Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan

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Introduction

SUSANNE FORMANEK and WILLIAM R. LAFLEUR

The Meaning of Life after Death

Among persons who like to think of themselves as “modern” there has for some time now been an implicit assumption that the whole concept of an afterlife is, at least for them, passé. They have the sense that a consistent rationality requires skepticism about life beyond death. And in addition, at least for persons in so-called “advanced” societies, their awareness of what is now theirs in terms of demonstrably extended life expectancies and in years replete with the “good,” material things of this world has contributed to the sense that it is no longer tasteful or even acceptable to leave with their equally “modern” peers the impression of having died somehow less than totally fulfilled. “Immortality” looks increasingly to be something empirically attainable within this life by means of a healthy lifestyle and medical technology that makes for “miracles” even if expensive.

Notions of an other world after death may, it is now often assumed, have been necessary for people in earlier epochs. They, after all, often died young and unexpectedly. Moreover, they – unlike ourselves – could not see such concepts for the feeble projections they really are. Things are vastly different now. To the extent that science now plays roles earlier filled by religion it has, many believe, pretty well shown that afterlives are simply beyond what can be demonstrated (Braun 1996:13–14).

We more or less expect this to be the case in the mainstream secular discourse. What may be surprising, however, is the extent to which even in the realm of theology earlier concepts of the afterlife and the other world have become more and more abstract – so much so that they are virtually void of any concrete content. This is especially so when it comes to the dark trajectories of afterlife. Within the Catholic Church, for instance, it is remarkable that the Second Vatican Council refur-
Rebirth and Immortality, Paradise and Hell - Conflicting Views of the Afterlife in Ancient Japan

CHRISTOPH KLEINE*

Immortality as a Soteriological Concept

When it comes to views of the afterlife in early Japan, most scholars distinguish roughly between imported Buddhist concepts and seemingly native ideas, sometimes rather misleadingly referred to as Shintoist concepts. Buddhist paradises and hells such as Amida's Sukhavati, Maitreya's Tuṣita, Avalokiteśvara's Potalaka, and the hell of King Yama are contrasted with allegedly indigenous concepts, such as Ne no kuni, Tokoyo no kuni, and Yomi no kuni. However, there is reason to suspect that the so-called indigenous views of the afterlife are in most cases modified Japanese adaptations of continental concepts. Since the earliest written sources which inform us about the "other worlds" (talmi) are known to be strongly influenced by Sino-Korean ideas, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct genuinely Japanese ideas from these sources (Earhart 1982:29, 31).

Among the obviously imported concepts of an afterlife there is one which largely dominated the soteriological aspiration of traditional Chinese religion, but is rarely mentioned in the context of Japanese reli-

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1 For instance, Barbara Ruch (1992:105ff.) does not even mention the possibility that concepts of realms of the dead, such as Tokoyo no kuni and Yomi no kuni, may have been imported from China or Korea but simply regards them as pre-Buddhist expressions of an indigenous Japanese belief in the postmortem existence of the tamashii (spirit).
One might ask whether "immortality," which will be the main focus of this paper, can actually be regarded as a kind of afterlife at all. The term suggests an everlasting life in this world rather than a postmortem existence in another. The concepts of immortality underwent various changes over the course of time, but in any case, immortality requires a person’s transformation. This transformation is so radical that it can in fact be described in terms of the immortal’s "having died" to his former existence as an ordinary human being; the "life" he will lead after this transformation is completely different from the lives of ordinary human beings who are, as a rule, not even able to perceive an immortal (Robins 1995:130–131). Thus, notwithstanding the fact that "the natural world of mortals was contiguous to supernatural realms inhabited by immortals" (Verellen 1998:363), the concept of immortality clearly implies a notion of transcendence and can in fact be regarded as a concept of the afterlife.

The prospect of immortality preoccupied the minds of many Chinese and inspired men of letters to collect numerous legends of immortals. It is somehow surprising, therefore, that the concept of immortality is hardly ever mentioned when people talk about soteriological ideas in early Japan. How could it be that the Japanese failed to adopt this important element of Chinese culture, while they otherwise eagerly absorbed all things Chinese? However, the concept of immortality was in fact introduced to Japan around the third century (Senda 1995:37), although it evidently never gained as much influence as in China. Notwithstanding, there exists one text from the Heian period which exclusively deals with immortals apparently following the Chinese model of shenxian zhuan or immortals’ legends. Based on an investigation of this unique document, I shall discuss the question as to what degree the Japanese intelligentsia of the Heian period was familiar with the Chinese concepts of immortality and how these concepts were integrated into the rhetoric of the religious discourse of Heian Japan.

The Honchô shinsenden

Around the year 1100 the former government counselor and man of letters Ōe no Masafusa (1041–1111) compiled a collection of originally some 37 “Accounts of Japanese Immortals.” Entitled Honchô shinsenden (hereafter: Shinsenden), this text openly reveals its dependence on a Chinese Daoist precursor, namely Ge Hong’s (261–341) “Accounts of Immortals” (Shenxian zhuan) written in the early fourth century. Accordingly, the reader would expect it to be a collection of hagiographic accounts of Daoist sages. Thus, one may be surprised to find Prince Shôtoku Taishi (572–621), Yamato-takeru-no-mikoto (ca. 81–113), the Buddhist masters Kûkai (774–835) and Ennin (794–864), the legendary Urashima no Ko (5th century?), En no Gyôja (634–?), a number of semi-historic founders of Buddhist temples, Buddhist hermits, and men of letters in the table of contents. This apparently incoherent group of protagonists and, above all, the dominance of thaumaturgic recluses, whom we would rather expect to find in Buddhist setsuwa tales, arouse suspicion with regard to the “purity” and consistency of Masafusa’s concept of immortality. Let us Therefore take a closer look at the contents of the stories.

Not surprisingly, in most cases it is said that the protagonist gained immortality or ascended to the rank of an immortal. The respective Chinese character, used to render this expression, is sen 仙, a character which represents a human being standing next to a mountain. Interestingly, however, the furigana attached to the character in several cases indicate that it should not be read sen, as one would expect, but hijiri. The term hijiri is normally used to denote an extramontastic Buddhist

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2 The meaning of the Chinese term xian, which is customarily translated as “immortality,” extends from extreme longevity in this world to existence in a paradisiacal, somewhat transcendental sphere, or even life in a heaven above. The most common concept in medieval China was that of a person who extends his life-span by means of drugs, gymnastics, breathing exercises, and certain sexual practices, etc., and who is, after several hundred years, transformed into some kind of celestial being who ascends to heaven and enters the earth at will.

3 The pre-modern Chinese never clearly distinguished between this world and another world, spirit and matter, physical and spiritual immortality; see also Bischoff, this volume, pp. 145ff. For the difficulty in distinguishing “real” death from a transformed life in traditional Japanese lore, see also Laffleur, this volume, pp. 494ff.

4 Unfortunately the original of Masafusa’s work is lost, but it has been possible to reconstruct 29 or 30 stories from the extant fragmentary copies of the text. For the Japanese text see the edition in NST 7; for an annotated translation of and commentary on this text see Kleine and Kohn (1999).
Furthermore, the furigana attached to the characters shinsen 神仙 in the Nihon shoki (hereafter: Nihongi) account of Tajima-mori’s trip to Tokoyo no kuni, “the mysterious (hidden land) of the hijiri [神仙],” actually indicate the substantial identity of immortals and hijiri. The terminological confusion, however, is further aggravated by the unusual reading of the compound 神仙 in the Shinsenden. According to the furigana, the compound is to be read ikibotoke, that is “living Buddha,” instead of shinsen.

In other words, a first formal inspection of the table of contents and the terminology used in the text makes us question whether these accounts are actually Daoist immortals’ stories or Buddhist setsuwa tales in disguise. In order to confirm or invalidate this, we need to examine the accounts more thoroughly especially with a view to clarifying whether Masafusa’s concept of immortality is compatible with the traditional Daoist notion.

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5 The relevant standard character is 僧. An investigation of medieval Japanese narratives reveals that the terms sen and hijiri were used more or less as synonyms inasmuch as both terms refer to pretty much the same types of people. It seems that the author’s decision as to which term to use depended chiefly on his own religious outlook or literary purpose. While referring to virtually the same signifiant, the signifiant “hijiri” had a more Buddhist connotation while the signifiant “sen” smacked of Daoism; see Kleine (1997).

6 In the Kojiki, Nihongi, and Man’yōshū, for instance; cf. Hori (1958:129–130); see also Kamstra (1967:448) and NKBT 67:280.

7 NKBT 67:281–282; in Kamstra’s (1967:448) translation the passage reads: “I have carried out the emperor’s order and went a long way over the weak water. This land of tokyo is the mysterious (hidden land) of the hijiri [是常世國, 則神仙】 inaccessable to ordinary people. My journey out and back has taken me ten years. Against expectations I braved high waves and returned to my own country. Thanks to the spirits of the imperial hijiri [hijiri no Mikado 聖帝] I was able, though with difficulty, to accomplish my return.”

8 This term, which is normally written 生佛, appears several times in the Shinsenden. Originally, the term ikibotoke was applied to eminent monks who were honored as if they had attained Buddhahood in their present incarnation.

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Chinese Concepts of Immortality

As indicated above, there are divergent notions of immortality which co-existed in traditional Chinese thought. Ge Hong’s somewhat paradigmatic classification of immortals is roughly as follows:

- First, we have the “earthly immortals (dixian 地仙)” who possess supernatural faculties but remain in this world, mostly voluntarily, because they do not want to give up worldly pleasures. Earthly immortals live in remote places, and ordinary men hardly have any chance to meet them. These immortals are also referred to as “hidden immortals (yindun xianren 隱遁仙人).”
- As a second category there are those who inhabit the distant realms of immortals, namely the mountain range Kunlun, the domain of Xi-wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. We may subsume those who dwell on the three Isles of Immortals, Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈, and Yingzhou 懿洲 in this category.
- Third, there is the highest class of so-called “heavenly immortals (tiānxian 天仙)” who “ascend to heaven in broad daylight 白日昇天” to occupy a rank in the hierarchy of celestial officials.

We may add a fourth category, namely those immortals who find the entrance to a paradise in a mountain cave, which is accordingly called “grotto heaven (dongtian 洞天).”

Let us now see which of these concepts can be found in Masafusa’s Shinsenden.

Specified Realms of Immortals and Concepts of Immortality in the Shinsenden

The three Isles of Immortals are mentioned in passing in the account of Yōshō’s disciple, who claims: “There is not one among the three mountains [of the immortals, i.e. Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou] or the five sacred peaks10 [of China] that I have not passed” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:169; NST 7:266/583b).

Penglai, or Hōraisan in Japanese, the most prominent among the three Isles of Immortals, is explicitly referred to in the famous legend of

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9 A description of the isles in the Daoist canon can be found in “The Record of the Ten Continents” (Shizhouji; DZ 1331); see Smith (1990).

10 The five sacred peaks are the highest mountains in central China, mainstays of the world as seen in Chinese sacred geography.
Urashima no Ko, which itself seems to be a variation of a legend from the Yangzi River Basin in the south of China (Senda 1995:40). The first part of the story goes as follows:

Urashima no Ko came from Mizumoe in the province of Tango. Once [when he was fishing] he caught a large tortoise which transformed itself into a woman. Her elegant appearance was incomparable and she became his wife. He was taken to Hōraian by her, and after they had arrived, he attained the supernatural power of longevity. There were towers of silver, palaces of gold, curtains of silk and walls of figured cloth. The music of the immortals [hijiri] followed the wind and the manifold food offerings increased daily. He stayed on the island for three years. In the first mildness of spring, flocks of birds harmoniously sang, smoke and mist floated [over the water], flowers and trees competed with each other in blooming (Kleine and Kohn 1999:183; NST 7:275/585b).

This is actually the only concrete description of a world beyond in the *Shinsenden*. The Chinese traditionally located Penglai beyond the eastern seashore of China, and at times even the identity of Hōraisan as Japan was suggested. This identification was apparently not only made because of Japan’s location in the Eastern Ocean but also because of the abundant amount of mercury found there. Mercury was highly esteemed by the Chinese as the most important component of a mineral drug believed to be an elixir of immortality. According to a famous Chinese legend, the emperor Shi Huangdi (246-207 B.C.) sent the Daoist magician Xufu to the east in order to acquire immortality drugs (Bauer 1989:104). Although he himself was not successful, Xufu’s example inspired many Daoist alchemists especially in the Tang and Song dynasties, known as the “golden age of alchemy.” The “fascination exerted by the pure mercury of Japan” (von Verschuer 1995:440) certainly played a decisive role in the assimilation of Japan to Penglai or Hörai by the Chinese. When the Xufu legend became known in Japan, it exerted a strong fascination exerted by the pure mercury of Japan” (von Verschuer 1995:440) certainly played a decisive role in the assimilation of Japan to Penglai or Hörai by the Chinese. When the Xufu legend became known in Japan, it exerted a strong influence on the development of Japanese alchemy. Some texts claim that Urashima no Ko entered the “Dragon Palace” (ryūgū), which was thought to be located beneath the sea. Some versions of the legend explicitly equate Tokoyo no kuni and Hōraisan, and later versions identify the place in the sea as the Dragon Palace. The Dragon King’s daughter is then identified as Otohime; cf. MacCulloch (1937:264). Another famous is the legend of Hōrai-san’s trip to the Dragon Palace where he marries Toyo-tama-hime, the Dragon King’s daughter. The Dragon King appears to be a version of the nāga king Sāgara mentioned in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The connection of the Dragon King with the Buddhist nāgas is confirmed in the story by the fact that he is described as someone who controls the waters (NKBT 67:163ff; Aston 1993:92ff; NST 1:105ff.; Philipp 1977:150ff; Naumann 1996:165ff).

Interestingly, the *Nihongi* account of Urashima no Ko equates Hōraisan with Tokoyo no kuni, the Eternal Land beyond the sea, by adding the interlinear *kana* “Tokoyo no kuni” to the characters 蓬莱山 which usually read “Hōraisan.” Another passage in the *Nihongi* indicates that yet another nether land, namely Ne no kuni, which shares many similarities with Tokoyo no kuni, is located in the sea. According to the *Nihongi*, Izanagi and Izanami appointed their son Susanoo as the ruler of Ne no kuni, saying:

Supposing that thou wert to rule this country, much destruction of life would surely ensue. Thou must govern the far-distant Nether Land [Ne no kuni] (NKBT 67:88-89, 96-97; Aston 1993:20, 32-33).

Normally, Tokoyo no kuni is believed to be located in the east, just as Hōraisan. Miyata Noboru (1988:179) argues that the ancient Yamato

11 Modern Kyūto-fū. According to the *Nihongi* the boy came from Tsukukaha in the district of Yosa of Tanba province, instead (NKBT 67:497; Aston 1993:368).

12 The tortoise symbolizes longevity.
people identified the Eternal Land with the area of Hitachi 日立 ("where the sun rises;" modern Ibaraki Prefecture), which is east of the Yamato area. Both *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*, however, suggest that Tokoyo no kuni could be reached from the coast of Kumano (modern Wakayama Prefecture).\(^{15}\)

When an imperial expedition in search of "a fair land encircled on all sides by blue mountains," of which Jinmu Tennō had heard from the "Ancient of the Sea" (NKBT 67:189; Aston 1993:110), reached the village of Kami in Kumano they, ...

... embarked in the rock-boat of Heaven [...] In the midst of the sea, they suddenly met with a violent wind, and the imperial vessel was tossed about. Then Ina-iihi-no-mikoto exclaimed and said: "Alas! my ancestors were Heavenly Deities, and my mother was a Goddess of the Sea. Why do they harass me by land, and why moreover do they harass me by sea?" When he had said this, he drew his sword and plunged into the sea, where he became changed into the God Sabi-mochi.

Mike-irino-no-mikoto, also indignant at this, said: "My mother and my aunt are both Sea-Goddesses: why do they raise great billows to overwhelm us?" So treading upon the waves, he went to the Eternal Land (NKBT 67:194–195; Aston 1993:114).

Certainly not just by pure coincidence, in the town Shingū in Kumano, a shrine called Jofuku jinja or "Xufu Shrine" was built on a hill called Hōraisan (von Verschuer 1995:441; Nakamura 1990:10). Furthermore, it was also believed that Avalokiteśvara’s or Kannon’s paradise Potalaka (Jap. Fudaraku) was located beyond the seashore of Kumano.\(^{16}\) This belief engendered a peculiar custom of religiously motivated suicide known as *Fudaraku tokai* in the process of which people tried to reach Potalaka by boat (Kabanoff 1999:50–53).\(^{17}\) I think it is safe to assume that Potalaka came to be associated with the seashore of Kumano because this place had already a reputation as the gate to both Hōraisan and Tokoyo no kuni.\(^{18}\)

Why then does the Urashima legend suggest that the land of immortals, Hōraisan or Tokoyo no kuni, was accessible from Tango, when this apparently contradicts the more widespread belief that a paradisiacal realm of immortals was off the coast of Kumano? First of all, sacred geography rarely tends to be consistent, and the premodern Japanese did not seem to have any problem in identifying more than one place with a specific other world (Kleine 1999). For instance, as was the case with Tokoyo no kuni, the exact location of Potalaka was not entirely clear to the Japanese. From the seventh century on, at the latest, there existed the belief that Potalaka was located off the coast of Kumano (Nakamura 1990:12). In addition, Nikkō and the great waterfall of Nachi were also associated with Potalaka. Furthermore, Kamo no Chōmei (1153–1216) in his *Hosshinshū* (III.5; compiled ca. 1211–1216) tells the story of a man who first decides to burn himself, like the Bodhisattva Kiken in his *Hosshinshū* (III.5; compiled ca. 1211–1216) tells the story of a man who first decides to burn himself, like the Bodhisattva Kiken (Skt. Sarvasattvapriyadarśana) did in chapter 23 of the Lotus Sūtra,\(^{19}\) in order to achieve birth in the Pure Land but later gave up this plan and set out for the coastal province of Tosa instead, from where he went south on a boat in search of Potalaka, which he thought really existed in this world and was accessible in this body (Miki 1976:137–138). It should be noted here that the notion of reaching a paradisiacal realm in this present body hints strongly at a connection with the belief in a physical transformation which is typical of Daoist immortality lore but not of Buddhist concepts of rebirth in a transcendental realm.

Secondly, we may assume that a certain tradition existed according to which a realm of immortals existed in the west. The account of En no Gyōja in the *Shinsenden*, for instance, provides a somewhat obscure hint that a land of immortals may as well be located beyond the Sea of Japan, namely in Korea:

Later Gyōja climbed into an iron begging bowl with his mother and set off across the ocean and left. Using neither boat nor raft, nobody knew where they went. [...] Much later a priest from our country [Japan] by the name of Dōshō [629–700] went to Koryō to lecture on the dharma. Among the

\(^{15}\) Furthermore, the *Nihongi* claims that Izanami was buried in the village of Arima in Kumano, and Sukunahikona is said to have entered the netherworld from Misaki in the same province (Eder 1978b:55). This indicates an early connection of Kumano with the other world.

\(^{16}\) According to the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (translated by Śikṣānanda; T 10:366c), Potalaka is located in the sea south of India, but the Chinese equated it with the island of Putuo Shan off the coast of Zhejiang to the east of China (Saddakata 1997:114).

\(^{17}\) Senda (1995:42) interprets these voyages of death to the destination of Buddhist Putuoluo as evolving from the concept of *shenxian.*

\(^{18}\) For the connection between Fudaraku, Hōraisan and Tokoyo no kuni in the Kumano cult, see also the chapter on "Fudaraku to Tokoyo no kuni" in Gorai (1995).

\(^{19}\) This story served as the main model of religiously motivated suicide or self-sacrifice which was a widespread but disputed practice in China; see Gernet (1960); Filliozat (1963); Jan (1965); Maegowan (1988); Kleine (forthcoming).
listeners there was one who spoke Japanese. He was Gyōja, although over a hundred years had passed since his departure (Kleine and Kohn 1999: 150–151; NST 7: 259/581a). 20

Although in this story no specific other world is mentioned explicitly, it seems to correspond to a common belief that identified some place in the west beyond the sea as a realm of immortals. The Konjaku monogatari (11/3) version of the story claims that En no Gyōja dwelled among “five-hundred masters of the Dao (doji 道師)” in Silla 21, which seems to support our assumption that some people believed that the wizard dwelled among immortals in Korea. Again, the account of the official and man of letters Tachibana no Masamichi in the Shinsenden also suggests that Korea was a favorite place of immortals. Masafusa reports that, “Some say that [Masamichi] crossed over into Koryō where he attained the rank of an immortal (hijiri 仙)” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:178; NST 7:272/585a).

Furthermore, the Nihongi and Kojiki accounts of Tajima-mori, who was purportedly sent to the Eternal Land by emperor Suinin in the year 61 A.D. to procure the fruit of immortality (tokijiku no kakunomi 非時香菓) (NKBT 67:279), 22 suggests that the Eternal Land might in fact have been identified as Korea. Tajima-mori was of Korean extraction and it seems reasonable to assume that the emperor sent him to the country of his ancestors to obtain the fruit, although some claim that he went to China. 23 Moreover, the motif of this story is roughly identical to the legend of Xufu. Hence, we may suspect that Tokoyo no kuni in the Tajima-mori account means in fact the same as Penglai. The assumption that Tajima-mori went westward to the land of his ancestors (Silla) and that this was equated with the Eternal Land (Tokoyo no kuni or Penglai) makes sense, even in geographical terms, when we take into consideration what Ennin writes in his diary about the location of Penglai:

Northeast from Mt. Ch’ih [in modern Shandong] more than a hundred li across the sea a mountain can be seen in the distance. It is called Mt. Ch’ing. Three peaks stand in row indistinctly in the distance. This was the place where the First Emperor of the Ch’in [i.e. Shi Huangdi] built a bridge over the ocean. From this mountain the First Emperor saw to the east Mt. P’eng-lai (Reischauer 1955:136).

A quick glance at a map suffices to establish that the Korean Peninsula lies right between the coast of Shandong and Japan. Given that the author of the Tajima-mori account had some geographical knowledge, he may have logically concluded that what was to the east from the standpoint of Shi Huangdi or Ennin may well be in the west from the perspective of Japan. Thus, the story’s implicit assertion that the realm of immortals – whether called Tokoyo no kuni or Penglai – may be located in the west, is at least when seen independently from other mentions of that realm in the Nihongi, not as strange as it may seem at first sight.

Furthermore, as Senda (1995:38) suggests, it may “have occurred to people that the culturally advanced, ideal land existed across the sea in China.” In addition, the Buddhists held that the paradise Sukhāvati, the domain of the Buddha Amida, was located in the west. It should be re-

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20 The account of his journey with his mother in an iron begging bowl is peculiar to the Shinsenden. The motif of using a bowl or cup as a vessel seems to be quite old, however, Huijiao (497–554) in his “Biographies of Eminent Monks” (Gaoseng zhuang), for instance, renders the story of the wine-drinking and meat-eating monk Beidu杯度 (“Cup Crosser”) who crossed a river in a cup in order to escape his persecutors (T 80:390b). The faculty of flying in a begging bowl is also ascribed to Huizi(515–577). Also, a Song text entitled Nanyue zongsheng ji (“Collection of all the Beautiful Spots on the Southern Peak”; T#2097), claims that the Zhibo Feng 極貧峯 (“Throwing-Almsbowl-Peak”) on Mt. Nanyue owes its name to the “fact” that Huizi once “threw his almsbowl into the air and rode it to the capital to meet with the emperor” (Robson 1995:256; see T 51:1062b).

21 Masafusa may have confused Koryō and Silla here, probably because in his days the Korean peninsula was ruled by the Koryō dynasty (936–1392).

22 Tokijiku no kakunomi refers to a peach which in China is regarded as a fruit of the immortals, the eating of which has the effect of “not getting old and [obtaining] long life” (Nakamura 1990:10).

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23 The Kojiki identifies Tajima-mori as descendent of Ame-no-hihoko, ruler of Silla (NST 1:223; Philippi 1977:293). Tajima-mori’s saying, “Against expectations I braved high waves and returned to my own country” (Kamstra 1967:448), seems to support this view. It is not entirely clear, however, whether moto no kuni 本土 refers to the country of Tajima-mori’s ancestors or to the country from where he started his trip (i.e. Japan). It must be noted that the ancient Japanese did not always clearly distinguish between the Korean peninsula and China. The character 地 (kara), for instance, was used to denote Korea as well as Tang China, or any foreign country (Morohashi 1957:1023b). Aston (1993:186) claims that: “Tajima Mori was apparently selected for this mission on account of his descent from a king of Silla. But the Tokoyo no Kuni, or Eternal Land, can hardly have been Korea, where the orange is little, if at all, grown in the present day. It was more likely China.” See also Papinot (1992:627).
membered here that one of the two aspects of Amida is “Infinite Life” (Skt. Amitāyus; Jap. Muryōju 無量寿) — the other being “Infinite Light” (Skt. Amitābha; Jap. Muryōkō 無量光). Finally, the Chinese believed, as we have already seen, that there was a western realm of immortals ruled by the Queen Mother of the West.

In addition to the apparent similarities of various other worlds, regardless of their location, the actual burial praxis of ancient Japan may have contributed to a certain disregard for geographical consistency. Many scholars maintain that the belief in other-worldly realms beyond the sea must be seen in connection with the ancient custom of abandoning corpses in caves by the sea, for which reason (or vice versa?) people thought that the souls of the deceased flew off from their grave sites to some unknown other world beyond the sea (Haussig and Schmalzriedt 1986:137–138). In some cases, the corpses were actually put in boats (Senda 1995:39); even today coffins are sometimes called norifune (boat to be entered) or simply fune (boat). In addition, uninhabited islands were chosen as gravesites (Eder 1978a:81, 83). Thus, it seems only natural that all Japanese living near the coast were inclined to claim that the other world was accessible from their respective shores.

A quite confusing blend of concepts concerning the afterlife is presented by Masafusa in his account of the Buddhist monk Nichizō. The story ends as follows:

Later, one morning he [i.e. Nichizō] returned to the [world of the yellow] springs 墮泉. His body was lowered into the coffin, but then all of a sudden his corpse was gone. Some claim that he attained deliverance from the corpse [kabane tokete 墮解]²⁴ and left (Kleine and Kohn 1999:183; NST 7:275/585b).

There are two distinguishable concepts contained in this brief passage: Firstly, the typically Daoist concept of an apparent death and deliverance from the corpse (shijie 戰解) which appears in Chinese immortality legends with topological frequency.²⁵ The protagonist seems to be dead but has actually attained immortality leaving a magically created corpse behind which is de facto usually a stick, a sword, or the hermit’s sandals.²⁶ Secondly, we have the concept of a subterranean realm of the dead named “Land of the Yellow Springs,” which is surprising in this context. Its etymologically obscure Japanese reading Yomi no kuni conceals the original meaning of the Chinese term “Land of the Yellow Springs” which is, however, preserved in the characters 黃泉国 used to designate Yomi no kuni.²⁷ This gloomy underworld was considered to be quite an unpleasant place by both Chinese²⁸ and Japanese. Under Buddhist influence, Yomi no kuni was at times even equated with the hell of King Yama.²⁹ The prospect of a miserable existence in the underworld of the dead seems to contradict Nichizō’s auspicious attainment of “deliverance from the corpse.”

There are several possible explanations for this apparent contradiction: Firstly, Masafusa may have simply regarded the term “Land of the Yellow Springs” as an umbrella term denoting death in general or any kind of other world.³⁰ Secondly, he might have adhered to the ancient Chinese belief that a person’s po 魂 or “body soul” was bound to descend to the gloomy “Land of the Yellow Springs” after death, whereas his hun 魂 or “spirit soul” ascended to heaven. This second explanation, however, is hardly compatible with the traditional concept of “deliver-

²⁴ All three objects are emblems of the Daoist hermit (Robinet 1995:151), but found their way into Buddhist hagiography as well.

²⁵ This is a Japanese reading of the Chinese Daoist technical term shijie.

²⁶ A list of shijie accounts in Buddhist literature is provided by Campany (1996:329, n. 150).

²⁷ For the Chinese concept of the “Land of the Yellow Springs” see Loewe (1979:10-11); Bauer (1989:273). In Japan, Yomi no kuni was connected with Kumano, as was Tokoyo no kuni. “The Nihon shoki [...] states that the god of Yomi no kuni (the land of the dead) was buried on Mt. Kumano. Such a belief added further mystery and awe to the deeply isolated mountain” (Matsumaga and Matsunaga 1974:242).

²⁸ “[...] from the eighth century BC the Chinese had envisaged the existence of the subterranean world known as the Huang ch’üan, or Yellow Springs. This world was populated by p’au; it existed in parallel with the paradise to which the hun tried to proceed, and was likewise characterized by an hierarchical form of existence. But unlike the life that was enjoyed under the aegis of Shang ti, existence in the Yellow Springs was miserable. Souls were held as wretched prisoners in bondage within the gaol of Hou t’ien, Lord or Queen of the Earth” (Loewe 1979:10-11).

²⁹ See, for instance, the story of Kashiwade no Omi Hirokuni in the Nihon ryöiki I/30, where Zhuangzi’s “Southern Land” (Tonan no kuni) is identified both with Yomi no kuni and with the realm of King Yama (Nakamura 1997:49–50).

³⁰ Kamstra (1967:452) maintains that “complete identification could eventually come about between yomi no kuni and all other lands of the dead [...]”. At times, Japanese authors have actually even equated Yomi no kuni with Tokoyo no kuni (Kohn 1995:399).
ance of the corpse." On the other hand there are Chinese texts according to which someone who had attained “deliverance from the corpse” dwells under the earth instead of entering the mountains or ascending to heaven as is usually the case (Robinet 1995:151). As with most stories in narrative literature of old Japan the account of Nichizō fails to provide a consistent idea of the other world.

In the Shinsenden we have yet another story in which the protagonist, Lay Recluse Gyöei, apparently attains deliverance from the corpse:

Thereupon he went off to the east. When he reached Mt. Otoba he spontaneously passed away leaving only his straw sandals and his staff behind. Later people thought he had ended his life there, so they divided his sandals, one to hang above the waterfall of his original temple and the other on Mt. Otoba (Kleine and Kohn 1999:157; NST 7:260/581b).

Quite a similar story is told about Ennin in the Shinsenden:

When the time came for him to die, he suddenly disappeared and was nowhere to be seen. His disciples looked for him everywhere, but they found nothing but his sandals which had fallen into a ravine on Mt. Nyoji (NST 7:265/583a).31

Leaving behind one’s sandals is, as indicated above, a common topos of immortals’ legends also frequently found in Buddhist hagiography. The First Emperor of the Qin, for instance, purportedly left behind his hemp sandals when he passed away on Mt. Qing just to the west of Fozu tongji (Kleine and Kohn 1999:156-157; NST 7:260/581b). Furthermore, the Fozu tongji32 claims that in the year after Bodhidharma’s death a messenger called Song Yun met the deceased with one of his sandals in his hand. When Song Yun reported this incidence to Bodhidharma’s disciples they opened his grave where they found nothing but the other sandal.

In summary, the Shinsenden hardly ever mentions any specific realm of immortals where the protagonists go after their “transformation.” “Grotto heavens” appear nowhere in the text, although caves actually do play a role in the Shinsenden, but only inasmuch as they are the favorite dwelling places of mountain ascetics. The custom of dwelling and practicing austerities in caves is in all likelihood historically connected with the idea of caves as entrances to the other world. However, there is no reason to suspect that Masafusa had the concept of “grotto heavens” in mind when he described some of his immortals as cave-dwellers. The idea of grotto heavens was primarily developed by the Daoist school of “Supreme Purity” (shangqing) (Robinet 1995:191) which obviously did not exert any influence on Masafusa.

Further Immortality Motifs

There are a few immortals which are – in accordance with the “encounter motif” of Daoist literature – met by wandering practitioners under wondrous circumstances in some remote area, usually in the deep mountains. The account of the above-mentioned Lay Recluse Gyöei clearly belongs to this type of stories:

The Lay Recluse Gyöei was the original resident of Kiyomizudera in Higashiyama. Although he lived for several hundred years, only few visitors came [during this time], and he made constant practice of refinement the main focus [of his life], living in purity, never marrying but abstaining from rice and avoiding grains. [...] Later he met the Great Master Höon. He passed on to him the Buddha [image] he possessed as well as his place of residence, saying: “I have been waiting for your coming. You shall be the lord of this place and spread the Buddha dharma. I [on the other hand] will go to benefit the barbarians and therefore will settle in the eastern provinces (Kleine and Kohn 1999:156–157; NST 7:260/581b).

A story of the same type explains the beginnings of Onjöji (or Miidera), and it is obvious that Masafusa resorted to engi legends here, which he thought might fit in the Shinsenden pattern:

The monk Kyötai came from the district of Shiga […]. Although he was several hundred years old, he still looked very young. […] Later he met the great master Chishō [i.e. Enchin] and handed over the abbacy of Onjöji Temple to him, saying: “I have waited for your coming, maintaining this marvelous place [for you]. May you now spread the Buddha [teaching] everywhere!” This affair concluded, he was seen no more (Kleine and Kohn 1999:158; NST 7:260–261/581b).

In contrast to the standard Daoist “encounter story,” those in the Shinsenden focus on the transmitter of the sacred ground rather than on the recipient of any kind of immortality drug, recipe, instruction, scripture or the like.33 Some of the immortals of that type, strange as they may be, are apparently of flesh and blood, but can nevertheless only be en-

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31 I apologize for the mistake in the translation of that passage in Kleine and Kohn (1999:166).

32 A genealogical record of Buddhist patriarchs compiled by Zhipan in 1269; T 49:291b.

33 In another story, however, Höon is the protagonist (Kleine and Kohn 1999:159).
countered by advanced adepts of mountain asceticism or immortality techniques.\textsuperscript{34} They can perhaps be classified as “earthly or hidden immortals,” and what qualifies them as immortals is their longevity and (almost) traceless disappearance. A miraculous transformation into a real immortal is indicated but no specific other world is mentioned.

As we have seen, the postmortum whereabouts of most of Masafusa’s immortals remain unclear. Most of them simply disappeared or flew away and were not seen anymore. The ability to fly is the most typical and indispensable feature of an immortal and a visible sign of his successful transformation. The monk Taichô, for instance could cover a distance of a thousand miles in just a moment and “without wings he was able to fly” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:152; NST 7:259/581a). Likewise, “Great Master [Hoon] often was at Kojima in the morning and came to Kiyomizu at noon. Although he had no wings, it was as if he was flying” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:159; NST 7:261/581b). Shôtoku Taishi even “ascended to heaven in the broad daylight” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:148; NST 7:258/580b), a technical term which usually denotes the highest form of transformation into an immortal.\textsuperscript{35}

It should be noted in this context that the earliest Chinese ideas of xian or immortals defined them as celestial or angel-like beings, covered with feathers.\textsuperscript{36} In the Shinseinden, there is at least one allusion to the notion of feathered celestial beings. It reports that: “[The lad of the venerable Chûsan] gave up all food for several months, made himself a robe of feathers [hafuku], and lived in free spontaneity” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:176; NST 7:272/585a). It needs no excessive imagination to see a connection between the idea of a “spirit soul” that ascends to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} See, for instance, the story of Jôzô’s encounter on Mt. Ômine: “The monk [looked at him and] said: “As you have managed to get this close to me, you must be a most excellent sort of person.” He then performed a kaji ritual to extinguish the fire. Later he explained that he was one of the shinse japon and gave Jôzô a persimmon fruit to eat” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:174; NST 7: 270, 584b).
\item \textsuperscript{35} It must be noted however, that this technical term is here used in a somewhat unorthodox way, i.e. not as a transformation into an immortal but as a way of supernatural locomotion. There is yet another account of a (vain) attempt to “ascend to heaven in broad daylight.” With a humorous undertone Masafusa tells the story of a monk from Tôji who was dropped by the yaksa demon who had been carrying him on his back, and fell to the ground (Kleine and Kohn 1999:178–179; NST 7:272–273/585a).
\item \textsuperscript{36} This image of flying beings is well preserved in the older version of the character xian 僧, which shows a figure dancing with flying sleeves.
\end{itemize}

heaven after death, flying celestial beings covered with feathers, the feathered robes of the immortals, and birds. Especially white cranes – just like tortoises and deer – in China symbolized immortality. Accordingly, the death of a master of the Dao was frequently depicted as a transformation into a bird. This motif appears in the Shinseinden account of Yamato-takeru-no-mikoto, the legendary military commander and national hero of the Yamato people who subjugated hostile tribes as well as obnoxious deities. Masafusa concludes that, “Yamato was no ordinary human being. After his death,” says Masafusa, “he transformed into a white bird and flew away” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:145; NST 7:257/580b), which clearly qualified him as an immortal.

**Immortality Techniques and Methods**

According to Chinese immortality lore, the final transformation into an immortal takes much time and can only be attained by means of a long period of physical and spiritual refinement. Hence, longevity is a precondition for the attainment of immortality (Robinet 1995:151). The ability to fly is regarded as a clear indication of an adept’s advanced state of refinement. Accordingly, levitation is perhaps the most prominent feature of an advanced practitioner of immortality methods.

The Chinese knew various means by which to attain the faculty of flying. The first and most basic step was abstinence from heavy food in order to refine the body and lose weight. Consequently, many of the protagonists of the Shinseinden lived a strict diet. For instance, the bodies of the disciples of the famous ascetic Zoga, who practiced the methods of the immortals on Mt. Atago, were so weightless “that they could tread very lightly so that even a very thin board would not crack under their feet” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:180; NST 7:273–274/585b). Temporary or permanent abstinence from certain or all kinds of food, however, had become a common practice among Buddhist hermits in China, too. Especially abstinence from grain (propagated in the Zhuangzi already) was regularly practiced by anchorites, although this diet is not to be found among the classical set of twelve Buddhist ascetic options known as dhâtunga. As food connected with the earth principle grains were deemed heavy (Robinet 1995:147). Abstention from grain, however, was not only held in order to attain a light body and finally the supernatural faculty of levitation, but also because it directly contributed to the attainment of longevity by starving out the Three Deathbringers (sanshi 三劫) which dwell in the human body and shorten
one's life-span. Hence, starving out the sanshi by means of abstention from grain was an important step towards the attainment of longevity.\footnote{Cf. Güntsch (1988:101). In addition, grain was associated with civilization, from which Daoists wanted to retreat (Seidel 1989–1990:260).}

In addition to abstention from certain kinds of food, Chinese immortality texts recommend various herbs, mushrooms, or mineral drugs.\footnote{According to Akahori (1989:78), “Twenty-three immortals [out of 92 in Ge Hong’s Shenxian zhuan] are described as drug-takers. Among the crude drugs used are pine seeds, pine resin, fungus, mica, and zhu. Ten of the twenty-three supplemented their drug intake with other methods, such as breathing exercises, talismans, and elixirs.” According to the Shenxian zhuan account of Peng Zi, the Chinese “Methuselah”, among the drugs only gold and cinnabar can enable the practitioner to “ascend to heaven in the broad daylight” (Güntsch 1988:54–55).} These drugs, which guaranteed longevity and levitation, were well known in Heian Japan, too, as we know from medicinal works such as Tanba no Yasuyori’s (912–995) Ishinpō from the tenth century. Viewed in the light of the significance of drug usage in Chinese texts dealing with immortals, the lack of any description of herbal or mineral drugs or mushrooms in the Shinseinden is remarkable. There is only one story in which the usage of unspecified drugs is mentioned:

The Stick-Beaten immortal [hijiri] came from the province of Yamato. Although he had studied immortality, his ordinary bones were yet heavy.\footnote{As opposed to his immortals’ bones, which he may have but needs to uncover or to which he yet has to refine his ordinary frame.} However, with the help of various medicines, he managed to lift off the earth and fly. Since he could not [rise] any higher than seven or eight shaku [2.45–2.80 m], the little children chased him about and beat him with a stick. Thence his name. Nobody knows what became of him (Kleine and Kohn 1999:175; NST 7:271/584b).

Besides drug taking, the Chinese precursors of Masafusa’s Shinseiden recommended a number of other classical methods conducive to the attainment of immortality, such as gymnastics, breathing exercises, the usage of charms and spells, and certain sexual practices (Maspero 1971:295–317). Interestingly, Masafusa does not specify any of these indispensable methods, but speaks only in very general terms of immortals’ techniques. According to Masafusa, Miyako no Yoshika, for instance, “practiced the methods of the immortals” and finally “entered the mountains in search of immortals and the cultivation of their techniques” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:171–173; NST 7:269/584a). A certain innate disposition toward immortality – often visible as bodily signs such as horns on the forehead or immortal’s bones – was accepted by Chinese authors as well; but a would-be immortal had to cultivate this disposition by the above mentioned methods. In agreement with this view, the Shinseiden tells the story of the Minister of Kawara-in who had “immortal’s bones” but was unable to attain immortality because he was not prepared to forsake his worldly life (Kleine and Kohn 1999:169–170; NST 7:267–267/583b).

What then did Masafusa’s more successful protagonists do in order to cultivate their potential? In short, most of them did nothing which an ordinary Buddhist anchorite would not have done. En no Gyōja and the nun Toran “cultivated the Buddha dharma (buppō)”, Yōshō’s disciple “practiced the way of the Buddha (butsudō) and eventually attained longevity” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:149, 154–155, 168; NST 7:258/581a, 260/581b, 266/583a), and so forth.

The Shinseiden in Context

Aims of the Work

Let us now pick up the questions posed at the beginning: What did Masafusa know about the Chinese concepts of immortality and how did he deal with them?

I think it is safe to assume that Masafusa was familiar with Ge Hong’s “Accounts of Immortals” and it is clear that he was – at least superficially – acquainted with the concepts of the “Three Isles of Immortals,” “apparent death,” “deliverance from the corpse,” and “ascension to heaven in the broad daylight.” Nevertheless, these concepts are mentioned only rarely and mostly in passing. Furthermore, quite unlike Ge Hong, Masafusa seems to be completely disinterested in specific methods and techniques which supposedly lead to the attainment of immortality. I think there are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, Daoism and the related immortality lore never really gained a foothold in Japan as an independent and organized cult,\footnote{“The Taoist religion was never officially introduced and never established any clerical organization in Japan. The Japanese delegates who went to the T’ang court in the eighth century belonged to a pro-Buddhist faction and, whatever they may have seen in Taoism, it is clear that they did not want to import it. In 753 they refused Emperor Hsüan-tsung’s offer to send Taoist masters to Japan” (Seidel 1989–1990: 301–302).} and Masafusa, unlike Ge Hong, was obviously not intending to promote such a
cult. In my opinion he simply wanted to prove that the Japanese were both capable of becoming immortals and of writing stories about them, just like the Chinese. The obvious fact that the Shinsenden is not designed as an edifying didactic collection of narratives, may be the main reason for its incoherence regarding views of the afterlife; an incoherence which, on the other hand, perhaps reflects the actual religious attitudes of the vast majority of the Japanese at that time much better than the strictly Buddhist edifying narratives of the ojöden (Chin. wangsheng zhuan, “accounts of births in the Pure Land”) genre, for instance.

Secondly, in order to provide evidence of a Japanese person’s potential to become immortal, he had to retell already existing stories which were at the same time deemed historical and therefore trustworthy, and marvelous enough to be convincing. However, since an organized and literally productive immortality cult did not exist in Heian Japan, he had to resort to old Japanese myths and legends, and, above all, Buddhist tales.

One of the most interesting questions, I think, is why Masafusa chose certain stories and – as would seem at first sight – forced them into the immortality pattern while neglecting others which could have served his needs just as well. Were his protagonists possibly regarded as immortals at that time and only lost that image later due to the dominance of a Buddhist rhetoric in “hagiography?”

**Earlier Traces of Immortality Concepts in Japanese Literature**

However incoherent the list of protagonists in the Shinsenden may seem, Masafusa’s selection was by no means arbitrary. We do not need to speak of Urashima no Ko whose visit to Hōraisan was described in the Nihongi and Man'yōshū already. According to the Nihongi and Kojiki, Yamato-takeru-no-mikoto transformed into a white bird and flew away just like a transformed Daoist master. According to the Nihongi account, he evidently attained deliverance from the corpse:

41 The Nihongi and the Jinnō shōtōki have it that Yamato-takeru died at the age of 30 and that the white bird “flew over to Kotohiki-no-Hara in Yamato” and then “again to Furuiehi in Kawachi.” In both places, in addition to Nobo in Ise, tombs or tumuli were erected (NKBT 67:310–311; Aston 1993:210–211). The Kojiki claims that the white bird flew away several times from the places where he was supposed to be buried (Philippi 1977:25; NST 1:190–191); it does not mention the opening of the coffin but indicates that Yamato-takeru-no-mikoto did not stay in his mausoleum:

Now Yamato-dake no Mikoto, taking the shape of a white bird, came forth from Misasagi, and flew towards the Land of Yamato. The Ministers accordingly opened the coffin, and looking in, saw that only the empty clothing remained, and that there was no corpse (Aston 1993:210–211; NKBT 67:310–311).

In the light of such miraculous occurrences, “how could one think,” asks Masafusa, “that he did not belong to the sort of the ‘divine immortals (ikibotoko no taguhi 神仙之類)?’” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:145; NST 7:257/580b).

Unfortunately, the final part of Shōtoku’s account in the Shinsenden is lost, but evidently it was a widespread belief that the prince had attained some kind of immortality. Both Nihongi and Nihon ryōiki call Shōtoku a hijiri (NKBT 68:204–205), a denotation which, as we have seen, was in early times almost a synonym of “immortal.” Kyōkai in the Nihon ryōiki (1/5) claims that Shōtoku after his death received the elixir of life from a miraculous monk (Nakamura 1997:114). Yoshishige no Yasutane (–997) in his Nihon ōjō gokurakuki claims that Shōtoku’s corpse was as light as garments which may indicate the concept of “deliverance from the corpse.”

42 Yasutane himself firmly believed in Shōtoku’s ōjō, however. Here again the question must be raised whether the distinction between ōjō and transformation into an immortal was actually that clear cut in Heian Japan. As Kamstra (1967:457) has demonstrated, the Tenjukoku mandara 天壽國曼荼羅 (“Mandala of the Land of Heavenly Long Life”), an embroidered mandala dedicated to Shōtoku’s memory by his widow, combines elements which hint both at Shōtoku’s ōjō and at his eternal life in a realm of immortals.

En no Gyōja is the prototype of a wizard and immortal per se, although he was later occupied by Buddhism when the syncretic Shugendō movement was institutionalized as branches of Tendai and Shingon esotericism, without, however, losing its many Daoist elements. As a powerful thaumaturgist En no Gyōja was capable of controlling local
deities and flew away to an unknown place in the west instead of dying and leaving a corpse behind.

The Shingon founder Kūkai was not only venerated as an exceptional Buddhist saint endowed with supernatural powers. It was also believed that he had not died but that he was still living, absorbed in samādhi (nyūjō) in the Inner Shrine (Oku-no-in) on Mt. Kōya. As an early legend of Kūkai’s eternal life, predating Masafusa’s Shinsenden by approximately 130 years, the Kongōbuji konyū shugyō engi gives the following account:

On the 15th day of the third month of the year 835, Kūkai said: “I expect to enter the state of eternal meditation in the early morning of the 21st day. From now on I will not resort to human food. [...] While I am in eternal meditation, I will be in the heaven of the future Buddha Maitreya, the compassionate one, in whose presence I shall serve. After more than five billion six hundred million years have passed, the compassionate one will descend to earth. At that time I will surely accompany Maitreya, and I will be able to see my old places. [...]” In the early morning hours of the 21st day of the third month of the year 835, Kūkai sat in the lotus position, formed the ritual hand gesture of the Great Sun Buddha (Mahāvairocana), and peacefully entered the state of eternal meditation (Tanabe 1999:358).

Up to this point, the story does not necessarily indicate Kūkai’s immortality, since it could be interpreted as an “ordinary” account of an auspicious death which results in birth in Maitreya’s Tuṣita heaven. However, the story continues:

His entry into meditation simply meant that he had closed his eyes and did not speak. In all other respects he was like a living person [...] Since he was [still living] like an ordinary person, no funeral was performed [...] According to ordinary custom, memorial services were carried out every week for seven weeks. When his disciples looked upon him, they saw that the color of his face had not faded, and that his hair and beard had grown long. Therefore they shaved him and took care of his clothing (Tanabe 1999:358–359).

Due to this popular legend, Kūkai may be regarded as a prototypical saint who has overcome mortality. Furthermore, in recent years several studies have suggested a close connection between Kūkai and alchemy. According to one theory, Kūkai chose Mount Kōya as the center of his order because of its vast mercury deposit (Wada 1965:3). It should be noted that one of the tutelary gods of Mt. Kōya, namely the goddess Niu 丹生, also known as Tanjō Myōjin 丹生明神 (literally “august mercury-producing deity”) was regarded as the deity of mercury (Satō 1991:218ff.; Wakao 1994:122ff.). Although economic reasons may also have motivated Kūkai’s choice, it seemed only natural to connect Kūkai with alchemy and immortality techniques. Hence, it has been proposed that there could have been a connection between the belief in Kūkai’s “eternal samādhi” (= immortality) and Kūkai’s interest in Daoist alchemy (Satō 1991:19ff.).

It would seem to be much more difficult to connect this to Ennin lore. At first sight, his “official” biography, the Jikaku Daishi-den written around 970, does not give any hint of his becoming an immortal. The description of his death perfectly conforms with the standards of traditional Buddhist hagiography to which it clearly belongs:

At the Hour of the Rat (Ne-no-toki, 11 p.m.–1 a.m.), while making mudrā, reciting mantras, his head pointing north, lying on his right side, Ennin passed away at the age of 71. His Buddhist age was 49. On the 16th day Ennin was buried at the tip of Tendai Ridge, running in the northern direction from the Enryakuji Temple (Satō 1992:71).

However, according to the text people interpreted “a shooting star [that] fell to the northeast corner of Monjurō and after a little while disappeared” (Satō 1992:71) shortly before Ennin’s death as signifying the transformation of his soul, perhaps into a divine immortal.43

Katsuno Ryūshin (1964:373–375) suggests that this story was actually the starting point of a tradition that regarded Ennin as an immortal. The Shinsenden was probably the first written account to explicitly claim Ennin’s transformation into an immortal, but it may be suspected that this belief was already circulating by the late eleventh century. In any case, a couple of texts from the Edo period claim that upon death Ennin flew through the sky heading east, entered into eternal samādhi just like Kūkai, and that his body showed no signs of decay even 841 years after his “death.” We may assume that from early on some people connected with the Tendai-shū tried to elevate Ennin’s status to that of Kūkai by claiming that the main representative of Tendai esotericism (tairitsu) had achieved the same kind of auspicious transformation as the founder of the rival Shingon esotericism (tōmitsu).

As we have seen above, another type of protagonist corresponds to the traditional Daoist motif of “miraculous encounter” with an immortal: A man encounters an immortal in a deep forest or mountain and receives some kind of revelation, scripture, chart or fruit of immortality from him (Verellen 1998). In the case of Masafusa’s Shinsenden the

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43 See also Katsuno (1964:376).
respective accounts are, however, modeled after engi-type stories, inasmuch as a man meets a strange hermit who hands over to him the abbacy of the sacred place predestined for the erection of a temple. Bo that as it may, we can easily imagine that the keepers of sacred grounds were actually conceived of as immortals since they were superhuman in many ways and needed an extremely long life-span in order to fulfill their task.

Laymen such as Miyako no Yoshika, the Lords Fuji and Hara, Tachibana no Masamichi, etc., are probably those who are most compatible with the Chinese model.

The seemingly most problematic and at the same time the largest group of protagonists is formed by those who can be categorized as Buddhist thaumaturgic hermits or hōjō. They carry the names of Buddhist priests and perform Buddhist practices, such as the recitation of sūtras or spells and the like. Only the outcome of their religious practice distinguishes them from the protagonists of Buddhist setsuwa tales. The stories would by no means lose their coherence if the term sen or “immortality” were displaced by the term hōjō or “birth in the Pure Land” of a Buddha. On the contrary, this is the kind of “happy end” we would expect, and some of the accounts actually found their way into collections of Buddhist setsuwa tales. It is interesting to note in this context that Miyoshi no Tameyasu in his Shūi hōjōden criticizes his contemporary Masafusa for incorporating the accounts of Zenchū and Zensan in his Shinseinen. He claims that Zenchū and Zensan finally flew away to the west where Amida’s Pure Land is located. Tameyasu concludes that neither belong to immortality literature but were actually “people who have attained birth in the Pure Land in their present bodies (genjin hōjō no hito 現身往生人).” Accordingly, Tameyasu included their life accounts in his collection of hōjōden. However, his arguments for qualifying Zenchū and Zensan as people who had attained hōjō rather than immortality reveal how thin the line between the two concepts of an “auspicious transformation” actually was. He writes:

Recently I came to know that Governor Ōōg the Counselor included the two persons [i.e. Zenchū and Zensan] in his ‘Accounts of Immortals.’ I

must object to that. In the ‘Indian Records of Births in the Pure Land’ there is one person portrayed who attained hōjō in his present body. When you look at [the description of] his life, you see that it roughly resembles that of Zenchū and Zensan. From this one learns that the two do not belong to the type [of immortals]. How can we know that? The [two] Venerables always vowed that they would be born in the Pure Land in their present bodies (NST 7:281/587b–588a).

Tameyasu refers here to a story contained in the Tenjiku hōjō genki which describes how a prince named Asita (Jap. Ashida) from the western part of India at the end of his life ascended to heaven in the western direction and attained hōjō (IZ, zoku 16:337a). In the epilogue to the text it says that:

In Central India there were among those inclined towards being mindful of Amida Buddha’s name 7,519 people who attained hōjō. Among those who whole-heartedly recited nothing but Amida Buddha’s name 35,900 people have attained hōjō. Among them there were 180 who attained hōjō in their present bodies (IZ, zoku 16:339a).

I think the concept of genjin hōjō must be regarded as a Buddhist interpretation of the “ascension to heaven in the broad daylight”-concept of Daoist immortality lore. Chinese or Japanese Buddhists may thus have attempted to reinterpret immortals’ legends as hōjōden or “accounts of births in the Pure Land.” The name of the prince who allegedly attained hōjō in his present body strongly points to such a conclusion. Asita which literally means “without white” (probably in the sense of someone whose hair is not whitened by age) in Sanskrit, actually refers to an immortal rṣi or seer, a term which again is rendered xian 仙 in Chinese (Monier-Williams 1899:120; Hirakawa 1997:96). According to some traditional accounts of the Buddha’s life, a hermit-sage 仙人 named Asita, possessing supernatural powers, descended from Trāyastrimśa heaven and foretold the future destiny of the newborn Gautama.

Another seer (sen 仙) named Asita appears in the “Devadatta chapter”

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44 Note that Masafusa himself has compiled a collection of “accounts of birth in the Pure Land,” entitled Zoku honchō hōjōden around the same time when he compiled his Shinseinen.

45 Jap. Tenjiku hōjō genki. This collection of nine accounts of Indians who were supposedly born in Amida’s Pure Land is traditionally attributed to Vasubandhu (translated into Chinese by Kumārajiva), but is apparently a Japanese fabrication.

46 Asita appears in the vinayapītaka of the Mahāsākā and of the Dharmaaguptaka, the Nidānakathā, the Mahāvastu, the Lalitavistara and the Divyāvadāna (Bareau 1995:2, n. 7).

of the Lotus Sutra (T 9:34c: 時有阿私仙) as a teacher of the Buddha in one of the latter’s past incarnations. Quite obviously, the author of the Tenjiku ōjō genki chose this name consciously, alluding to the Buddhist legends about the powerful ārāma and the seer named Asita, because this served his cause, namely to absorb immortality lore into a Buddhist soteriological system without resorting to Daoist immortals’ stories.

A key to the understanding of Masafusa’s decision to depict (seemingly) Buddhist ascetics as immortals is the very notion of hijiri and its evolution in the Heian period. As noted above, in ancient times the term hijiri was hardly distinguished from sen or shinzen. Hijiri were supernormal immortals, mostly “transformed” and thus deified rulers and heroes. The other type of immortal as portrayed in Chinese Daoist stories was the recluse who lived a long, secluded and simple life in the mountains (hence the character 仙 and was eventually transformed into a heavenly immortal. In the Heian period the number of recluses and mountain ascetics steadily grew, but it took some time before they were regarded as hijiri (now written 乞里), denoting a practitioner who practiced arduous asceticism in sacred places in order to obtain supernatural faculties and finally immortality, be that in heaven above, in Hōrai, in Tokoyo no kuni, in Potalaka, in Sukhavati, in Tūṣita, or elsewhere.48

The equation of hijiri and immortals (of the recluse type), however, only marked a transitory phase. Later, especially from the Kamakura period onwards, the term hijiri came to be used rather generously, gradually losing the connotation “immortal.” Unlike contemporary authors of ōjōden, for instance, Masafusa openly reveals the indebtedness of Japanese “Buddhist” mountain asceticism to “Daoist” immortality lore. In short, the so-called Buddhist saints were certainly not as “purely” Buddhist as Buddhist literature and modern historians would have us believe. The hijiri represent a trans-denominational system of beliefs and practices that was entirely syncretic.49 According to emperor Go-Shirakawa’s description, hijiri – preferring moss, bark, paper, and deer skins as clothing – did not even look like Buddhist priests (Gorai 1990:33).

It is important to note, however, that Buddhist views of the afterlife and Daoist – or simply Chinese – immortality beliefs did not reach Japan through different channels only to be amalgamated by the Japanese, always inclined to syncretism. On the contrary, as Anna Seidel (1989–1990:302) put it:

Many specifically Taoist beliefs and cults were carried back to Japan in the baggage of the Japanese students and pilgrim monks who brought Tantric Buddhism. Popular Chinese Buddhism of the T’ang period had absorbed many features of Taoism, and the Japanese most likely did not recognize their non-Buddhist origin.

The quest for immortality was in fact by no means unknown to Chinese Buddhists. Huijiao’s Liang gaoseng zhuan (519–530) contains 34 biographies of monks whose bodily remains had disappeared when their graves were opened (Katsuno 1964:377). The Pure Land thinker Tanluan (476–542) searched for immortality techniques in order to live long enough to complete his commentary on the Mahā-saṃnipāta-sūtra ( Xu gaoseng zhuan, T 50:470 a–b). Moreover, it is reported that the famous Tiantai patriarch Huisi (515–577) of the “Southern Peak” (Nanyue) practiced immortality techniques in order to experience the descent of the future Buddha Maitreya in his present incarnation (Robson 1995:247ff.). In the light of the fact that the mountain range of Nanyue was not only the center of Tiantai Buddhism but also of Daoist practitioners and that the Tiantai monks – among them the most famous being Zhiyi – were evidently interested in immortality techniques and alchemy (Robson 1995:251ff.),50 it is not surprising that Buddhists in Heian Japan combined originally Daoist practices with more genuinely Buddhist ones. The connection between the Maitreya cult and the quest for longevity was also strong in Japan51 where Buddhists believed that Tūṣita

48 In the early Heian period the terms zenji 禅師 (“meditation master”) and ubasoku 侶婆薩 (from the Skt. upāsaka; i.e. a Buddhist lay follower) were most frequently used to refer to extra-monastic practitioners of asceticism, thaumaturgy, clairvoyance, exorcism and spirit healing. The most prominent mountain ascetic known as an ubasoku is En no Gyōja, or En no Ubasoku.

49 Whereas Buddhist scholars tend to regard hijiri as Buddhist practitioners. Kuroda Toshio (1981:6) argues that the concepts of “hijiri or sen (Taoist – immortal, Japanese – saint, emperor, or recluse […]1)” are indeed Daoist elements in Japanese religion.

50 Note also that emperor Wuzong in an edict against the saṃgha in 842 explicitly mentions Buddhist monks and nuns who occupy themselves with alchemy (Reischauer 1955:321).

51 In the Hōnen shōnin gyōjō ezu it is reported, for instance, that Ajari Kōen, one of Hōnen’s teachers, once reflected upon the problem of the short life-spans of human beings: “I have […] indeed been born a man, but I am so unfortunate as to have come into the world in the period between the appearance of the two Buddhas, and so I see nothing for it but that I must go through transmigration after transmigration. But in order to be able to meet the Merciful One (Maitreya) when he finally appears in the world, I should like to have my body changed into that of some being
“... will manifest on the peak of Kinpusan [“Mountain of the Golden Peak”]; one of the favorite sacred mountains of the hijiri], which is called Golden Pure Land (Ögon jödo). In order to be reborn in the Golden Pure Land, one has to wait and live until the advent of the world of Maitreya” (Miyata 1988:183).

Conclusion: The "Unconscious" Syncretism of Ancient Japan’s "Common Religion"

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the distinction between Buddhist, Daoist, and allegedly indigenous concepts of the afterlife was an academic matter which did not concern the majority of religious practitioners, not to speak of the laity, in Japan, educated or not. While Buddhist scholastics argued about questions such as whether birth in Sukhāvatī was more desirable than birth in Tusita or vice versa, most people probably did not see any substantial difference between Sukhāvatī, Tusita, Potalla, Tokyo no kuni, Ne no kuni, Hōraisan, and so on. In semiotic terms we may speak of a synonymy here inasmuch as all these signifiants refer to one signifié. All these places were regarded as paradisiacal spheres beyond the reach of common mortals. Likewise the distinction between living Buddhas, those who attained birth in the Pure Land, and immortals was quite irrelevant.

To illustrate that, let me, as a final example, quote a passage from the account of the immortal Yōshō. When a monk from Tōdaiji encountered Yōshō, at the Peak of Immortals, the latter told him:

I have a grandfather in my old village who is a close friend of this old mountain. Please tell [him] that I can see the Buddhas and hear the dharma, ascend to heaven and enter the earth; I can change [my appearance] supernaturally as I wish (Kleine and Kohn 1999: 167; NST 7:265–266/583a).

Here, the concepts of immortality and of birth in a Buddha-Land are obviously intermingled. Yōshō, who could fly without wings, ascend to heaven and enter the earth, just like a perfect immortal, claims that he is also able to see the Buddhas and listen to the dharma, which clearly indicates his attainment of ōjō. Finally, Yōshō’s grandfather, being ill, complains: “... Alas! How sad! If Yōshō has become a living Buddha (ikibotoke 神仏), why does he not come to see me?” (Kleine and Kohn 1999:168; NST 7:266/583a). Thus, Yōshō is depicted as an immortal, as someone who has attained ōjō, and finally as a living Buddha in one single story.

As we know, even scholastically established Buddhism, propagating a “philosophy of assimilation,” tended to soak up everything regardless of its provenance. Tendai and Shingon eventually absorbed the syncretic cult of mountain asceticism which was closely related to Shamanism and Daoist immortality beliefs. Despite the fact that, in the long run, “immortality” as a soteriological concept could not compete with the corresponding Buddhist concepts, the Zen monk Kokan Shiren (1278–1346) in the fourteenth century dedicated an entire section of his Buddhist historiographical work Genkō shakusho to the life accounts of immortals. Some of them were earlier portrayed in Masafusa’s Shinsen-

52 Despite the fact that Tusita, where Maitreya (Jap. Miroku) prepares for his descent 56,740,000 years after Sakyamuni’s death, is clearly described as a “heaven above” in “canonical” Buddhist scriptures, the people who live along the eastern sea coast from Ibaraki to Shizuoka prefecture, preserve a tradition according to which Maitreya is believed to come by ship across the sea from the east: “The cult of Maitreya centered in Ibaragi Prefecture envisions a utopia across the sea from which Miroku will bring a good harvest” (Miyata 1988:183). In this regard, the notion of Tusita as upheld by the people of Ibaraki again resembles Ne no kuni or the Okinawa Nirai Kanai, which is a paradise offshore to the east from where mankind and the most important cultural goods originally come. In addition, rice is believed to come from this paradise (Hausig and Schmalzriedt 1986:100); see also Kreiner, this volume, p. 400ff. See also Mujū Ichien’s (1226–1312) Shasekishū, which was written after the syncretism of Japanese religion was theoretically backed by the honji suijaku doctrine. Mujū claims that the “Rock Door of Heaven,” behind which Amaterasu hid herself when Susano raged, was in fact identical with both Maitreya’s Tusita and Takamagahara, the dwelling place of the highest kami, ruled by Amaterasu: “[... ] that which is called the Rock Door of Heaven is the Tusita Heaven [of the future Buddha Maitreya], also known as the High Plain of Heaven (takama ga hara)” (Morrell 1999:420).

53 While setting aside “non-Buddhist” concepts of the afterlife, Barbara Ruesch (1992:94) correctly states that “technically speaking, there were plural heavens (Amida’s paradise, Miroku’s paradise, etc., also described as ‘Pure Lands’), but in the popular mind they ultimately merged into one general image.” And Nakamura (1997:50), although in somewhat problematic terminology, draws the same conclusion, including “non-Buddhist” concepts of the afterlife such as Takamagahara, Yomi no kuni and Tokoyo no kuni, which “are not necessarily exclusive of each other and together suggest a common symbolic understanding of the other world.”

54 Entering the earth is the correlate to ascending to heaven.
den. Some protagonists of the *Shinsenden*, however, were submerged under other categories in the *Genkō shakusho*. This clearly demonstrates how interchangeable the categories were.

But the question remains why Masafusa took the life accounts of Buddhists and retold them in a collection of immortals’ stories? I think the answer is quite simple. The creativity of premodern authors was severely restricted by the rules of established genres and prevalent discourses. The religious discourse reflected in the literature of Japan in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries was so much dominated by a Buddhist rhetoric that every hagiography inevitably took the shape of a Buddhist legend. As indicated above, there was no institutionalized and organized Daoism in Japan which could have produced its own independent literature or could have significantly contributed to the religious discourse. All the serious religious activity of an individual took place in the confines of Buddhist terms and concepts and in some relation to Buddhist institutions, habits and practices. Accordingly, the stories Masafusa had to resort to in order to compile his *Shinsenden* were molded by the predominant structural and topological paradigms of Buddhist hagiography. Only a few accounts were taken from sources which were not “Buddhist” which makes the compilation appear somewhat incoherent. However, for the historian of religion this incoherence is rather an advantage than a weakness, inasmuch as it offers better insight into the diversity of religious concepts unified under the roof of what we might label “common religion”55 than any doctrinal or “strictly Buddhist” text ever will. The text forces us to rethink our image of ancient and medieval Japanese religion and reevaluate the process of syncretization. It is generally maintained that the syncretism of Japanese religion was actively created by clerics in order to amalgamate the foreign religion of Buddhism with the indigenous cult of “Shintō.” However, I think from what has been said above we should come to a different conclusion: Due to the lack of early materials, we cannot say anything reliable about what was genuinely or specifically Japanese in pre-Buddhist beliefs in Japan. All we can tell is that the earliest accessible layers of Japanese religious history reveal a mixture of accommodated Buddhist, Daoist, and simply Chinese or continental beliefs. The syncretism of ancient Japanese religion was probably an unconscious one, because the various ideas and practices were either already mixed up in China or Korea, or were imported as an evidently incoherent aggregate which could not, however, be untangled by the Japanese of that time. The “philosophy of assimilation” – as represented by the *honji suikaku* theory and the concepts of *shinbutsu shūgō*, *ryōbu shintō* and *sannō shintō* – promoted by the clerical elite was rather the doctrinal justification of an already established syncretism. In the Heian period a number of well-educated Japanese priests went to China to actively and systematically import Buddhist teachings which had previously been mostly brought to Japan unsystematically as elements of the superior continental culture by merchants and refugees. Once the Buddhist elite was able to trace back the single elements of the syncretic belief system of Japan to their origins, they consciously created a theoretical framework which sanctified the existing syncretism instead of trying to separate the diverse elements of which it was composed. Japanese religion thus proceeded from the stage of an unconscious and unsystematic syncretism to a conscious and systematic syncretism.

What is striking about Ōe no Masafusa’s *Shinsenden* is the date of its compilation rather than its contents. The collection is clearly outdated from the perspective of the Buddhist discourse of his days, represented by the *ōjōden*, for instance. Since Masafusa did attempt neither at a participation in that discourse nor at religious propaganda, but instead at the production of a piece of literature following the rules of a Chinese literary genre, he could freely pick up diverse tales and stories without regard for coherence or doctrinal consistency. However, his work would not have convinced his audience had it been completely incompatible with existing religious ideas. Thus, the “unsystematic syncretism” reflected in his work refers either to an earlier stage of Japanese religion, or to a non-doctrinal discourse that, despite being largely ignored by the “official” Buddhist discourse, was still alive and well around the year 1100 on the level of “common religion,” or to both.

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55 I chose to use this term in order to avoid the somewhat misleading denotation “popular religion” which suggests an inferior level of “folk-beliefs” as contrasted to “high religion.” By “common religion” I mean a whole variety of world views, religious customs and attitudes shared by the vast majority of the people of a given historical context who are not professionally engaged in the doctrinal discourse of an established orthodoxy. The notion of “common religion” in this sense does not refer to the beliefs of lower social classes.
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