

A Brief Discussion on the Development of Geta in Ancient China and Its Transmission to Japan

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Abstract

According to existing data, geta was transmitted from China to Japan. After Tang Dynasty, Chinese geta was used as rain shoes and was no longer worn as everyday footwear, which led many people to regard geta as a type of “Japanese shoes”. This article attempts to utilize research findings from philology and archaeology to explore some historical topics. According to Chinese literature, geta originated during Spring and Autumn period, and from its emergence until Western Han Dynasty, it was merely a special type of footwear that was “suitable for walking in muddy places”. By Eastern Han Dynasty, it had become a popular type of footwear, and it was even an important item for women at weddings. The Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties marked the “golden age” of geta, especially during the Southern Dynasties, when geta became an essential accessory for noble families. Additionally, according to Tang poetry, geta was still very popular during the Tang empires, but after the period, geta gradually became marginalized. On the other hand, historical materials from Japan tell us that as early as Tang periods, Japanese envoys brought geta to Japan, but we do not have literary evidence regarding the exact time of its introduction. Archaeological discoveries in Japan show that geta has already appeared at the Hōbuzan site and the Kamota site, suggesting that geta may have been transmitted to Japan during the Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties, and had social influence during this period, which coincided with the peak popularity of geta in Chinese history.

Keywords: *geta* (wooden clogs), Sino-Japanese culture exchange, Wei-Jin and southern-northern dynasties

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Introduction

In the Western stereotype, geta are typical Japanese footwear. However, it is also well-known that in certain Chinese dynasties, geta were extremely popular and carried rich cultural connotations. How have Chinese and Japanese wooden clogs evolved? If we consider that Japanese wooden clogs originated from China, when were they approximately introduced to Japan? This paper aims to conduct a preliminary exploration around these questions and endeavors to demonstrate that the cultural connection between China and Japan may be more profound and intricate than we imagine.

“Ji” (屐) and the Origins of Chinese Wooden Clogs

The character “ji” (屐) was already recorded in Chinese dictionaries as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to ancient Chinese scholars, it referred to a type of footwear designed for walking in muddy ground. Based on historical records, wooden clogs (木屐) may have originated during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. A popular legend from later generations claims that Duke Wen of Jin, a feudal lord from the Spring and Autumn period, specially crafted wooden shoes to commemorate one of his ministers. Although this legend was widely circulated, its historical accuracy is questionable. From a philological perspective, the earliest written account of wooden clogs might be found in the *Zhuangzi*, a text compiled during the Warring States period, which states: “Members of the Mohist school mostly wore coarse cloth clothing and wore wooden clogs and hemp shoes...” (Zhuangzi, trans., 2015, p. 575) Based on this record, we can infer that, in the eyes of many during the Warring States period, wooden clogs were a type of wooden footwear worn by the Mohist school as part of their ascetic practices. From this, we conclude that China already had wooden clogs during the pre-Qin period, and that they were a common, even rudimentary type of footwear.

The Development and Popularity of Chinese Wooden Clogs

According to Chinese historical records, during the Qin and Han dynasties, Chinese footwear was diverse. According to the Han dynasty’s system: people wore thick-soled shoes during rituals, thin-soled shoes when meeting the emperor, and only in informal settings were they allowed to wear wooden clogs (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 188). However, during the Eastern Han dynasty, wooden clogs became increasingly popular, even to the extent that they were prepared for women’s weddings. The *Book of the Later Han* (後漢書) records: “Elderly people in the capital all wore wooden clogs. On their wedding day, women would paint patterns on the wooden clogs with lacquer and then secure them to their feet with colorful ribbons.” The author of the *Book of the Later Han* believed this to be an abnormal phenomenon. However, from the mid to late Eastern Han period, wooden clogs began to gain popularity, and this trend seemed unstoppable. During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, wooden clogs finally entered their “golden age”, a result of the aesthetic preferences of the time. Especially during the Wei and Jin periods, cultural elites cherished freedom and strongly resisted the various regulations on clothing imposed by the Han dynasty system; thus, they regarded the freely wearable wooden clogs as their favorite footwear. By the time of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, young nobles in the Southern Dynasties almost universally wore wooden clogs. The *Yan’s Family Instructions* (顏氏家訓) records: “During the most prosperous period of the Liang dynasty, young nobles...all wore

high-heeled wooden clogs”. The author of the *Yan’s Family Instructions* did not approve of this phenomenon, but it was a historical trend, and he could do nothing about it.

The Decline of Chinese Wooden Clogs

According to existing records, during the Sui and Tang Empire period, wooden clogs may still have been quite popular. Li Bai mentioned wooden clogs in many of his works and even specifically referred to a type of socks worn with them. From his poetry, we find that he himself seemed to greatly enjoy wearing wooden clogs. His representative works suggest the following: first, ancient Chinese wooden clogs were generally equipped with ridges, meaning they were a type of high-heeled wooden shoes; second, the design of the ridges on wooden clogs had already reached a very high level in ancient China, both in terms of design by designers and craftsmanship by artisans; third, some wooden clogs were already being used as mountain-climbing shoes, which indicates that from this time onward, wooden clogs began to show signs of evolving into work shoes. After the collapse of the Sui and Tang Empire, the frequency of wooden clogs appearing in Chinese literature gradually decreased. Eventually, they were commonly used as rain shoes. During the Southern Song period, the poet Lu You mentioned wooden clogs as rain shoes in many of his works.

Why did wooden clogs in China transition from being a popular footwear to being used specifically as rain shoes? We speculate that this may have been due to the influence of the nomadic culture of the northern regions on the traditional clothing of the Central Plains after the establishment of the Sui and Tang Empire. Specifically, regarding footwear, according to the official regulations of the Sui and Tang Empire, formal occasions required the wearing of black leather shoes or boots, which were far more practical than wooden clogs. We know that in later Japanese culture, wooden clogs became increasingly popular. If we were to discuss the reasons behind this, we believe it is because, in terms of geographical environment and climatic conditions, wooden clogs were more practical than leather shoes or boots in Japan.

The Barefoot Tradition and the Emergence of Footwear in Japan

According to the Chinese historical text *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志), the lifestyle habits of ancient Japanese people (or a specific region of ancient Japan) are described: “People walked barefoot and did not wear shoes.” Another Chinese historical text, *The Book of Sui* (隋書), also describes the clothing habits of ancient Japan: “Their shoes were coated with lacquer and tied to their feet with ropes. Most people went barefoot.” Based on the records in *The Book of Sui*, during the reign of Empress Suiko, common people did not wear shoes, while nobles wore a special type of footwear (屨). According to the expression habits of ancient Chinese, we speculate that this special type of shoes (屨) might be hemp shoes and absolutely could not be wooden clogs (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 76).

It is important to note that in the portrait of Prince Shōtoku, he is depicted wearing black leather shoes, which were formal footwear during the Sui and Tang periods (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 613). Based on his portrait and the historical records in *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Book of Sui*, we can draw the following preliminary conclusions: First, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Japanese still had the habit of going barefoot. Second, during the Asuka period (538-710), nobles may have worn hemp shoes, while common people mostly went barefoot. We can confidently conclude that wooden clogs were not popular at that time. Third, after the Taika Reforms, Japanese nobles wore black leather shoes

or boots for formal occasions, while the situation for common people is unclear. In summary, the popularity of wooden clogs in Japan must have occurred after the Tang Dynasty in China.

Regarding the relationship between Chinese wooden clogs and Japanese wooden clogs, there are three main academic viewpoints. The first viewpoint holds that Japanese wooden clogs originated from China and are identical to Chinese wooden clogs. The second viewpoint argues that Japanese wooden clogs developed independently with little influence from Chinese culture. The third viewpoint suggests that wooden clogs were transmitted from China to Japan, where they were localized and became a representative footwear in Japanese traditional culture. However, there is no fundamental difference between Japanese wooden clogs and Chinese wooden clogs. This article leans toward the third viewpoint. How did Chinese wooden clogs spread to Japan? Many speculate that envoys to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, while learning Chinese culture, brought back not only various types of footwear popular in China at the time but also their manufacturing techniques. According to Japanese archaeological discoveries, relatively mature wooden clogs were already present in the Nara period (corresponding to the Tang Dynasty in China). This is sufficient to indicate that although they were not yet popular, Chinese wooden clogs had already been transmitted to Japan during the Tang Dynasty.

Japan's Earliest "Footwear" Artifacts

Some believe that Japanese wooden clogs developed independently, and they have an important piece of evidence: numerous "wooden clogs" from Yayoi period have been unearthed in Japan, suggesting that the Japanese could have independently developed wooden clogs based on these findings without the need for Chinese cultural influence. However, we believe this viewpoint is debatable. According to Japanese archaeological findings, the earliest "footwear" in Japan can be considered as the "tageda" from the Yayoi period. But is tageda a type of geta? Some scholars argue that it was a agricultural tool rather than footwear (Yamamoto, 2011). In the Toro site near Mount Fuji, tageda was discovered, featuring very thick soles. Researchers speculate that this was because the fields at that time were filled with water, and only by making the sole very thick could it function as a agricultural tool to assist in farming.

Undoubtedly, tageda is intrinsically linked to the "wet-rice cultivation culture". We align with a cohort of Chinese scholars in asserting that wet-rice cultivation culture spread to Japan from the lower Yangtze River basin in China. During the period spanning China's Spring and Autumn Period to the early Qin Dynasty, a significant wave of migration occurred from the middle-lower Yangtze region overseas (Wang, 2001, p. 69). It was likely these migrants who introduced both wet-rice cultivation culture and wooden clogs as agricultural implements to Japan. According to archaeological discoveries in China, the earliest known wooden clogs were unearthed at the Liangzhu Culture sites (c. 3300-2300 BCE). Given the absence of written records during the Liangzhu period, it remains uncertain whether these earliest Chinese clogs functioned as agricultural tools or footwear. However, inferences drawn from the societal development level suggest that the clogs discovered at Liangzhu sites likely served as agricultural implements. Viewed through this lens, tageda may also share cultural lineage with Liangzhu practices. We contend that regardless of whether tageda is classified as an agricultural tool or footwear, it is unlikely to be considered an independent innovation in Japan entirely unrelated to Chinese cultural influence.

Footwear in Japan Before the Edo Period

It is certain that wooden clogs had become extremely popular by the Edo period. Regarding what footwear Japanese people wore in earlier periods: during the Yayoi and Kofun periods, most Japanese walked barefoot. From the Asuka period, Japanese attire gradually aligned with Sui-Tang clothing styles. In the *Taihō Code* (701), there were dedicated *Costume Statutes*. Although these statutes were far less stringent than Sui-Tang systems, specifically regarding footwear, the *Costume Statutes* stipulated that formal occasions required thick-soled shoes or black leather shoes, while only informal occasions permitted straw sandals (Takahashi, 2016, p. 50).

Costume Statutes contains no specific references to wooden clogs. It is plausible that during the Asuka and Nara periods, Japanese nobility adopted black leather shoes and black leather boots, aligning exactly with the customs of Sui-Tang imperial aristocracy. Commoners likely went barefoot or wore straw sandals. A Japanese scholar contends that prolonged use of straw sandals correlates with dietary culture: before the Edo period, Japanese people had not developed customs of consuming beef or pork, hence animal hide footwear remained uncommon (Yamamoto, 2011).

During the Heian period, wooden clogs constituted one of multiple footwear options, though their usage remained limited. By the subsequent Kamakura period, picture scrolls (emaki) emerged as significant historical records. These emaki reveal that while some commoners went barefoot, others wore straw sandals or wooden shoes. Crucially, iconographic evidence alone suggests minimal functional variation between Kamakura-era and Edo-era wooden shoe designs.

Wooden Clogs: Tested With Artifacts

The earliest Chinese wooden footwear was unearthed at the Liangzhu cultural site (c. 3300-2300 BCE). Chronologically, Liangzhu correlates with Japan's Jōmon period, while Japan's earliest wooden-soled implements appeared during the subsequent Yayoi period (3rd century BCE-3rd century CE). We posit potential technological linkages between these primordial Chinese and Japanese specimens. Since scholarly research confirms the transmission of wet-rice cultivation techniques from China's ancient Wu-Yue territories (modern Zhejiang/Jiangsu) to Yayoi Japan (Mao, 1996), our deduction extends to possible transfer of rudimentary footwear production methods.

During the late Yayoi phase (100-300 CE), Japanese communities likely utilized wooden clogs primarily as agricultural implements rather than daily footwear. Concurrently in Han dynasty China (206 BCE-220 CE), archaeological evidence reveals these objects had evolved into culturally significant dress accessories. Chinese excavations of multiple Western Han tombs (e.g., Mawangdui, Hunan) have yielded diverse structural variations, with the most striking testimony coming from a lacquered wooden clog discovered in the 249 CE tomb of Zhu Ran, a Wu Kingdom general of the Three Kingdoms period. Han-to-Jin textual and material records collectively suggest these items transcended utilitarian functions to embody culturally embedded significance.

Archaeological evidence from Japan's Kofun period (4th-6th century CE) reveals technically sophisticated wooden clogs excavated at sites including Hobuzan and Kamata. These discoveries contemporaneously align with China's Jin to Southern Dynasties period (265-589

CE). Both historical texts like the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) and Chinese records document frequent diplomatic exchanges between Japanese rulers and southern Chinese regimes. Crucially, Japan actively recruited specialized artisans during this era—notably the Nuhi (Costume Craftsmen Corps)—who likely transferred continental East Asian apparel culture to the archipelago (Wang, 2001, p. 127), corroborating the footwear technology transfer.

Wooden Clogs: Studied in Manuscripts

According to Chinese historical records, during the Kofun period (4th-6th century CE), Japanese monarchs frequently presented offerings when interacting with southern Chinese regimes. Following diplomatic conventions, these regimes likely reciprocated with gifts. Although conclusive evidence is lacking, wooden clogs were highly prevalent in southern China at that time. Thus it is reasonable to surmise that even if Japanese envoys received no such gifts, they could have observed the prevalence of wooden clogs in China. According to Japanese historical sources, a wave of migration occurred during this period, which included substantial numbers of immigrants from China's Wu-Yue region (modern Jiangsu/Zhejiang) (Wang, 2001, p.143). It would have been a logical outcome for these migrants to introduce Wu-Yue attire and contemporary Chinese artifacts to Japan.

During Japan's Asuka period (538-710 CE), the nation began large-scale adoption of Chinese cultural elements. Although definitive records of clog transmission are absent, Japanese documents note that Prince Shōtoku lectured on Buddhist sutras while holding a horsetail whisk (麈尾) (Wang, 2001, p. 171). Both horsetail whisks and wooden clogs were signature items favored by cultural elites during China's Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties. While no literature confirms Prince Shōtoku's connection to clogs, his documented use of the whisk suggests he would unlikely have been ignorant of clogs. Additionally, Japanese accounts record that Kūkai (774-835 CE) cited *Shishuo Xinyu* (世說新語), confirming he studied this classic in Japan and proving its arrival in Japan by 797 CE at the latest (Ma, 1989). Given clogs' prominence in *Shishuo Xinyu*, this supports the postulation that both the text and clog culture reached Japan during Empress Suiko's reign (592-628 CE). However, due to formal footwear regulations mandating black leather shoes for official occasions, clogs were precluded from widespread popularity.

During Japan's Nara period (710-784 CE), the vigorous adoption of Sui-Tang cultural models would seemingly make the transmission of wooden clogs appear inevitable, yet scant documentation exists to confirm this process. We may, however, propose a hypothetical framework: within the sartorial domain, Japanese institutional priorities centered on emulating Tang court-prescribed footwear (notably black leather shoes and boots), potentially overlooking pre-Tang footwear traditions popularized during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE).

According to Japanese scholarship, wooden clogs or similar footwear appeared in Heian-period literary works such as the *Tale of Utsubo* (ca. 10th c.) (Takahashi, 2016, p. 335), indicating nascent popularization among commoners (though possibly non-ridged variants). During the subsequent Kamakura period (1192-1333), clogs gained pervasive popularity among warrior and peasant classes – amply evidenced in visual arts beyond this paper's scope. Why this surge? We propose a social transformation thesis: Originally functioning as plebeian footwear in China, clogs remained culturally incompatible with Japanese aristocratic hegemony. The Kamakura era's socio-political realignment, marked by ascending warrior

and peasant influence, catalyzed their dissemination. Ultimately, these groups' preferences propelled clogs toward their Edo-period (1603-1868) zenith.

Conclusion

This paper posits shared origins for Japanese and Chinese clogs, with clogs originating in China and later disseminating to Japan through specific conduits. Documentary evidence inadequately clarifies the transmission specifics, yet artifacts and pictorial records enable tentative dating of its introduction. Pre-Tang cultural contact, Japanese residents largely eschewed footwear. During Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods, aristocracy gained access to physical clogs and could acquire artisans with clog-crafting skills, yet cultural penetration remained limited in this era. Widespread adoption commenced in the Kamakura period, by which time clogs had been marginalized in China. Divergent trajectories in both nations stemmed inherently from clog properties: Their adaptability to Japan's climate, terrain, and lifestyle, whereas in China, competitive disadvantage against later footwear (e.g. boots) caused progressive diminishment of their influence, culminating in virtual disappearance from Chinese culture.

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