became protectors of the Dharma in Buddhist cosmology.²⁷ By the seventh century, the *biwa* lute was a regular fixture in large musical ensembles that represent the role of divine music heard in a Pure Land, repeatedly identified in scriptural descriptions and in mural paintings found at Dunhuang.²⁸ In the meantime, it also became a staple in Tang court music, and musicians of Central Asian origins were often coveted for their talents.²⁹

It is unclear exactly how the instrument came into Shōmu's possession. Naitō Sakae has speculated that it may have been brought back from China by Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備 (695–775), who was part of a Japanese embassy to Tang China in 716 and spent nineteen years there before returning in 735.³⁰ Historical records indicate that a musical performance of Tang and Silla (Korean) music was held to entertain the returned ambassadors, with the emperor Shōmu in attendance. The *biwa* may have been presented to the emperor on this occasion.³¹ While it is

²⁷ One famous example can be found on the late fifth-century mural program at Cave 1, Ajanta. See Behl, *Ajanta Caves*, 71.

²⁸ Gómez, *Land of Bliss*, 181.

²⁹ Schafer, *Golden Peach of Samarkand*, 52–55.

³⁰ For a history of Japanese embassies to China before the tenth century, see Wang, *Ambassadors*.

³¹ Naitō, "Hokusō no gakki," 8–9.

difficult to substantiate the specifics of Naitō’s argument, other evidence indicates that such gifts were indeed a major source of Shōmu’s collection. One of the most reproduced objects in the Shōsō-in collection is an eight-lobed, petal-shaped, bronze mirror, which may have followed a similar trajectory. Its back is furnished with exquisitely carved and gilded designs of landscape, vine scrolls, and divinatory symbols (Plate 8.1). These designs have close counterparts in other bronze mirrors produced in Tang China in the same period.³² What is striking about this example from the Shōsō-in, and what seems to offer firmer ground for speculation about its provenance, is a poem inscribed on the outer rim of the mirror:

A lonesome figure cut by the visitor from a foreign land,
Alas, singing without a companion, how many more
springs to come?

This mirror that reflects my visage, freshly forged,
I think of my fair lady from afar.

The Prancing Phoenix returns to the forest, homebound,
The Coiling Dragon crosses the sea, refreshed;
To be sealed and cast aside for the day of return,
This mirror I now hold and brush clean, my thoughts
touched by true affections.

[隻影嗟為客，孤鳴復幾春。初成照瞻鏡，遙憶畫眉人。
舞鳳歸林近，盤龍渡海新。緘封待還日，披拂鑑情親。]

The first couplet expresses the sentiments of a traveller whose journey home may still be years in the future. Such longing then becomes encapsulated in the object that bears this poem, in the form of a play on the reflective surface of the mirror—it at once intensifies these emotions (“reflects my innermost feelings”) and allows the author to project the visage of a lover (“my fair lady from afar”). The third couplet continues to take the mirror as its subject: in this case, the dragon and phoenix refer to the two pairs of these mythic animals found close to the centre of the mirror, interspersed, as they are, between mountains and immortals. And yet, as in the previous lines, they serve only as foils to help articulate the poet’s homesickness: as dragons and phoenix are bound for their natural habitats, so will he one day. This mirror will thus be put away until that day arrives.

³² The forms and placements of the dragons and phoenixes within the inner circle bear a close resemblance to those on a contemporaneous example now in the Sengoku Tadashi collection in Japan. The mountains displayed here are also similar to those on another bronze mirror in the same collection. See von Falkenhausen, ed., *Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection*, 2:29, figs. 9 and 10. I thank Kin Sum (Sammy) Li for the references to these mirrors.

Figure 8.8. Glass bowl with wheel-cut facets, sixth century: Shōsō-in, Nara (Japan). The Shōsō-in Treasures, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

Poetic inscriptions on Tang bronze mirrors tend to be formulaic, at most slightly modified from pre-composed verses.³³ This inscription, by contrast, not only engages the specific aesthetics of the bronze mirror—its reflective surface and the designs on its back—but also transforms them into poetic motifs to express the author's longing for home. Such sentiments suggest that the owner of this bronze mirror was, like Kibi no Makibi, a member of the Japanese embassy to China. We might also be able to postulate the following commissioning process in which the textual and pictorial had to be coordinated (a rare case at that). Placing a custom order at a workshop in the Tang capital, our unnamed ambassador-poet would have picked out the designs first (probably from a number of template books), made decisions about where to place the inscription, and composed the poem to be incorporated into the design.

If the *biwa* and the bronze mirror are reminders of a taste for luxurious exuberance shared by the courts of Tang China and Nara Japan—connections that were fostered by the visible and ostensibly managed channel of diplomatic missions—the glass wares (Figure 8.8) preserved at the Shōsō-in hint at connections forged by other means. In China, Roman glass drinking vessels were collected as early as the third century for their translucent clarity.³⁴ Sasanian vessels soon followed.

33 Li, "Tangdai tongjing mingwen chutan," 354.

34 An, "Art of Glass," 59.

Figure 8.9. Glass bowl with wheel-cut facets, sixth or seventh century: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image in the public domain.

A wine cup with a flaring opening and wheel-cut facets similar to those on the surface of the Shōsō-in example has been excavated from a tomb in southern China dated to the early fourth century.³⁵ In Japan, as elsewhere in East Asia, glass vessels often turn up in mortuary contexts that speak to their exalted status as prized utensils.³⁶ A glass bowl now in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum was reportedly found in the sixth-century tomb of Emperor Ankan 安閑, located near Osaka, during the Edo period.³⁷ A close cousin of the Shōsō-in glass bowl now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (**Figure 8.9**) suggests that the possible mechanism through which it became incorporated into the royal collection may have been the religion of Buddhism. A painted banner from Dunhuang, now in the British Museum and dated to the ninth century, shows a Bodhisattva holding a bowl almost identical to it in both shape and design (**Plate 8.2**). While it

³⁵ Ibid., 61, reproduced as fig. 51. Brigitte Borell (“Travels of Glass Vessels”) has speculated that such vessels may have arrived in southern China through maritime trade, having been transported from Red Sea ports to India and East Asia.

³⁶ An, “Art of Glass,” 57–66; Lee, “Of Glass and Gold,” 114–31.

³⁷ Harada, ed., *Shōsōin no garasu*, 5. The author also makes the argument that both glass bowls may have arrived in Japan at the same time, as early as the sixth century. While the Ankan vessel was interred, the Shōsō-in bowl was passed on as an heirloom until it entered the repository.

falls short of confirming Buddhist connections forged at the time of its making, the painted banner implies that a glass bowl like the one at Shōsō-in had, around two centuries later, become part of a Bodhisattva's accoutrements. Archaeological contexts in which glass vessels are found in China hint at the possibility that, at least in some cases, they may have been used as reliquaries.³⁸ In 753, only three years before Kōmyō dedicated Shōmu's personal collection to the Tōdai-ji, the Chinese monk Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763), or Ganjin as he is known in Japanese, brought thirty pellets of Shakyamuni's relics to Nara contained inside a glass bottle likely of Sasanian origin.³⁹ While little evidence other than the objects themselves survives, it is likely that some of the glass vessels now in the Shōsō-in may have found their ways to Japan through this demonstrable connection to Buddhism.

Objects travel through time in strange ways, and at different paces. The trajectories through which the above examples arrived in Japan are haphazard at best. Each of them gained its own "biography" in that process. As such, they lend themselves to recent methodological interventions which emphasize the identities of objects, and how their movement across physical space often precipitates modulations of meaning.⁴⁰ Even within the small group of objects discussed here, the identities of some seem to be more stable than others. The *biwa* lute, for instance, conjures up a striking impression of contemporaneity, of shared tastes for music and dazzling surface décor that joined the Tang and the Nara courts. This sense of immediacy is further underscored by the fact that Kibi no Makibi, who possibly brought the instrument back as a diplomatic gift, may have been the only degree of separation between Shōmu and his Chinese counterpart Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756). Meanwhile, the instrument's exotic status and its documented link to the Buddhist Pure Lands in the religious imagination of the period should alert us to the entangled relationships between religion, international diplomacy, and court culture.

On the one hand, the meanings of the Shōsō-in artifacts were often contingent on what was done to or with them. The bronze mirror was brought back by another returnee from China. While in shape and form it may resemble the best examples of its kind produced in the Tang capital Chang'an at the time, the unusually close

³⁸ Sen, "Relic Worship." For example, a glass bottle was found in the rear chamber of a crypt underneath a pagoda at the Famen Temple west of Xi'an, which was last sealed in 874. It contained a slip of paper, of which only fragments remain and on which two characters are still legible: "lotus, true," or "Lotus [blossom]; True [Body] 蓮[華]真[身]," a common period reference to relics of the Buddha. See Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan et al., eds., *Famen si*, 1:213.

³⁹ See Wong, "An Agent," 78 and fig. 18.

⁴⁰ Appadurai, "Introduction"; Gerritsen and Riello, eds., *Global Lives of Things*.

correspondence between the design and the inscription was likely an intervention made by its Japanese owner to transform the otherwise conventional images into his own expressions of longing. Textiles that bear similar designs seem to have been equally adaptable to asserting a shared ideology of rulership and undercutting that message, or at least rendering it iconographically impotent. The glass vessels, on the other hand, demonstrate how objects may move in and out of different contexts over the *longue durée*. We do not know when and where the glass bowl became incorporated into a Buddhist iconography; nor can we explain why one bowl would be interred with an emperor in the sixth century, while another remained above ground and appeared in the Shōsō-in collection two centuries later. In all likelihood, despite their shared origin, these two glass bowls arrived in Japan at very different times. The gap in time—and hence difference in distances travelled and meanings accrued—as well as functional shifts may also account for where each ended up.

“Inside-Out”

Their prior “lives” and the various routes that took them to Japan notwithstanding, many of the artifacts now in the Shōsō-in collection were united to serve a singular purpose when they were donated by Kōmyō to Vairocana in the sixth month of 756, forty-nine days after the death of Shōmu.⁴¹ A new layer of meaning was, as it were, added to the palimpsests that they were already. Moreover, a document accompanying Kōmyō’s donation affords us a language through which to understand these objects as an ensemble whose collective meaning extends to more than the sum of its parts. Together with the myriad objects in Shōmu’s personal collection was a long text written on Kōmyō’s behalf. Bracketed by a preface and prayers in her voice is an itemized inventory of the donation. A personal tone permeates the preface, which describes, among other things, the circumstances under which the objects were donated. The inventory, by contrast, is characterized by a bookkeeper’s attention to detail, listing the artifacts item by item, often with their dimensions, materials, and provenances. A close reading of both preface and inventory will shed light on how this ensemble of artifacts is connected to the imperial and religious identities of Shōmu.

The entire text was written out on a scroll constituting of eighteen sheets of paper, each 26 cm in height and between 81 and 89 cm in width (**Figure 8.10**).

41 It used to be a significant part of Buddhist ritual practice in East Asia to perform a memorial service on the forty-ninth day after a person’s death, during which merit is gained through ceremonial offerings and then transferred to the deceased.

Figure 8.10. Last section of the inventory of the initial donation showing Kōmyō's prayer: ink on paper, dated the 21st day of the 6th month, 756. The Shōsō-in Treasures, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

Imperial authority is asserted emphatically in the shape of a large square seal that was impressed 489 times on its surface. In a modern collated edition, this list translates to a hefty fifty pages.⁴² The document was written by an accomplished hand in the style of the Chinese master Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361). As was the case in the Tang court, Wang's style seemingly enjoyed considerable popularity within Shōmu's circle, as twenty scrolls of rubbings of Wang's calligraphy were also included in the 756 donation.⁴³ In the inventory, artifacts are loosely categorized according to medium/material, some with annotations in smaller script detailing their dimensions, accessories with which they were associated, and their place(s) of origin. For instance, the *biwa* (Figures 8.6a–b) is listed as the sum of its parts: “Five-String Sandalwood *Biwa* Lute with Mother-of-Pearl Inlay, One: [in smaller script] plectrum guard with turtle shell inlay, wrapped in a purple twill with light green wax-resisting dye patterns.”⁴⁴

⁴² The text can be found in *Dai Nihon komonjo* (hereafter DNK), 4:121–71. A donation of medicine was dedicated on the same day, its items listed in a separate inventory. More donations followed in that same year. At least two more documented donations took place in 758, one of which expressly names Kōken as the donor.

⁴³ Two years later one more scroll of calligraphy—this time the “authentic work” of Wang and his son Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386)—was gifted by Kōmyō to the Tōdai-ji.

⁴⁴ DNK 4:131.

Other itemized descriptions bespeak concerns beyond the materiality of the objects. Like patterns on a mandala tapestry, they weave together names and places of the world known to Shōmu and his court. They also speak to the fact that Shōmu and his associates were clearly conscious of the distance that some of these artifacts had travelled. Connections to this larger world meant a great deal to them, as did connections to the local past. Close to the beginning of the list is a red lacquer cabinet with a most exalted pedigree—the indented annotation traces it all the way back to Tenmu 天武 (r. 673–685) and through four subsequent rulers to the present day, when Shōmu’s daughter and the present emperor Kōken was gifted the cabinet by her father the retired emperor.⁴⁵ This description’s formulaic language—reminiscent of a royal genealogy—underscores the legitimacy of the object’s successive imperial owners.⁴⁶ Another such cabinet is listed as a gift from King Uija 義慈王 (r. 641–660) of Paekche (in southwestern Korea) to Fujiwara no Kamatari 藤原鎌足 (614–669), Kōmyō’s grandfather.⁴⁷ The eighth-century *Nihon shoki* records that Paekche embassies to Japan took place almost annually during the twenty years of Uijia’s reign. The cabinet may have been gifted on one of such occasions to appease Kamatari, who held sway at the court.⁴⁸ Similar descriptions also emphasize geopolitical significance: further down the inventory we find descriptions of two Silla *kin* (Chinese: *qin*) zithers with gold engravings (金鏤新羅琴), a large gilt bronze blade from Tang China (金銅莊唐大刀) wrapped in a “Goryeo” brocade of white ground, and a large blade with silver ornament in the “Goryeo” style (銀莊高麗樣大刀). In both cases, the term “Goryeo” is used to refer to the regime of Koguryō on the northern half of the Korean peninsula, which had lost its geopolitical significance after Silla unified the peninsula in 668. The language used to decouple provenance (Tang or Goryeo) from style (“in the Goryeo style”) hints at an emerging paradigm of artistic imitation that was driven by increasing cultural exchange and immigration.⁴⁹ At the same time, the inscriptions

⁴⁵ DNK 4:123.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of controversies surrounding imperial succession in the eighth century, see Ooms, *Imperial Politics*, 1–27.

⁴⁷ DNK 4:130.

⁴⁸ Somewhat striking is the almost complete silence on such exchanges in the (much later, twelfth-century) Korean source *Samguk sagi*, which only mentions one embassy dispatched in 653 (the first for over two centuries). See Best, *History*, 192–93. It is also likely that it was Kamatari who first converted the clan to Buddhism; previous generations had served primarily as court ritual specialists. See Mikoshiba, “Empress Kōmyōshi,” 22–37.

⁴⁹ On immigrants from the continent and the Korean peninsula and their impact on Japanese culture of this period, see Como, *Weaving and Binding*.

also allow us to trace more local connections across time. If the first cabinet was the heirloom of the imperial line of Tenmu, a fact expressly underscored in the itemization, the second cabinet most likely represented Kōmyō's own lineage, a token of the once formidable presence of the Fujiwara clan at the court, whose surname was first conferred to Kamatari by Tenji 天智 (r. 661–671) in 669.⁵⁰

These personal and politically potent ties are further forged and articulated in Kōmyō's prayers, which precede the inventory. These prayers generally conform to contemporary discursive practices which tap into the Buddhist soteriology of merit: good deeds (material gifts to the Buddha included) would lead to rewards in this life or the next.⁵¹ Kōmyō's donation of these precious artifacts was therefore expected to translate into positive karmic merit that could be transferred to benefit not only the deceased Shōmu but, by extension, his subjects and all sentient beings:

I have heard that
fierce fires flow constantly through the vastness of the Three
Realms;
Poisonous nets ensnare all in the depth of the Five Paths
[of Rebirth].
The august heavenly teacher, the Buddha,
suspends the Dharma hook to benefit all sentient beings,
opens the mirror of wisdom to save the world.
Thus the clamorous multitude are led to enter in to the
realm of tranquility;
All moving creatures hastened to the garden of perpetual
bliss ...⁵²

To begin a prayer with an encomium of the Buddha conforms to the format of similar liturgical texts in both China and Japan at this time. This opening passage of Kōmyō's text is composed in the Chinese style of parallel prose. Yet like the collection of artifacts that it precedes, the various images evoked here are drawn from a variety of sources (Indic, Chinese, Buddhist) and other literary genres.⁵³ Following

50 Only Tenmu's cabinet survives today, however. The Paekche cabinet was lost during the Meiji period, under circumstances that are not well understood. See Nishikawa, "Sekishitsubun kanboku."

51 For an introduction to practices that were performed to earn karmic merit in China, see Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism*, 157–219.

52 The full text of the prayer is in DNK 4:121–22; translations here and below are adapted with some substantial changes from Harada, *A Glimpse*, 97–99.

53 Lowe, *Ritualized Writing*, 57–79.

this “praise of the Buddha,” Kōmyō goes on to describe the ritual intent of her donation, which prompts her to reflect on the virtues of Shōmu. In a language that clearly parallels that of the previous passage, Kōmyō lauds the great prosperity of his reign, highlighting Shōmu’s devotion to Buddhism and claiming that the fame of his devotion even reached India and China and drew such enlightened monks as Jianzhen to Japan. And yet:

To our great sorrow, there is no prolongation of his hallowed presence.

I became unaware of the passage of time ...

Bitterness weighing more heavily on my mind;

My grief was growing ever deeper.

Opening the earth would reveal no sign;

Appealing to heaven brought me no solace.

So I desire to give succour to his august spirit by the performance of this good deed, and therefore, for the sake of the late emperor, I donate these rare treasures of this realm, these various articles which once *gave him great pleasure* ... to the Tōdai-ji, as a votive offering to Vairocana Buddha, various other Buddhas, Bodhisattvas ... [italics mine]

Dedicatory prayers like this are often personal; indeed, Kōmyō had, on various other occasions, made similar prayers intended to bring salvation to her family members, both living and departed.⁵⁴ Rarely, however, do we see such an outpouring of emotions; indeed, Kōmyō mourns Shōmu again in her conclusion to the inventory. Twice Kōmyō underscores Shōmu’s personal attachment to these artifacts, which “once gave him great pleasure,” calling them “treasures which were handled by the deceased emperor” towards the end of the text.⁵⁵

Such an emphasis on personal attachment may also be an indication of the pathos that these artifacts collectively embodied for Kōmyō. They reminded her of days gone by, and the mere sight of them was enough to strike her down with grief.⁵⁶ In a broader soteriological context, the celebration of attachment to worldly possessions was meant to make the act of renunciation all the more compelling, and to increase the merit being transferred to Shōmu and, by extension, to his heir and daughter, her subjects, and all sentient creatures. Read between the lines, however, Kōmyō’s prayer suggests deeper anxieties and betrays the more personal concerns of a recently bereaved widow and mother. For Kōken, who had

⁵⁴ Lowe, “Texts and Textures,” 18; Mikoshiba, “Empress Kōmyōshi,” 31.

⁵⁵ DNK 4:171.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

succeeded Shōmu in 749, was by no means secure in her rule. To make matters worse, Kōmyō's own Fujiwara clan, which had enjoyed great prestige and power at the Nara court, was wiped out by a smallpox epidemic in 737, leaving her the only member with any power.⁵⁷ Now with Shōmu gone, Kōmyō beseeches the Buddha to extend his benevolence to Kōken. Through the ritual of offering, these exquisite artifacts were meant to summon protective forces to the aid of her precarious reign.⁵⁸ Finally, both Kōmyō's prayers and the inventory list employ the same rhetorical structure, in each case placing Shōmu at the centre of a soteriological scheme warranted by the donation and accompanying prayers. The inventory is reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges's fictional Chinese encyclopedia, with great leaps in the "wonderment of [it]s taxonomy" and its purpose of listing things "belonging to the Emperor";⁵⁹ it also seems to abide by a subtler logic. It has been noted recently that the inventory's items are ordered according to their distance from the physical body of Shōmu.⁶⁰ The inventory proceeds from the monastic kāṣāya vestments that Shōmu once donned, to the red lacquer cabinet discussed above, which held not only some of his most prized items but also those that were most intimate (calligraphic exercises by him and Kōmyō), and finally to large quantities of court and martial paraphernalia that were donated by ministers and other close members of the court. The text of the inventory therefore conjures up a carefully constructed space which emanates from and envelopes the deceased emperor.

Moreover, by repeatedly underscoring how the objects were treasured by the emperor, Kōmyō frames the ritual offering of them to Vairocana Buddha as an ultimate act of world-renunciation on Shōmu's part, the act of "giving" translated into "giving up." As Reiko Ohnuma has put it, "Every gift is defined as a moment of cultivating nonattachment, the culmination of which is the monk's renunciation of the world."⁶¹ The order in which they were enumerated in the inventory, in which they seem to unfold from the physical body of Shōmu, suggests that more than just riches were being given up. The *physical* connection—"treasures which were handled by the deceased emperor"—may be understood to mean that they are also consecrated objects, once touched by the Buddha-like Shōmu. By extension, the emperor's hallowed presence is now encapsulated in these objects, construed not only as an extension of the deceased Shōmu's body, but also as constituting the gift of the body: classified as one of the "superior gifts" in the *Da zhi du lun*

57 Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*, 251–55.

58 Lowe, *Ritualized Writing*, 171–208; Piggott, "Last Classical Female Sovereign."

59 Foucault, *Order of Things*, xvi.

60 Kita, "Kenmotsuchō kanken," 138–68.

61 Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood*, 164.

大智度論 (Treatise on the Great Perfection Wisdom) attributed to Nāgārjuna (fl. second–third century).⁶² This “superior gift” was designed not only to bring about the salvation of the deceased, but also close members of his family, his subjects, and all sentient beings, strictly in that order.

Thus, on the twenty-first day of the sixth month of 756, Shōmu’s collection of artifacts, of diverse and distant origins, became subsumed into local history, tied to the well-being of his afterlife and to the safekeeping of Kōken’s reign and the welfare of her subjects. But the same benediction was also extended to “all sentient beings in Ten Directions and Three Realms, Four Kinds of Births in the Six Paths”: to the entire world of the Buddhist Dharma. Even if we grant that this is a liturgical language which had, by that point, become formulaic,⁶³ it still begs the question: what was this “world” like to Shōmu and Kōmyō? What did they find so compelling about this “world” for them to seek assurance at a time of uncertainties, and for them to bank on the soteriological promises of a religion founded in a distant land, more than a millennium before?⁶⁴ There are no simple answers to these questions. Reading the prayer and the inventory together—two texts which share the same material space even when in language and intent they seem rather disparate—reveals that thinking about these artifacts is basic to the conception of this world.⁶⁵ The meticulously labelled items in the inventory were not only records of Japan’s geopolitical ties, they were also meant to represent segments of a much larger religious landscape and its material abundance. The artifacts they describe allowed Shōmu and his associates to imagine themselves projected well beyond the boundaries of their country, into a world of which Japan was only a small part.⁶⁶ The emperor’s medallion-studded robe, resplendent *biwa*, gilt bronze mirror, and translucent glass bowls became powerful synecdoches of that world by virtue of their scarcity, exoticism, and their association with the great global religion of Buddhism. The identity of Shōmu, the Buddhist ruler of Japan, is inextricably bound to his global collection of artifacts.

⁶² Kingdom, riches, wife, and children are also included under the category of “superior gifts”: *ibid.*, 354–55.

⁶³ Lowe, *Ritualized Writing*, 66.

⁶⁴ No Japanese pilgrim made their way beyond China in the early medieval period, even though from the ninth century onwards, Japan became increasingly discussed in a “three countries” schema within which it is compared and contrasted with India and China. See Toby, “Three Realms,” 18. See also Blum, “*Sangoku-Mappō* Construct.”

⁶⁵ Here I am reversing the phrasing of Alexander Nagel when he describes how “the conception of a world is basic to thinking about art” in the context of Christian art in the late antique world. See Flood et al., “Roundtable,” 9.

⁶⁶ On how such artifacts continued to inform how those in Japan imagined others into the early modern period, see Watsky, “Locating ‘China.’”

A Sobering Note

If this discussion leaves the reader with the impression that the world of the eighth century bears a certain resemblance to the world we live in today, in its unfettered globalization, its interconnected economy and religions, mediated by unmitigated circulation of goods, that impression has a lot of truth to it. However, these artifacts also arrived at the Nara court against the grain, despite the harsh conditions of travel in the eighth century. Japan, Korea, China, and their neighbours in Central Asia and further west belonged to a world system that still operated on horse-, camel-, and mule-backs, on skiffs and barges. The economy on the Silk Road is a trickle-down economy, and a whimsical one at that. Belied by the romantic image of a straight line connecting the Roman Empire and China on its ends, the reality of these routes was constituted of small caravans, merchants, craftsmen, and clerics who travelled short distances.⁶⁷

It is therefore hard for us to imagine the journeys that brought these artifacts to Shōmu and to the Shōsō-in; harder still to speculate how many such journeys were cut short, and journeymen and their goods buried in the sands of time. Consider an alternative tale of the trials and tribulation surrounding a journey that almost did not happen, from the same time that the construction of the Tōdai-ji monastery and the casting of the monumental Buddha image were about to break the coffers of the Nara state. In 742, a Japanese embassy was sent to Tang China. One of their designated missions was to invite an eminent monk to travel to Japan to spread the Buddhist Dharma. Jianzhen, whose name was mentioned in Kōmyō's prayer, not only agreed but also began preparations for the voyage the following summer.⁶⁸ In the next decade, he made five attempts, each time thwarted by either natural disasters or government prohibition. When Jianzhen finally reached Nara in late 753, more than eleven years had elapsed since the initial request. During the interim, Jianzhen had lost his sight due to an infection he contracted during his fifth attempted voyage. Is there a moral to this story? In Jianzhen and Kōmyō's time, some of the most unimaginable adversities were overcome by faith in an interconnected world. That such a large number of artifacts made their way to the islands of Japan, and that they managed to survive the vagaries of time, remains testimony to that faith, even as a powerful exception to the rule.

⁶⁷ Hansen, *Silk Road*, 10.

⁶⁸ On Jianzhen's trepidations and the Buddhist material culture of his time, see Wong, "An Agent."

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Abstract This article focuses on the Shōsō-in repository in Nara, a collection of artifacts that were fashioned in various media along the Silk Road. The repository first took shape in the mid-eighth century, when the personal collection of Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–749) was posthumously dedicated to the Buddha Vairocana. While the precocious globalism of this collection has been celebrated in previous literature, I examine some of the local and intercontinental mechanisms that brought these artifacts to Japan. Through a close reading of the original dedication in 756, I argue that this global collection of art, along with the religion of Buddhism, sustained the belief in an interconnected world, and allowed Shōmu and his associates to imagine themselves projected well beyond the boundaries of their country.

Keywords Shōsō-in, silk road, Shōmu, Kōmyō, Nara, Japan, Tang, China, Buddhism, merit soteriology, globalism, East Asia, religion and exchange