

The Discovery of the Gold Seal in 1784 and the Waves of Historiography Ever Since

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Abstract

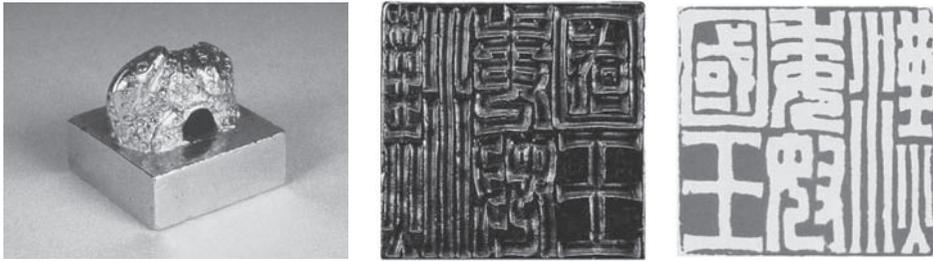
According to the *Hou Han shu*, in 57 B.C.E. an emissary from the land we now call Japan arrived at the court of the Later Han dynasty in Luoyang. Although we don't know his name or who his sovereign was, he was awarded a seal and ribbon. The seal promptly disappeared from history for the next 1,727 years. It was unexpectedly discovered in an irrigation ditch being repaired by a farmer in Kyushu. For the next 233 years (until now), every detail about this golden seal has been the topic of extensive debate with over 350 books and articles devoted to the topic. This essay discusses that lengthy debate and tries to understand it on its own terms.

Key words: Gold seal, historiography, Confucianism, National Learning, Kamei Nanmei, China, Later Han dynasty, Japan, science

According to the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, in the year Jianwu zhongyuan 建武中元 2 (57 A.D.) an emissary from the statelet of Nu 奴 in the kingdom of Wo 倭 (J. Wa) arrived at the court of the Guangwu Emperor 光武帝. He was seeking investiture within the Later Han's ritual system of foreign states for his homeland in the Wa federation, and the court awarded him with a seal and a ribbon. This would doubtless have remained just one among many unprovable items from the Chinese dynastic histories had not something utterly extraordinary occurred over 1,700 years later. In 1784 a rice farmer in Fukuoka domain (Kyushu) was repairing an irrigation ditch in his rice paddy when he happened upon something shiny lodged between some rocks. He pulled it out, washed off, and found that he had discovered some sort of inscribed seal. Unaware of just what it was or what value it might possess, by various hypothesized routes it was brought to the local magistrate who showed it to a local scholar, Kamei Nanmei 龜井南冥 (1743–1814), a famous Confucian teacher in his day. Nanmei looked at its inscriptional face which

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read 漢委奴國王, and he knew immediately that this was the same seal mentioned in the *Hou Han shu*.



Before we launch into a discussion of the debate as it developed over the next two centuries and more, let me say a few words based on what genuine experts in seals and seal script have had to say in recent years. The inscription is cut in seal script (*zhuanwen* 撰文) and, despite considerable debate, is fully consistent with Han-era official and private seals, according to Kobayashi Tsunehiro 小林庸浩 (1916–2007), an expert in this field; it is not, in his view, a subsequent forgery: “As a result of detailed investigations on two or three occasions of the original seal, from a whole host of angles, I have come to the conclusion that it is the very seal presented by the Guangwu Emperor.” One curiosity about the inscription on the seal is the lack of the character *yin* 印 (seal) or one of the other characters that appears as the final element in the inscription on most seals and denotes “seal.” Over 700 or more seals given by the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties to its alien neighbors have thus far been unearthed, but only a few are missing such a character.¹ Ōta Kōtarō 太田孝太郎 (1881–1967) goes this one further by claiming: “The seal in question is not only, I believe, the finest of all those seals given to alien peoples, but it is a representative example of [all] Later Han seals.” The final two characters of the inscription, *guowang* 國王 (J. *kokuō*), “are unmatched for the quality,” according to Sugimura Yūzō 杉村勇造 (1900–78). And, the calligraphy specialist Nishikawa Yasushi 西川寧 (1902–89) rebuts all the non-specialists’ claims that there are strokes awry in the inscription by comparative analysis.²

1 Tsukushi Yutaka 筑紫豊, *Kin'in no furusato: Shikanoshima monogatari* 金印のふるさと: 志賀島物語 (Home of the gold seal, the story of Shikanoshima) (Tokyo: Bunken shuppan, 1982), pp. 86–87; Kobayashi Tsunehiro 小林庸浩, “Kandai kan'in shiken” 漢代官印私見 (My views on official seals of the Han dynasty), *Tōyō gakuho* 東洋学報 50.3 (December 1967), p. 143.

2 Ōta Kōtarō 太田孝太郎, “Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō inbun kō” 漢委奴国王印文考 (Study of the inscription on the seal [inscribed] to the ruler of the state of Na in Wa under the Han), *Iwate shigaku* 岩手史学 17 (December 1954), pp. 1–6. For more on the epigraphy of the seal and comparative analysis of the

Before more than a handful of people knew of its existence, Kamei Nanmei penned a lengthy essay explaining the meaning and defending the authenticity of the seal—an utterly brilliant piece of writing—and in so doing launched a debate that continues till today, over two centuries later. Every aspect of this small piece of gold, roughly one inch to a side, with a small handle in the shape of serpent or snake has been debated over the years—who received it, the meaning of the inscription, what the snake-shaped handle signifies, how it might have ended up where it did, and its overall importance or irrelevance in Sino-Japanese relations—altogether roughly 350 books and articles. In what follows I would like to outline the contours of that debate, looking at how it has changed and why. It offers in microcosm a look at the changing nature of Japanese commentary on its relationship with Mainland culture.

Whatever may have been the interactions between proto-Chinese and proto-Japanese in the centuries before the launching of diplomatic interactions, we now generally accept the fact that the year 57 C.E. marks the first state-to-state meeting of the two (though it was certainly an unequal one).³ This fact is attested in the *Hou Han shu*, and even those who may have

inscribed characters vis-à-vis other inscriptional material from the Qin-Han era, see, among many such essays: Sugimura Yūzō 杉村勇造, “Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō in shikan” 漢委奴国王印私観 (My views on the inscription on the seal [inscribed] to the ruler of the state of Na in Wa under the Han), *Nihon rekishi* 日本歴史 51 (August 1952), pp. 11–15; Nishikawa Yasushi 西川寧, “Kin’in no kokuhō” 金印の刻法 (How the gold seal was inscribed), *Shohin* 書品 28 (May 1952), p. 53. Much of this is summarized in Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, *Kin’in no monogatari* 金印のものがたり (The story of the gold seal) (Fukuoka: Nishi Nihon toshokan konsarutanto kyōkai, 1979), pp. 43–44; see also Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, *Kenkyū shi kin’in* 研究史金印 (The history of scholarship on the gold seal) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1974), pp. 118–19; and Wang Xiaoqiu 王晓秋. *Zhong-Ri wenhua jiaoliu shihua* 中日文化交流史话 (Historical tales from Sino-Japanese cultural interactions) (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), pp. 16–20.

- 3 Writing shortly after the conclusion of World War II, Tsuda Sōkichi was hesitant about claiming this meeting as the “first time the king of Na had paid tribute” to the Han court, but the weight of subsequent scholarship confirms that is surely was. See Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉. *Nihon koten no kenkyū* 日本古典の研究 (Studies in the Japanese classics), in *Tsuda Sōkichi zenshū* 津田左右吉全集 (Collected works of Tsuda Sōkichi) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1963), vol. 1, p. 18; Itō Terufumi 伊藤皓文, “Nihonkoku to sono kokusai kankei no kigen ni tsuite: Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō no seijishi kenkyū” 日本国とその国際関係の起源について: 漢委奴国王の政治史的研究 (On the origins of the state of Japan and its international relations, a study in political history of the [gold seal inscribed] King of the state of Na in Wa under the Han), *Hokuriku hōgaku* 北陸法学 11.1–2 (September 2003), p. 11.

serious doubts about the gold seal do not as a rule question the testimony of the Chinese historical record. The gold seal given by the Later Han emperor to the emissary from Na (within the Wa confederation) stands as the first material object of significance exchanged, and the fact that it remains extant (despite seventeen centuries of being hidden in the ground) should not be underestimated.

It also effectively marks Wa's entrance into the world of "international" affairs, a world defined by the Han empire. The five-character inscription on the seal also marks the first instance in which Chinese characters functioned in and of themselves in the "Japanese" archipelago. Objects with Chinese graphs on them were certainly imported to the archipelago earlier, but they were little more than impenetrable symbols or decorations with no intrinsic significance. Kume Masao (b. 1948) 久米雅雄 has thus asserted that this exchange denotes "Japan's" first awareness of the universe of Chinese characters and hence its entrance into that world, where it remains, *mutatis mutandis*, to this day.⁴ But, long before Kume's recent work, Kamei Nanmei noted in his defense of the seal's authenticity: "The five characters of this seal mark the first time writing from a foreign country were transmitted to our land (*honchō* 本朝)." The seal's discovery in 1784 was, according to Nanmei, a "good omen (*shōzui* 祥瑞) for civilization" itself.

Nanmei clearly understood the extraordinary significance of this find. It is not that he believed the story in the *Hou Han shu* to be false or untrustworthy, but the seal's actual discovery in his own domain in Fukuoka marked an event of great auspiciousness as he was about to open the doors of one of his domain's Confucian academies. Here was that early icon of Sino-Japanese ties unearthed just as his own academy was taking off. Nanmei was a devout Confucian. One might even think of him as a kind of Confucian fundamentalist. He believed that one could find most answers to questions of a philosophical or moral nature without looking further than the *Lunyu* 論語. He was also a medical doctor and thus a man of science. He argued in his philosophical writings that knowledge and practice had to inform one another or

4 Kume Masao 久米雅雄, "Kin'in Nakoku setsu e no hanron" 金印奴国説への反論 (Response to the thesis of the gold seal [having been presented] to the state of Na), in *Ko bunka ronsō: Fujisawa Kazuo sensei koki kinen* 古文化論叢: 藤澤一夫先生古稀記念 (Essays on ancient culture in commemoration of the sixtieth birthday of Professor Fujisawa Kazuo) (Osaka: Fujisawa Kazuo sensei koki kinen ronshū kankōkai, 1983), pp. 112–13. This point is strongly emphasized by the great Chinese Japanologist, Wang Xiangrong 汪向榮. *Yemataiguo* 邪马台国 (The state of Yamatai) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1982), pp. 231–32.

neither would be of much use.⁵

Roughly three weeks after first being shown and allowed to analyze the gold seal in the spring of 1784, Nanmei wrote his famous piece about it,

- 5 Yoshida Yōichi 吉田洋一, “Kamei Nanmei no igaku shisō” 亀井南冥の医学思想 (Kamei Nanmei’s medical thought), *Yōgaku* 洋学 8 (1999), pp. 1–21; “Kameigaku koborebanashi” 亀井学こぼればなし (Tidbits of the Kamei school). *Kishi Noko hakubutsukan dayori* 季誌能古博物館だより 31 (September 1997), pp. 7–9; Shōno Hisato 庄野寿人, “Kokuhō ‘kin’in’ shutsudo ni tsuite” 国宝「金印」出土について (on the unearthing of the national treasure, the “gold seal”). *Kishi Noko hakubutsukan dayori* 季誌能古博物館だより 30 (October 1996), pp. 10–12; Inoue Tadashi 井上忠, “Kamei Nanmei to Takeda Sadayoshi, hankō seiritsu zengo ni okeru” 亀井南冥と竹田定良、藩校成立前後における (Kamei Nanmei and Takeda Sadayoshi, around the time of the establishment of the domainal schools), in *Fukuoka ken shi, kinsei kenkyū hen, Fukuoka han (yon)* 福岡県史、近世研究編、福岡藩(四) (History of Fukuoka Prefecture, section of early modern studies, Fukuoka domain, vol. 4), ed. Nishi Nihon bunka kyōkai 西日本文化協会 (Western Japan cultural association) (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Prefecture, 1989). pp. 23–24; Takano Mototarō 高野江基太郎, *Jukyō Kamei Nanmei: Nanmei sensei hyakkaiki kinen shuppan* 儒侠亀井南冥:南冥先生百回忌記念出版 (Confucian hero Kamei Namei, published to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Nanmei’s death) (Fukuoka: self-publ., 1914); Tsujimoto Masashi 辻本雅史, “Kansei ki ichi igakusha no shisō: Kamei Nanmei ni tsuite” 寛政期一異学者の思想:亀井南冥について (A heterodox thinker in the Kansei period: Kamei Nanmei), *Kōka joshi daigaku Kōka joshi tanki daigaku kenkyū kiyō* 光華女子大学・光華女子短期大学研究紀要 17 (December 1979), p. 113; Tokuda Takeshi 徳田武, ed. and annot., *Bunjin: Kameda Bōsai, Tanomura Chikuden, Nishina Hakukoku, Kamei Nanmei* 文人: 亀田鵬斎・田能村竹田・仁科白谷・亀井南冥 (Literati: Kameda Bōsai, Tanomura Chikuden, Nishina Hakuboku, Kamei Nanmei), in series *Edo Kanshi sen* 江戸漢詩選 (Selections from Edo-period poetry in Chinese) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996), vol. 1, p. 333; Nakaizumi Tetsutoshi 中泉哲俊, *Nihon kinsei gakkō ron no kenkyū* 日本近世学校論の研究 (Studies of views on schools in early modern Japan) (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1976), pp. 310–16; Jin Peiyi 金培懿, “Guijing Nanming *Lunyu yuyou zhi jiejing fa*” 亀井南冥論語語由之解經法 (Kamei Nanmei’s method of explicating the classics in his *Rongo goyū*), *Hanxue luntan* 漢學論壇 1 (June 2006), pp. 63–91; Terashi Bokusō 寺師睦宗, “Kamei Nanmei, sono hitotonari to gyōseki” 亀井南冥、その人となりと業績 (Kamei Nanmei, his personality and accomplishments), *Nihon Tōyō igaku zasshi* 日本東洋医学雑誌 54.6 (2003), pp. 1023–33; Kasai Sukeharu 笠井助治, *Kinsei hankō no sōgōteki kenkyū* 近世藩校の総合的研究 (Comprehensive study of early modern domainal schools) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1960), p. 3; Tsujimoto Masashi 辻本雅史, “Kamei Nanmei no gakkō ron to Fukuoka hangaku no setsuritsu” 亀井南冥の学校論と福岡藩学の設立 (Kamei Nanmei’s views on schools and the establishment of domainal learning in Fukuoka), *Kōka joshi daigaku Kōka joshi tanki daigaku kenkyū kiyō* 光華女子大学・光華女子短期大学研究紀要 18 (December 1980), pp. 117–18.

entitled *Kin'in no ben* 金印辨 (On the gold seal).⁶ This piece was preceded by an authentication that he was asked to make of the seal in which he merely gave the dimensions and shape of the seal and included a drawing. Unlike the seal itself, this drawing and copies of it circulated among Japanese intellectuals who often made their comments on it based solely on his drawing. The longer essay is primarily a series of hypothetical questions that might be (and later definitely were) raised about the genuineness of the gold seal. One by one Nanmei poses these points of doubt in as strong a way as he can, and one by one he demolishes them. For example: Is it possible that gold could remain underground surrounded by rocks for nearly two millennia and come up without a scratch? Yes, Nanmei replies to his own straw-man question, and he proceeds to marshal scientific data to demonstrate that gold holds out extremely well. Another example: Doesn't the middle character of the inscription, 奴, with its meaning of "slave" or "servant" or simply "underling" imply a decidedly negative evaluation of the statelet receiving it and hence of early Japan? Indeed, Nanmei replies, one finds the character in such tribal names as Xiongnu 匈奴, but that would not have applied here, and he heads into a lengthy exegesis of what this graph would have meant at the time:

It being a time in which we did not have writing [in Japan], when our emissary to the Han dynasty [in 57 C.E.] was asked there what the name of our country was, he would have responded orally 'Yamato no kuni.' They attached the character 倭 to our national name. Through the end of Han, they added the character 奴 to convey 'Yamato no kuni' with 倭奴國. In the Chinese language, [the second character] 奴 is pronounced *no* [actually *nu*, but used to render Japanese *no*]. In [such Ming-period texts as] *Wubei zhi* 武備志 (Treatise on military preparedness) and *Riben kao* 日本考 (Study of Japan), [the place names] Mino 美濃 is transcribed with the Chinese characters 米奴 and Kii 紀伊 rendered 乞奴苦藝 ['Ki no kuni']. In the [Ming-period work] *Yinyun zihai* 音韻字海 (Dictionary of sounds and rhymes), words from our land are translated, such as *ushitsuno* 牛角 (ox horn) rendered as 吾失祖奴 and *tsuru no kubi* 鶴項 (crane's neck) as 它立奴谷只. Given these [examples], the term Xiongnu represents a euphonic change from Xianyun 獫狁 [an early Chinese name for the Xiongnu]. These characters are there for their pronunciation, not for their meaning.... There is [thus] no derogatory meaning to the character 奴 in

6 It has been reprinted a number of times. See *Kamei Nanmei Shōyō zenshū* 亀井南冥・昭陽全集 (Collected writings of Kamei Nanmei and [Kamei] Shōyō), 1:360–68 (Fukuoka: Ashi shobō, 1978).

the notes and explications of that land [i.e., China]. In our understanding of the character usage of that land, this should be something quite easy for us to comprehend.

On the whole Nanmei's defense is based on a range of disciplines: a little science, a little philology, and a lot of Confucianism. In the immediate years following the discovery and Nanmei's essay, numerous pieces of varying length would be written by many of Japan's leading intellectuals of the late eighteenth century. In fact, so many people over a wide geographic area contributed essays that one has to frequently remind oneself that this was an age not only prior to modern communications, of course, but one in which even inter-domainal communications and transportation were anything but smooth and travel sharply monitored or curtailed.⁷ Somehow ideas transcended those barriers, even as it was people who carried the information.

The debate that followed Nanmei's seminal essay took up many of the issues he raised. Many were based only on news of the discovery or just Nanmei's authentication. In other instances, his longer essay was copied and circulated. The contours of the debate, though, soon came down, on the one hand, to Confucians who understood Japan's cultural heritage as intricately linked to that of the mainland and recognized that anything in which Japan might excel culturally found its roots in China (or possibly Korea). For this group, as for Kamei Nanmei, their progenitor, the seal was a testament to the antiquity of Japan's ties to the Mainland. Their defenses of it tended to invoke the Confucian classics as the fount of truth and were less sanguine about native Japanese sources. Opponents of this group were, on the whole, men based in the nativist (*kokugaku* 國學) tradition for whom the Confucian classics were an alien body of literature with little importance in Japan. These men tended to marshal evidence from the ancient Japanese classics, such as *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of ancient matters) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan). They went out of their way either to downplay the importance of the unearthing of the gold seal or to cast anything from mild to serious aspersions of the small state that received it from the Later Han court. Interestingly, though, it would be another five decades before anyone—significantly, a nativist scholar—would actually claim that the gold seal was a complete fake. That was to be Matsuura Michisuke 松浦道輔 (1801–66), a disciple of Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843), writing in 1836.⁸

7 For more on the topic of travel restrictions in the Edo period, see Constantine N. Vaporiš, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1994).

8 Yamada Yoshio 山田孝雄. *Hirata Atsutane* 平田篤胤 (Tokyo: Hōbunkan, 1940),

Although Japanese Confucians did not completely ignore the Japanese classics any more than nativist Japanese ignored the Confucian classics, each worked overtime to emphasize the importance of its own set of books as the source of truth. Thus, at one significant level, the debate took on almost a religious quality making it all but impossible for either side to convince the other of anything. The starkest contrast in the main two opposing sides was how each viewed the gold seal in connection with their own identity, or more broadly how each saw side saw its identity in relation to China and Chinese culture. The debate did have the positive effect (for later scholars) of bringing to the surface numerous topics in the more general Confucian-nativist debate which were otherwise submerged, and virtually all the traditional sources extant were brought to the fore, even of modern scholars may approach them differently now.

Roughly, one hundred years later by the middle of the Meiji era, with Confucianism on the wane and Central European academic benchmarks all the rage in scholarly circles in Japan, the well known historian Miyake Yonekichi 三宅米吉 (1860–1929) brought the latest standards of philology and historical phonology to bear on a study of the gold seal, penning an essay which has set the standard ever since in the area of a proper reading of the seal’s five-character inscription.⁹ There have been dissenting voices since his essay appeared, but they have been largely relegated to the sidelines as the minority opposition or as curiosities—a fact all the more fascinating when viewed in the light of the numerous essays before his that closely debated the reading of the seal’s inscription. Once Miyake’s extraordinary essay appeared, that discussion—on the reading and meaning of the inscription—was, as it were, over, even if some disagreed with it and, more recently, the debate has been somewhat revived. Philology as the discipline of choice ruled the day from mid-Meiji Japan, and with its universalist claims that the surest way of

p. 161. Matsuura’s essay would like have remained entirely obscure if not for its republication by Miyake Yonekichi at the end of the nineteenth century. As we shall soon see, Miyake completely disagreed with Matsuura’s thesis, but he thought it deserved the light of day. See Matsuura Michisuke 松浦道輔. “Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō kin’in gisaku ben” 漢倭奴國王金印偽作辨 (On the forged gold seal [inscribed] to the king of Na in Wa under the Han). Rpt. in Miyake Yonekichi 三宅米吉. “Wa no Na no kokuō kin’in gisaku setsu no hihyō” 倭奴國王金印偽作説の批評 (A critique of the theory that the gold seal [inscribed] to the king of the state of Na in Wa is a forgery). *Kōkogakukai zasshi* 考古學會雜誌 2.5 (September 1898), 10–13 [172–75]; and in “*Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō*”, pp. 94–95.

9 Miyake Yonekichi, “Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō in kō” 漢倭奴國王印考 (A study of the seal [inscribed] to the King of the state of Na in Wa under the Han dynasty), *Shigaku zasshi* 史學雜誌 3.37 (December 1892), 874–81.

searching for and reaching the origins of historical problems was by means of language, it had the power to shift paradigms.

The central claim of Miyake's essay was that the inscription on the face of the gold seal (漢委奴國王) should be read (in Japanese) as "Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō," meaning that this seal was presented to "the sovereign of the state of Na in Wa under the Han" empire. The implication that this Japanese state of Na or the larger confederation of Wa were subservient to the Han dynasty, anathema to nativists earlier, was no longer an issue, as it had been until that time. Miyake was also solving two other problems with this reading. First, the second character of the inscription 委, he claimed echoing Kamei Nanmei himself, was merely a short form for Wa 倭, and thus not the first of a two-character approximation in Chinese for some other ancient Japanese state (many had read 委奴 as "Ito" or "Ido"). Second, that troubling middle character 奴 was not a Chinese stand-in for the genitive particle *no* の, as even Nanmei had believed; nor, of course, did he think it bore any patronizing or derogatory view of Japan from China. Instead, it was to be read *na*, and it represented the Chinese approximation for the small state that had sent the emissary to the court of the Later Han.

As Miyake makes clear, however—and this provides another indication that the Confucian-nativist debate was a thing of the past—before the discovery was made, two scholars (one usually associated with Confucianism and the other a major figure in the nativist school) had already identified this character with the proper site in Kyushu at which the seal was later discovered. Writing in 1716, the celebrated historian Arai Hakuseki 新井白石 (1657–1725) identified the state of Na (as indicated in the *Wei zhi* 魏志 [Chronicle of the kingdom of Wei]) as Naka-gun 那珂郡 in Chikuzen domain, Fukuoka. In his *Koshi tsū wakumon* 古史通惑問 (Questions about the full run of ancient history), Hakuseki was not directly discussing the seal itself, of course, but the state referred to in the *Wei zhi* as "Nuguo" 奴國 in Chinese, which he noted "was Naka-gun in Chikuzen domain" in his own time. In the absence of the seal itself, this association accrued no followers and as such was not built upon in subsequent years.¹⁰

Six decades later, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801), writing in 1777, only a few years before the seal's discovery, associated the same character with two different place names in the same region of Kyushu, and he assigned to both of them "Na" as the correct reading. Arguably the greatest of

10 Arai Hakuseki 新井白石, *Koshi tsū wakumon* 古史通惑問 (Questions about the full run of ancient history), in *Arai Hakuseiki zenshū* 新井白石全集 (Complete works of Arai Hakuseki), ed. Imaizumi Sadasuke 今泉定助 (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1977), vol. 3, p. 388.

the nativist scholars, Norinaga would later go to pains to note that mention of this state of Na in the *Wei zhi* bore no relation at all to the state named in the middle three characters on the gold seal (倭奴國). This middle character, which he claimed was to be read *to* (and hence all three as “Ito no kuni”) and *nu* in the context of the three-character expression in the *Hou Han shu* (倭奴國), now acquired a third reading (*na*). In this last incarnation, Norinaga associated it with the local place names, Na-no-agata 儼縣 and Nanotsu 那津, in the Kyushu region. Although he struck gold with this assertion, it seems to have gotten lost in the mix of opinions flying fast and loose at the time and would not be revived until revived by Miyake Yonekichi at the end of the following century.¹¹ Thus, despite some apparent confusion, Norinaga made an extremely important point which emerged from his undeniable talents as a philologist. Like Arai Hakuseki before him, he associated the middle character of the seal’s inscription 奴 (though not specifically in this instance of the seal itself, which had yet to be unearthed, but as it appears in the *Wei zhi* where it should be, he claimed, pronounced *na*) with the character 儼 (also pronounced *na* and appearing as an ancient toponym from the very region in which the seal was discovered) and additionally with the character 那 (again, pronounced *na* and also linked with local place names).¹²

Instead of sustaining this argument and anticipating Miyake Yonekichi’s paradigm-shifting essay of 1892, Norinaga jumped to the conclusions that the expression 倭奴國 from the *Hou Han shu* should be read “Wanukoku” and that this state had nothing to do with the kingdom of Wa. Undoubtedly these conclusions were influenced by the discovery of the gold seal and the need in his own mind to disassociate it either from importance in genuine Japanese history or at least disassociate it from the ancient Wa.

Miyake Yonekichi’s conclusions met with rebuttal in the 1890s, but interestingly those scholars who initially disagreed with him in print—Kume Kunitake 久米邦武 (1839–1931), Kan Masatomo 菅政友 (or Suga Masatomo, 1824–97), and Hoshino Hisashi 星野恒 (1839–1917)—one by one all switched their positions and came on board with Miyake’s conclusions. These three men were considerably older and more established than Miyake, but they nonetheless recognized that his arguments—especially, his resolution of the proper understanding of the seal’s inscription—were correct. Hoshino and

11 Motoori Norinaga, 本居宣長, “Gyojū gaigen” (“Karaosame no uretamigoto”) (Words of lament to drive out the barbarians), in *Motoori Norinaga zenshū* 本居宣長全集 (Collected works of Motoori Norinaga) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1972), vol. 8, pp. 30–34.

12 This passage from Norinaga’s “Gyojū gaigen” is also excerpted in Mishina Akihide 三品彰英, *Yamataikoku kenkyū sōran* 邪馬台国研究総覧 (Overview of research on the state of Yamatai) (Tokyo: Sōgensha, 1970), p. 55.

Kume were professors at the recently founded Imperial University in Tokyo; Kan, the oldest of the group, was the chief priest of Ise Shrine. What won the day for them was Miyake's use of historical philology. Although philology has all but become a term of derogation in most academic disciplines in North America, it was the queen of disciplines in mid-Meiji Japan.

It should be noted that Miyake's achievement was made not by obliterating the entire model and all studies that preceded his own, but by building on them and elevating the entire discussion to a new level with the introduction of modern philological methods. The advance here may, then, be understood as a form of shifting paradigms on the model of Thomas Kuhn's (1922–96) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹³ The nature of the discord between schools of thought from the time of Kamei Nanmei's initial essay through most of the nineteenth century was simply spinning its wheels and no longer producing anything new or innovative. It would take a change in approach to relaunch the discussion in a productive direction, and that was precisely Miyake's contribution.

The decades following Miyake's essay mark the maturation of modern Japanese historical scholarship. Overall there were fewer essays on the gold seal in the Taishō and early Shōwa years, though the topic never disappeared from research interests. One of the problems plaguing continued research, especially after Miyake had "solved" the enigma of the inscription's meaning, was the simple fact that the seal was not readily available for viewing, to say nothing of actually examining it. Then came the run up to Japanese expansionism on the Mainland and full-fledged war.

There were efforts to assess the gold seal within the system of seals awarded by the Former and Later Han courts to domestic and foreign entities, and frequently the gold seal was considered an outlier. Few seals made of gold and few with the snake-shaped handle had been discovered. These facts led a number of scholars to question the authenticity of the gold seal, and a few scholars were even prepared to judge it a fabrication.

The problem, of course, with Chinese artifacts is that there are countless items underground but they are not so easily unearthed. The discipline of archeology needs to be developed and well funded, as it would be after the war. The new regime in China following the Communists coming to power in 1949 discovered promptly that there is no discipline so intimately tied to nationalism, national identity, and national unity as archeology, especially in a culture that for millennia has tended to revere the old and privilege the ancient over the modern. Even the Communists, who had long made a business of destroying everything that smacked of traditional Chinese culture,

13 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and reprinted many times since.

found “Chinese” heritage too tempting to ignore as it built its own claims to being the legitimate heirs of its numerous predecessors.

Thus, archeology was supported and got off the ground in China soon after the new regime consolidated its power. And, sure enough, artifacts underground were more than accommodating. In 1956 another gold seal with a snake design at its top was discovered in a Former Han tomb in Shizhaishan 石寨山, Yunnan Province, and this Yunnan find more or less shut the door on claims that the gold seal found in Japan was bogus. The Yunnan seal was inscribed “Dian wang zhi yin” 滇王之印 (seal of the sovereign of [the state of] Dian [Yunnan]), and its face is a square measuring 2.4 centimeters to a side; it is thought to date to the end of the Former Han dynasty, and its coiled snake is much more easily recognizable as such than that of the gold seal discovered in Japan.¹⁴

14 The Yunnan seal was unearthed in Tomb No. 6 and dates to a time when “Dian” 滇 (which has now come to be the single-character, short-form for Yunnan Province) connoted a non-Han ethnicity living in this southern region; Emperor Wu of the Han conquered the area in 109 B.C.E., and when the king of Dian surrendered, he was given a royal seal (undoubtedly the very one discovered in 1956). Li Kunsheng 李昆声, “‘Dian wang zhi yin’ yu ‘Han Wei Nu guowang’ yin zhi bijiao yanjiu” 「滇王之印」与「汉委奴国王」印之比较研究 (A comparative study of the “Seal of the king of Dian” and “Han Wei Nu guowang” seal), *Sixiang zhanxian* 思想战线 3 (1986), pp. 78–81; Nishitani Tadashi 西谷正, “Shikai ni atatte: Nit-Chū ryōkoku nisen nenrai no bunka kōryū to ‘Ten ō no in’ kin’in” 司会にあたって: 中日両国二千年来の文化交流と「滇王之印」金印 (Chair’s remarks: Cultural relations between China and Japan over the past 2,000 years and the gold seal to the king of Dian [Yunnan]), in *Chū-Nichi ryōkoku nisen nenrai no bunka kōryū to “Ten ō no in” kin’in, kōkai shinpojiumu* 中日両国二千年来の文化交流と「滇王之印」金印、公開シンポジウム (Public symposium on cultural relations between China and Japan over the past 2,000 years and the gold seal to the king of Dian [Yunnan]) (Nagasaki: Nagasaki Kōshibyō Chūgoku rekidai hakubutsukan, 1993), p. 6; Yoshikai Masato 吉開将人, “Sekisaisan bunka shūdanbo bunseki shiron” 石寨山文化集団墓分析試論 (A tentative analysis of the cemeteries of Shizhaishan culture), *Tōnan Ajia kōkogakkai kaihō* 東南アジア考古学会会報 10 (1990), pp. 90–91; Wang Rencong 王人聰 and Ye Qifeng 葉其峯, *Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbei chao guanyin yanjiu* 秦漢魏晉南北朝官印研究 (Studies of official seals in the Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties) (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue wenwuguan, 1990); Okamura Hidenori 岡村秀典, “Zen Kan kyō no hennen to yōshiki” 前漢鏡の編年と様式 (The dating and form of Former Han mirrors), *Shirin* 史林 67.5 (September 1984), pp. 1–41; Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, “Samazama naru inju” さまざまなる印綬 (Various and sundry seals and ribbons), in Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, ed., *Kin’in kenkyū ronbun shūsei* 金印研究論文集成 (Collection of research essays on the gold seal) (Tokyo: Shin jinbutsu ōraisha, 1994), p. 83; Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, “Kodai Chūgoku



Then, in 1983 another gold seal—this one with a dragon-shaped handle—was discovered in the excavated tomb of the king of the early “Vietnamese” state of Nam Viêt 南越 in what is now Xianggangshan 象崗山, Guangdong Province. It is a bit larger, measuring 3.1 centimeters on each side, and bears the inscription “Wendi xingxi” 文帝行璽 (seal of Văn Đế), namely the seal of the second ruler of Nam Viêt, whose personal name was Triệu Mạt 趙昧 (C. Zhao Mo, r. 137–122 B.C.E.), grandson of the dynastic founder, Triệu Đà 趙佗 (C. Zhao Tuo, c. 230–137 B.C.E.). It is widely believed to have been privately produced, not imperially bestowed on the ruler of Nam Viêt.¹⁵

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- kara sakuhō sareta kan'in ni tsuite” 古代中国から冊封された官印について (On official seals used for infeudation from ancient China), *Chōsen gakuho* 朝鮮学報 119–120 (July 1986), pp. 42–45.
- 15 Mai Yinghao 麦英豪 and Li Jin 黎金, “Guangzhou Xianggang Nan Yue wangmu muzhu kao” 广州象岗南越王墓墓主考 (Analysis of the main figure buried in the royal tomb of Nam Viêt at Elephant Ridge, Guangzhou), *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古与文物 6 (1986), pp. 83–87; Diana Lary, “The Tomb of the King of Nanyue—The Contemporary Agenda of History, Scholarship and Identity,” *Modern China* 22.1 (January 1996), pp. 3–27. For a brief but interesting comparison of Dian and Yamatai, see Imamura Keiji 今村啓爾, “Ten ōkoku ni okeru dansei kenryokusha to josei kenryokusha: Yamataikoku to hikaku shite” 滇王国における男性権力者と女性権力者: 邪馬台国と比較して (Male and female powerholders in the Dian kingdom, as compared with the state of Yamatai), *Yūsei kōko kiyō* 郵政考古紀要 18 (1992), pp. 113–29. Kajiyama Masaru 梶山勝 argues for a number of reasons that the Nam Viêt gold seal may have been produced in Nam Viêt (and not in or near the Han capital); see his “Zen Kan Nan Etsu ōbo shutsudo no kin'in ‘Buntei gyōji’ ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu” 前漢南越王墓出土の金印「文帝行璽」に関する一考察 (A study of the gold seal [inscribed] “Wendi xingxi” unearthed at a royal Nam Viêt tomb from the Former Han era), *Kodai bunka* 古代文化 36.10 (October 1984), pp. 23–30. Around 183 B.C.E., under the influence of Empress Lü 呂 (d. 180 B.C.E.), the Han dynasty began restricting trade with outlying areas. Zhao Tuo protested and she had his relatives all murdered and his ancestral tomb demolished. Soon thereafter, according to the treatise on the kingdom of Nam Viêt in the *Shi ji* 史記 (j. 113), Zhao Tuo began calling himself *di* (emperor) without informing the Han court, and Emperor Wen 文 (r. 180–157 B.C.E.) sent a high official, Lu Jia 陸賈 (240–170 B.C.E.) to investigate. Zhao responded apologetically in the form of a letter which he signed “Manyi



One further gold seal deserves mention in this comparative context. It was unearthed in 1981 from the second tomb at Ganquan 甘泉, a village about twenty kilometers to the northwest of the city of Yangzhou. At its base it forms a square 2.3 centimeters to a side, bears a tortoise handle, and carries the inscription “Guangling wang xi” 廣陵王璽 (seal of the prince of Guangling [a fiefdom awarded by Emperor Ming 明 to his younger brother, Liu Jing 劉荆, 37–67]).¹⁶ Because it was forged in the year 58 C.E., only one

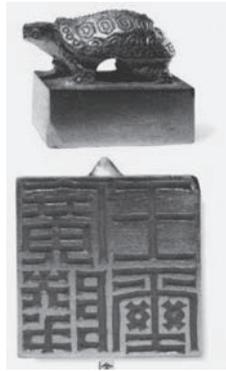
dazhang laofu chen Tuo” 蠻夷大長老夫臣佗 (your aged subject [Zhao] Tuo, a barbarian chieftain), by which he effectively demoted himself from putative emperor to “barbarian” and, like other Han officials, dropped his surname. His grandson took the further step of issuing himself an imperial seal, ironically with the same imperial name of Wendi. See Tsuruma Kazuyuki 鶴間和幸. *Faasuto enperaa no isan, Shin Kan teikoku* ファーストエンペラーの遺産、秦漢帝国 (Bequest of the first emperor, the Qin-Han empire) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2004), pp. 172, 235.

- 16 Kajiyama Masaru 梶山勝, “‘Kōryō ōji’ kin’in to ‘Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō’ kin’in, kin’in to Higashi Ajia sekai” 「広陵王璽」金印と「漢委奴国王」金印: 金印と東アジア (The gold seal [inscribed] “Guangling wang xi” and the gold seal [inscribed] “Han Wei Nu guowang, gold seals and East Asia), in *Chūka jinmin kyōwakoku Nankin hakubutsuin meihōten* 中華人民共和国南京博物院名宝展 (Exhibition of treasures from the Nanjing Museum of the People’s Republic of China) (Nagoya: Nagoya City Museum and Chūnichi shinbun, 1989), pp. 16–22. Liu Jing was the ninth son of Emperor Guangwu, founder of the Later Han; he was enfeoffed at age two (in 39 C.E.) as “duke” or “prince” (*gong* 公) of Shanyang and elevated two years later to *wang* (king, prince) of Shanyang. When Guangwu died in 57, he was succeeded by his fourth son Liu Zhuang 劉莊 (28–75) as Emperor Ming, and the next year Liu Jing was promoted to “prince of Guangling.” He committed suicide in 67 after being exposed in a treasonous incident; his seal was buried with him. See also Ji Zhongqing 紀仲庆, “Guangling wang xi he Zhong-Ri jiaowang” 廣陵王璽和中日交往 (The Guangling wang seal and Sino-Japanese interactions), *Dongnan wenhua* 东南文化 1 (1985), pp. 233–34, wherein Ji also recounts the great excitement the discovery of the seal elicited in Japan; and Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男, “Go Kan to Gi no shokōō no shinshaku” 後漢と魏の諸侯王の進爵 (The rise in nobility for feudatory princes of the Later Han and Wei), in Ōtani Mitsuo, ed., *Kin’in kenkyū ronbun shūsei* 金印研究論文集成 (Collection of

year after the Han seal was presented to the ruler of the state of Na, Okazaki Takashi (1923–90) has argued (and Kajiyama Masaru concurs) that, given their uncanny resemblance—such as the presence of scales on the animal figures of their respective handles, the similarities in the calligraphy of the inscriptions, and the similar way in which the inscriptions were cut—they may have been fashioned in the same workshop in Luoyang. Although both are made of gold, there are some important differences. The Guangling seal was designated a *xi* 璽, while the Na seal does not even bear such a designating Chinese graph. Second, the Guangling seal has a tortoise handle, while the Na seal has a coiled snake. And, the color of the ribbon originally accompanying the seals differed as well, with the Guangling’s green ribbon assigned to imperial princes (*zhuhou* 諸侯) and the Na’s purple one reserved for adjunct marquises (*liehou* 列侯), one notch down. The prefixing of the character Han to the Na seal, as noted by Okazaki Takashi (in the essay discussed below) was deemed necessary only for an external subject state (*waichen* 外臣) such as Na, but unnecessary for Guangling, an internal subject (*neichen* 內臣) of the Han throne. Both recipients enjoyed the position of *wang* 王 or prince, but they were nonetheless at different levels because of the external vs. internal nature of their respective places within the Sinosphere.¹⁷

research essays on the gold seal) (Tokyo: Shin jinbutsu ōraisha, 1994), p. 77.

17 Okazaki Takashi 岡崎敬, “Arata ni hakken saretā ‘Kōryō ōji’ ni tsuite: Kōso shō Kankō ken Kansan nigōbo” 新たに発見された「広陵王璽」について: 江蘇省邗江県甘泉二号墓 (On the recently discovered “Seal of the Prince of Guangling”: Tomb Number Two, Ganquan, Hanjiang County, Jiangsu Province), in *Ine fune matsuri: Matsumoto Nobuhiro sensei tsuitō ronbunshū* 稲・舟・祭: 松本信廣先生追悼論文集 (Rice, boats, festivals: Essays marking the death of Professor Matsumoto Nobuhiro) (Tokyo: Rokkō shuppan, 1982), pp. 625–30; Kajiyama Masaru, “‘Kōryō ōji’ kin’in to ‘Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō’ kin’in, kin’in to Higashi Ajia sekai,” in *Chūka jinmin kyōwakoku Nankin hakubutsuin meihōten*, pp. 17–18; Okamura Hidenori 岡村秀典, “Kōkōgaku kara mita Kan to Wa” 考古学からみた漢と倭 (Han and Wa as seen from archeology), in *Wakoku tanjō* 倭国誕生 (The birth of the state of Wa), ed. Shiraishi Taiichirō 白石太一郎 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2002), pp. 225–26; Shiraishi Taiichirō 白石太一郎. “Wakoku tanjō” 倭国誕生 (The birth of the state of Wa), in *Wakoku tanjō* 倭国誕生 (The birth of the state of Wa), ed. Shiraishi Taiichirō (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2002), pp. 64–66; Keiji Imamura, “Jomon and Yayoi: the transition to agriculture in Japanese history,” in *The Origins and Spread of Agriculture and Pastoralism in Eurasia*, ed. David R. Harris (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), pp. 460–61.



As these new finds and many more like them indicate, a whole new approach was required in the postwar years to make sense of the field of seals into which the gold seal discovered in Kyushu in 1784 would be placed. The normative texts about seals dating from centuries past were no longer seen as the best guide and certain not the only guide to understanding where the gold seal fit. The new model discipline supplanting the philological paradigm established at the end of the nineteenth century would be science. Archeology was only part of this shift, though certainly an important part. The representative essay that marks this paradigmatic change was written in 1968 by Okazaki Takashi, the noted historian of early China and Japan. In many ways, the shift into a world governed by science when studying the gold seal is the same world we inhabit today. The power of science is all around us—upending human judgments and past misdeeds all the time. One of the rare scholars allowed to actually examine the seal, Okazaki (and his assistants) applied a host of scientific tests to it in an effort to allay the least doubt about the seal’s authenticity. Cold, hard science recognizes no human frailty or prejudice; it is its own universe of verifiability which we ignore at our peril. This was a universe in which “science,” because of its putative claims to universal applicability and pure objectivity, had become the final arbiter of “truth.” The intent of Okazaki’s fine essay was to put an end to any and all allegations of fabrication. And, inasmuch as the seal is not at all easily available for scientific investigation, his study loomed all the larger.¹⁸

18 Okazaki Tadashi 岡崎敬, “‘Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō’ kin’in no sokutei” 「漢委奴国王」金印の測定 (Measuring the gold seal [inscribed] to the “King of the state of Na in Wa under the Han”), *Shien* 史淵 100 (March 1968), pp. 265–80; rpt. in *Shikanoshima: “Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō” kin’in to Shikanoshima no kōkogakuteki kenkyū* 志賀島:「漢委奴国王」金印と志賀島の考古学的研究 (Shikanoshima: The gold seal [inscribed] “Han Wei Nu guowang” and archeological research at Shikanoshima), ed. Kyūshū daigaku Bungakubu Kōkogaku kenkyūshitsu 九州大学文学部考古学研究室 (Department

Both hard science and archeology have advanced beyond the stage they were a generation ago, but the status of “science” remains exalted. It has come under attack by postmodernists from one side and religiously inspired men and women from another; its putative sanctity has been criticized from other realms as well, but it still enjoys enormous veneration.

As of this writing, we may be seeing a fourth phase in the study of the gold seal, what might be called constructivism. This view, heavily indebted to postmodernism, effectively sees much of reality and certainly the historical past as a construction of the individual perceiver. Few would disagree with the idea that everyone’s sense of reality is different, though most would find it difficult to accept the idea that such differences (with the exception perhaps of schizophrenics) amount to anything fundamental. In 2006 a scholar of ancient Japanese literature by the name of Miura Sukeyuki (b. 1946) from Chiba University published a volume aimed at toppling all supports underpinning the authenticity of the gold seal.¹⁹ That meant debunking every aspect of the received story and coming up with an elaborate conspiracy theory for how it was forged in the months or years prior to its unearthing in 1784. This he does with a fair degree of expertise, though, to be sure, there are holes in his argument. Riding the wave set in motion by Miura’s book and the newspaper articles and debate that followed as well as a series of his own essays, in 2010 Suzuki Tsutomu (b. 1949) published a volume which approached the gold seal from the heretofore unexplored realm of the history of metallurgical methods.²⁰ Although his ultimate position remains a bit vague, in no small part because of the hyperscientific nature of his specialty, Suzuki effectively cast great doubt—not from the perspective of constructivism but from that of better science—on the capacity of Han Chinese to cast such a seal. It is still much too early to tell if constructivism or better (newer and more sharply penetrating) science will constitute the discipline of a new paradigm, or if neither will force us to shift gears.

Where does that leave us now? The likelihood of finding new documents

of Archeology, Faculty of Letters, Kyushu University) (Fukuoka: Kin’in iseki chōsadan, 1975), pp. 84–92.

- 19 Miura Sukeyuki 三浦佑之, *Kin’in gizō jiken: Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō no maboroshi* 金印偽造事件「漢委奴國王」のまぼろし (The incident of the forged golden seal: The illusion of “King of Na in Wa, under the Han”) (Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2006).
- 20 Suzuki Tsutomu 鈴木勉, “*Kan no Wa no Na no kokuō*” *kin’in tanjō jikūron: Kinseki bungaku nyūmon I, kinzoku inshō hen* 「漢委奴國王」金印誕生時空論: 金石文学入門 I, 金属印章篇 (The time and place of the birth of the gold seal [inscribed to] “the king of the state of Na in Wa under the Han”: Introduction of epigraphic literature, vol. 1, metallic seals) (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 2010).

is extremely small. Ōtani Mitsuo 大谷光男 (b. 1927), the scholar who has done more research on and unearthed more materials concerning the gold seal than anyone, is unlikely to have an heir. Whether the fourth wave of historiography on the gold seal will be able to sustain itself—and whether that wave will be predominantly social constructivism or better science—remain to be seen.

The first three waves, though, have fully made themselves felt. While each was transcended by the next, it is hard to imagine the present state of scholarship on the gold seal, or much of anything else, without the preceding stages. Thus, Kamei Nanmei's world of Confucianism in Fukuoka or Miyake Yonekichi's world of philology in the straitlaced world of Tokyo at the turn of the last century may be far from our own, they nonetheless produced indispensable scholarship which we ignore at our intellectual peril.