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A Study and Interpretation of the Epitaph of In Shinjō—Cross-Cultural Exchange in Tang Dynasty East Asian Ritual System

Hong Yang

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Macao Polytechnic University, Macao 999078, China

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Abstract: In 2004, the "Epitaph Presented to the Imperial Attendant in Shinjō" was unearthed in the eastern suburbs of Xi'an. This epitaph is currently the earliest surviving Tang dynasty stone inscription clearly bearing the name "Japan" and is now housed in the Northwest University History Museum. This paper uses cross-cultural communication theory as the analytical framework, combining epitaph measurements, epitaph interpretation, and Sino-Japanese legal documents to conduct multiple cross-verifications. It systematically analyzes In Shinjō's time of arrival in China, identity attributes, the origin of his sinicized name, posthumous official titles, and epitaph author, and sorts out his experiences in China. The research finds that In Shinjō was an official cultural medium specially selected by the Japanese court for studying the Tang dynasty imperial clothing and ritual system, representing the state-led institutionalized cross-cultural communication model in 8th-century East Asia; Their voluntary adoption of Han-style names is a typical cultural connotation and identity adjustment behavior during intercultural contact; The Tang court's posthumous honorary robes and official funeral regulations established a mature mechanism for acceptance, recognition, and symbolic incentives for foreign cultural learners. This epitaph fully preserves the official transmission link of Tang ritual and music civilization to East Asia. The stone inscription itself serves as a cross-cultural communication medium, providing rare first-hand physical materials for understanding pre-modern East Asian transnational cultural flows, dynastic foreign cultural narratives, and negotiation and adjustment among different cultures

Keywords: In Shinjō's epitaph; Envoys to Tang; Transmission of ritual systems; Cross-cultural exchange; Tang dynasty foreign management system

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1. Introduction

In 2004, the epitaph of In Shinjō was unearthed in the eastern suburbs of Xi'an. Its discovery is a testament to early Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, and the Northwest University History Museum has collected it and

published related materials [1]. This news sparked a wave of research into In Shinjō's epitaph in both China and Japan. This was also the first physical record of Japan, and the four characters "Country Name Japan" in the inscription clearly represent the Kaiyuan era, which is a key advantage distinguishing it from the "Epitaph of Du Sixian, Prefect of Xuzhou." Although the latter had early records of "Japan," the rubbings had a narrow circulation and lacked supporting historical facts, resulting in no systematic research results for a long time. As a stone inscription material that combines information on the figure's biography, Tang-Japanese diplomatic clues, and the Tang bureaucratic system, the In Shinjō Stele enables two-way comparison and mutual verification between unearthed artifacts and surviving documents. It is well known that epitaphs are a literary form that records the tomb owner. These inscriptions integrate multiple layers of information about the figure's life, Tang-Japanese diplomacy, and the Tang official system, enabling mutual verification between excavated artifacts and surviving documents

Most existing research focuses on archaeological interpretation, Tang dynasty statutes, and traditional Japanese historical research, discussing epitaph textual collation, In Shinjō's identity, and the posthumous official system, but analysis from the perspective of cross-cultural communication is relatively weak. The envoy system to Tang China is the most important transnational cultural flow carrier in medieval East Asia. Unlike individual and spontaneous folk cultural exchanges, it is coordinated by the national administrative forces of China and Japan, selecting professionals based on national institutional reform needs, completing the introduction, learning, and localization of institutional civilization, representing a typical state-led cross-cultural communication activity. As a student sent to Tang China specializing in court ceremonial dress and ritual systems, In Shinjō fully participated in the entire process of importing, absorbing, and localizing Central Plains ritual and music culture. The epitaph text clearly records the official cultural exchange process between Tang and Japan, naturally fitting the national cross-cultural communication perspective. Based on historical fact-finding, this paper focuses on exploring the communication mechanisms, cultural adaptation, symbol encoding, and external narrative strategies behind epitaphs, thereby enriching the research dimensions of cross-cultural exchanges between Middle and East Asia.

2. In Shinjō's identity and time of his arrival in China

The entire set of remains is divided into two parts: an inverted bucket-shaped stele cover and a square inscription stone, both made of bluestone: the bottom of the stele measures 37 cm in length and width, the top is a 20 cm square, overall height 7 cm, seal script arranged in four rows, totaling twelve characters, interpreted as "Epitaph for the Imperial Clothing Attendant to the Well Prefect"; The square inscription stone has twelve columns in regular script, with a maximum of fifteen characters per column, totaling 171 characters. Due to construction damage, the first nine characters from columns three to eleven are damaged and unrecognizable. Early studies only counted 162 characters, which is a data bias caused by not including missing characters.

Textual Collation: Gong's surname is Jing, courtesy name Zhencheng. The country is called Japan, truly gifted by heaven. Thus, he was able to carry orders to distant lands and hasten to visit foreign nations. He followed rites and music, inherited the official robes and hats; Wearing his belt and standing in court, he was hard to match. Who would have thought that he would study tirelessly, seeking the Way unfinished? When a boat moves in a ravine, in a moment he meets a galloping horse. On the day of the first month in the twenty-

second year of the Kaiyuan era, ... The soul and common people returned to their homeland (the complete collated text is replaced with fragments of). The inscription [2] follows the standard epitaph template for Tang dynasty people who died abroad, recording in sequence nationality, reasons for entering Tang, details of the funeral, and the eulogy. Interpreted from the perspective of cross-cultural symbol dissemination, the entire chronicle constructs a textual carrier for a two-way civilizational dialogue between Tang and Japan: "The Country Name Japan" completes the standardized identity coding of foreign regimes; "Walking in rites and music, wearing attire" records In Shinjō's active acceptance of the core ritual symbols of the Central Plains; "Sent to distant lands" clarifies his official role as a dedicated cultural medium; the concluding elegiac is an empathetic narrative design that balances foreign feelings and weakens cultural barriers, fully presenting the entire process of encoding, transmission, and adaptation of state-led cross-cultural communication in the 8th century.

Based on the epitaph, it can be roughly determined that In Shinjō alone was sent to Tang China in 717. According to the Dai Nihonshi: "In the second year of Reigi under Emperor Genzho, Tajibi Prefecture served as envoy to Tang, Ōtomoyama no Kami as ambassador, and Fujiwara no Mayo as deputy envoy, all sent to Tang in the fourth year of Kaiyuan. In the second year of Yōro, the governor of Tajibi Prefecture and others returned. In the fifth year of Emperor Shōwu's Tenpyō era, Tajihi Hirosei was sent as envoy to Tang, and Nakaomi Nakami was appointed as deputy envoy to Tang. The above records [3] say "the fourth year of Kaiyuan in Tang" roughly corresponds to 716 AD. The court appointed Tajibi no Kami as the envoy, Otomoyama no Kami as ambassador, and Fujiwara no Mayo as deputy envoy to form the Tang Dynasty mission, which returned home in Yōrō 2 (ようろう) (718). In 716, Imasaki turned nineteen, fully meeting the age selection criteria for Japanese government-funded overseas trainees, and thus was deemed to have crossed the sea to Tang China with this mission.

The epitaph materials clearly show that In Shinjō was a secular student studying abroad, not a monk studying abroad. Japanese who entered the Tang dynasty were divided into two categories: study monks and secular students. The writing style of their epitaphs was clearly distinguished: if a monk was a monk, the epitaph had to include the name of the temple, and the title included words such as "Great Deer," "Zen Master," or "Dharma Master," and the inscription would also introduce the subject's secular surname, secular name, and Dharma name one by one. Moreover, the document [4] clearly states, "Talent is called heaven-bestowed, thus I can be entrusted with missions to distant lands and travel to visit superior countries," and "How could I hope to study tirelessly and seek the Way without end?" The text "bearing orders to distant lands and racing to great nations" clearly indicates its official dispatch nature. "Mandate" represents the mission entrusted by the Japanese court, not spontaneous pursuit of learning by the people; The "Dao" pursued by "Seeking the Way Unfinished" refers to the state's top-level institutions, imperial attire, and ritual systems, distinct from ordinary students studying literature and handicrafts. Therefore, Shinjō's purpose in coming to China was to study Tang culture, possibly as a government-sponsored student sent by Japan. In 645, Japan carried out the Taika Reform, using the Tang dynasty's political, legal, and ritual systems as templates for national reform, forming top-down cross-cultural reforms coordinated by the government. Politically, it imitated the Tang's Three Departments and Six Ministries system and established the Two Officials and Eight Departments system. Economically, the bu-min system was abolished and the citizens' land system was practiced. The Taika Reform was essentially a political reform modeled after the Tang dynasty. After the Taika Reform, Japan gradually established a ritsuryō system. The nature of the state

began to transition from a slave system to a feudal system. After the Taika Reform, Japan's national strength began to grow rapidly. In 660, the Battle of Baijiangkou broke out between China and Japan, marking their first confrontation. The war ended in Japan's defeat, but Sino-Japanese relations did not become rigid; instead, the size of the mission to Tang China was tripled, with professionals selected according to domestic institutional reform needs to study in Tang. The mission system was an institutionalized transnational cultural communication mechanism, with the main dissemination being the two imperial courts and the content of the national ritual and music system. In Shinjō, as the "recipient of the dispatch," it simultaneously served as a learner of knowledge, cultural translator, and institutional translator, serving as a key medium in the cross-cultural communication chain at the national level.

3. Interpretation of the name in Shinjō

The official surname is Jing, courtesy name Shinari. The country name is Japan. Currently, there are several views regarding the name In Shinjō. Yasumimi Reiki from the French Academy believes that In Shinjō likely came from the Japanese In Shinjō family, with the noble surname Jing, given name Kami, courtesy name In Shinjō, and full name In Shinjō, but the given name was dropped when writing the epitaph, retaining only the surname and courtesy name. Higashino Haruyuki of Nara University in Japan believes that In Shinjō should have come from the Japanese Kuzui family[5]. Kutsurai belongs to a noble family, and "In Shinjō" is a dialectal homophone of "Kutsurai". Professor Wang Weikun of Northwest North University believes that the name In Shinjō may have been changed after arriving in China, which may be related to Abe no Nakamaro's change to Chao Heng. Tracing the origins of the system, foreign peoples adopted Han surnames and were sinicized. Typical examples in Chinese history come from the reign of Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei, such as: the Qiudun clan changed to Qiu, the Helai clan to He, and the Koba clan to Ke. Afterwards, Tang emperors not only granted surnames to the foreign royal clan but also bestowed many surnames from the foreign surnames to foreign officials [6]. Therefore, In Shinjō may have also changed his name during this period. The "Genna Surname Collection" records: "Japanese envoy Chōshūnin Zhenjin was appointed Minister of Imperial Kitchens in Chang'an; The Shuai Gengling Tongzheng appointed the Chōshū grandfather. Chōshin is a surname. "Chōshin" [7] was an ancient Japanese surname, with the highest ranks including Shin and Ren, and others including Zō, Kimi, Nakō, and Man. For example, the court official Abe no Nakamaro is abbreviated as "Asomi Nakamitsu." Heirene no Nakasei is simplified to "Chōshin Hirotomi [8]." In the Tang dynasty, simplification and rewriting occurred, and the epitaph " 井 " character could not be directly equated with the Japanese mainland Kutsui and Fujii clans.

Wang Weikun's view of "sinicizing and naming after entering the Tang dynasty" can be corroborated with the theory of cross-cultural adaptation. The epitaph describes In Shinjō as "upholding rites and music, inheriting the attire and cap; Wearing his belt and serving at court, unmatched in his own way. How could he strive to study tirelessly?" This shows his deep identification with Central Plains ritual and music culture. In the social and bureaucratic cultural environment of Tang Chang'an, the names of native Japanese clans were complex and lengthy, which was unfavorable for interpersonal interactions and official archival registration. The Honglu Temple managed outsiders, and its archives only recorded Chinese-style surnames and courtesy names; native Japanese clans were not included in official records, resulting in epitaphs only recording "Jing, courtesy name Zhencheng," without their native Japanese surnames.

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, changing Han-style names is a typical act of cultural adaptation. A given name is an important symbol of cultural identity. The formation of In Shinjō's Han-style name is an adjustment of identity in cross-cultural interaction: on one hand, it is an individual's acceptance and identification with Tang culture; on the other, it is a strategic choice to adapt to the official Tang administrative system. It is a vivid case of "the recipient actively transforming their own symbol" during cultural transmission. In the process of cross-cultural communication, outsiders actively adjust their symbolic identity to reduce resistance to cultural adaptation, thereby adapting to the system and social context of the host country. In Shinjō's proactive construction of Han-style identity was not simply a name change, but a micro-level expression of cultural connotation: after deeply engaging with Tang ritual and music culture, he voluntarily borrowed Central Plains name symbols to reshape his identity, thereby better accomplishing learning and connecting with Tang official resources for dissemination.

4. Examination and interpretation of the posthumous title of In Shinjō's epitaph

In Shinjō arrived in Chang'an at roughly the latest in 733 AD, and the court posthumously awarded him the fifth rank of "Shangyi Fengyu" (Attendant of the Imperial Wardrobe). Emperor Xuanzong of Tang was able to grant In Shinjō such an official position, indicating that his relationship with him was extraordinary. The formation of such a close relationship was inevitably related to In Shinjō's outstanding performance [8]. Posthumous official titles were honorary titles given by the court to deceased officials. In the Tang dynasty, the previous rank and position of the recipient affected the posthumous rank and official title after their death. According to the "Ce Fu Yuan Gui", the foreign groups granted official titles by the court were divided into three categories: vassal monarchs, prince lineages, envoys skilled in special regulations, and students studying abroad; Shinjō belonged to the third category, which essentially was an institutionalized recognition of his achievements in ritual and musical symbols.

In Shinjō's posthumous official rank was not exceptional; according to the rank of posthumous titles, his official rank at the time was also around fifth grade. "Shangyi Fengyu" was an official title during the Sui and Tang dynasties. Its main duty was to manage the emperor's clothing exclusively. Although this position had no real power, it was a high official rank of fifth grade. Historically, those who held the position were mostly close relatives of the emperor or deeply favored and trusted by the emperor. According to statistics, about 26 officials held the position of "Shangyi Fengyu" during the Tang dynasty, most of whom came from imperial relatives, sons of meritorious or famous ministers, children of previous emperors, and those with specialized records or skills. In Shinjō clearly did not fall into the first three categories. In Shinjō, as a foreign scholar of ritual systems who died in Chang'an, was posthumously awarded this honor as a special honor and incentive established by the Tang court for foreign cultural researchers, serving as a supporting system for the Tang dynasty's cross-cultural acceptance system.

Granting official titles is merely a favor, not a real position. Therefore, the posthumous title of "Shangyi Fengyu" and the actual position of Shangyi Fengyu may not have a necessary intrinsic connection with the emperor. It is possible that the Tang dynasty granted posthumous titles to officials of foreign envoys to Tang who died in Tang, such as those of high rank or extraordinary individuals. Therefore, the posthumous "Shangyi Fengyu" and the actual position of Shangyi Fengyu may not have a necessary connection with the emperor. It is possible that the Tang dynasty granted official titles to envoys to Tang who died in Tang China

or to those with special contributions. At the same time, "Shangyi Fengyu" may also be related to In Shinjō's own expertise; for example, In Shinjō may have been responsible for or involved in the construction of the Ritsuryō state, related to the carriage and clothing system. During the Nara period, Japan was in a critical period of localization of the court attire system: in 718, the "Yōrō Ritsuryō" was issued, but the emperor's ceremonies and court assemblies still used local plain-colored formal attire; In the first year of Tenpyō (732), during the New Year's Day ceremony, the emperor wore the full set of Tang-style crown robes for the first time during the ceremony, fully covering the entire period of In Shinjō in Chang'an from 716 to 734 [8].

To complete the transplantation of crown and attire symbols, the Japanese court specifically selected bureaucrats familiar with court dress regulations to visit Tang China, and In Shinjō was the dedicated medium responsible for this civilizational transformation. The Tang dynasty Shang Yi Bureau preserved a complete set of imperial ceremonial dress production and usage standards, which closely matched In Shinjō's study goals. Posthumously awarding him the title of Shang Yi Feng Yu was not only an official recognition of his years of study but also reflected the Tang Dynasty's proactive export of ritual and music symbols and the overall dissemination strategy of building East Asian ritual cultural circles.

The Tang Six Codes: Honglu Temple Guest Office clearly recorded the posthumous arrangements for foreign personnel: the chief and deputy envoys of foreign missions, or leaders of third rank and above, had to report to the monarch, and funeral supplies were to be distributed by the government; For those of fourth rank and below, only vehicles were arranged for the funeral procession, without reporting to the emperor. The conversion standards were third rank for third rank, fourth and fifth rank for fourth class. According to the above, In Shinjō did not have the actual official rank of Chang'an and was classified as a fourth-rank foreign leader. Routine administrative procedures were only for the Ministry of Rites and Ministry of Rites to draft funeral standards and posthumous titles based on the unified standards of foreign tribes. News of In Shinjō's death alone was not necessarily reported to the emperor, and his funeral was conducted according to Tang dynasty customs for foreign officials, including writing epitaphs. Therefore, the epitaph recorded in the emperor's posthumous title for In Shinjō may be a case of the epitaph mentioning "the emperor's grief," but in reality, the title may have been determined by the official responsible for the work according to the usual rules and principles of posthumous titles. The epitaph may have been merely embellished and not personally witnessed by Emperor Xuanzong, or perhaps In Shinjō died due to a major sudden incident. Moreover, due to In Shinjō's significant contributions to the Tang dynasty, this incident alarmed Xuanzong, who, in his sorrow, personally issued an edict to confer the title. However, due to the lack of historical evidence and the discovery of new archaeological materials, these two views are merely speculations based on existing materials. Therefore, the issue of In Shinjō's official rank requires further research.

5. Interpretation of the author of the epitaph

The Tang dynasty established a clear official funeral handling process for foreign envoys and government-funded scholars who had passed away in Chang'an and Luoyang. The Bureau of Writings, the Zhenguan Office, and the Honglu Temple cooperated in a division of labor, jointly completing the writing, engraving, and placement of inscriptions. The Zhuozuo Lang and Zuo Lang were responsible for drafting the inscription documents uniformly and preparing general writing templates in advance to meet the bulk funeral needs of outsiders; the Zhen Guanshi undertook the practical work of stone carving and making funeral objects; the Honglu Temple's Dianke Office coordinated the entire process of living, studying, and posthumous

arrangements for outsiders in China, organizing basic archives and handing them over to the Literary Works Bureau for writing.

Who wrote the epitaph for In Shinjō ? The epitaph information for In Shinjō is brief, recording only surnames and courtesy names, lacking family background. The root cause is that the Honglu had limited registration materials for foreign students, unable to provide complete background information, so basic information could only be filled in with templates. At the end of the epitaph, "the form is buried in foreign soil, the soul returns to its homeland" was a common expression at the time in epitaphs, not written exclusively for Jing Zhen. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this standardized document template balanced Central Plains funeral traditions with the homesickness of outsiders, recording and transmitting Central Plains ritual and music culture while considering the emotional identification of outsiders, reducing psychological distance between civilizations. This was a gentle narrative approach in Tang dynasty official foreign cultural communication and reflected the dynasty's inclusive and considerate approach toward foreign cultural recipients.

The inscription's ending, "My form is buried in a foreign land, my soul returns to my homeland," is widely found in foreign inscriptions in the Western Regions and the Korean Peninsula, and belongs to the Bureau of Writings' pre-produced standardized universal script. From the perspective of cross-cultural narrative strategy, this sentence balances Central Plains funeral rites with overseas media and local sentiments, weakens psychological barriers between civilizations, and reduces the rejection of Central Plains ritual and musical symbols by outsiders. It is a typical example of Tang dynasty officials designing gentle narratives for external communication. The core narrative is fine-tuned based solely on the tomb owner's personal experience, confirming that the stele was not written by relatives or friends but is a formal official document carrying the Tang court's narrative of foreign civilization. The entire process proves that the Tang dynasty established an integrated management system covering foreign cultural media intervention, study tours, and posthumous matters. While adhering to the discourse of Central Plains ritual and music, it also considered foreign sentiments, adopted gentle and inclusive narrative strategies, and achieved a unity of institutional management and cultural dissemination, reflecting the mature techniques of medieval countries in external communication.

6. Conclusion

By combining the actual inscriptions on the In Shinjō stele with Chinese and Japanese texts, it is possible to fully reconstruct the cross-cultural transmission chain of the government-led ritual system in the 8th century between Tang and Japan: Japan formulated a policy of civilization transplantation based on Ritsuryō reforms, selecting professionals like In Shinjō to study ritual systems in Tang China; The Honglu Temple coordinated the daily management and ritual and music study channels for foreign trainees, allowing learners to absorb core systems such as imperial crowns and robes, after which relevant cultural norms returned to Japan for localization. At the same time, the Tang court established supporting preferential policies such as posthumous honorary titles and publicly funded burials, establishing a stable mechanism for two-way civilizational exchange. This institutionalized communication model, promoted jointly by the administrative systems of both countries, differs from scattered folk interactions and is the most mature form of cross-cultural exchange in Middle East Asia

Since the inscription was unearthed in 2004, current research has mostly focused on historical research on the tomb owner's name, identity, and posthumous official titles, with little explanation from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. Current research mainly focuses on modern transnational communication carriers, but there are still research gaps in typical cases of medieval official ritual system transmission. This stele inscription fills this gap, providing scarce physical evidence for analyzing pre-modern civilizational flows, intercultural adaptation, and dynastic strategies for foreign cultural export.

From a macro East Asian historical perspective, from the Taika Reform to the Nara period, Japan continuously sent missions to Tang China to fully absorb the Tang dynasty's political and ritual systems, with In Shinjō being a typical individual in this national-level civilization transplantation process. The historical facts recorded in the inscription, such as the eastward transmission of the crown and clothing system and the management and pension of foreign personnel, vividly demonstrate the cultural influence of the flourishing Tang dynasty on Northeast Asia and serve as firsthand archaeological evidence of equality and mutual learning between ancient Chinese and Japanese civilizations. Subsequent research can combine Nara clothing documents and Tang dynasty foreign inscription groups to clarify the complete transmission of the Tang crown and attire system into Japan, further uncover the interdisciplinary value of earth and stone carvings, and achieve the integrated development of cultural relic research and cross-cultural communication theory analysis.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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