



Heather Blair, *Real and Imagined: The Peak of Gold in Heian Japan*

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THE PAST DECADE has seen numerous English-language monographs and dissertations paying due attention to numinous mountains, their cults, and pilgrims. These studies have conveyed the need to scrutinize such spaces, particularly because many significant temple-shrine complexes, pilgrimage circuits, and aristocrats held mountains as ritual and geographic foci. Heather Blair, associate professor at Indiana University, offers *Real and Imagined*, a pertinent contribution in the wave of studies on Heian Japan, pilgrimage, and Shugendo. Focusing on Kinpusen 金峯山, the Peak of Gold, and the attention it received from Fujiwara regents during the Heian period, Blair offers the first comprehensive treatment of premodern Kinpusen in English and fills substantial gaps in knowledge regarding practices in, out, and between the mountain and other locales. Blair's lucid writing style, useful images and maps, in brilliant combination with valuable theoretical models and

the use of a diverse array of Heian period sources, many of which are previously unstudied, provides significant insights into the corporeal and imaginary construction of Kinpusen as both idiosyncratic and representative of premodern Japanese religious culture.

In approaching Kinpusen, a subject robustly represented in Japanese scholarship, Blair traces the contours of Kinpusen's rise to and fall from prominence during the Heian period by emphasizing Fujiwara regents' and retired sovereigns' imaginings and constructions of the peak as pilgrims. This strategy draws from Edward Sonja's socio-spatial category of *real-and-imagined* space, addressing mutually constitutive tangible and *affective* landscapes. Real-and-imagined, as the title and running theme, cuts across numerous dimensions in Kinpusen's cultic history, in what she broadly posits as a "history of practices of place-making," in Heian Japan (9). As a case study, Kinpusen illuminates the dynamics of historical and spatial change broadly in terms of rupture and discontinuity, starting with the "rise of aristocratic pilgrimage, then the institutional subordination of Kinpusen, and finally the rise of Shugendō" (294). Blair distinguishes this approach towards Kinpusen by using strictly Heian sources, dissenting from notions of Shugendō continuity in sectarian sources, and by focusing on the activities of elite laymen.

To accomplish her aims, Blair's book is broken up into three sections spanning eight chapters, closing with an epilogue. Part one comprises three chapters, all of which contribute to the ideological construction of Kinpusen as a ritualized and politicized landscape. Chapter 1 accounts for the entanglements between what Blair calls *affective*, or imagined landscape, and the devotional sensibilities of lay pilgrims to Kinpusen. Using references from anecdotal literature, annals, codes, vows, and a manuscript of a prayer copied by Fujiwara no Moromichi, Blair argues that elite lay pilgrims both received and contributed to the imaginary surrounding Kinpusen's affective landscape as one of radical alterity and the abode of charismatic holy men.

Chapter 2 navigates the contours of Kinpusen's non-canonical pantheon, most notably the endemic Zaō 蔵王, using writings and excavated bronzes. Blair's objective in this section, much as it was inferred in chapter 1, is to explore how and why the localized and distinctive Kinpusen cult received the attention of Heian aristocrats. Blair shows that the theological fluidity and distinctiveness characterizing Kinpusen's religious culture brought the mountain great appeal, something apparent in the writings of Heian pilgrims (90).

Methodologically, chapter 3 is one of the more important chapters in the book, focusing on the *ritual regimes* schema first introduced by Blair in a 2013 article on Kiyomori's activities at Itsukushima and Fukuhara (BLAIR 2013). Blair defines ritual regimes as "flexible patterns of practice, through which members of the high elite strengthened their rule and displayed their piety" (99). Such strategies are narrowed to those "anchored in distinctive sets of sites, rites and texts" (6). Showcasing the broad applicability of this model, Blair argues that in Heian Japan, ritual was highly

entangled with precedent, competition, and political life, and further shows the role Kinpusen played as a source of political legitimacy for the regents.

Part two considers the “real,” that is, the spatial, material, and social elements involved in pilgrimage to the golden peak, comprising three chapters. Chapter 4, follows closely the specifics of the regents’ pilgrimage activities and the ways they envisioned their pilgrimages, examining both the roles of trace and precedence as well as soteriological imaginings of the trail. Blair draws largely from the diaries and prayers of Michinaga and Moromichi, read together as evidence of a continuum of conservative precedent, or *traces* (*ato*, *seki* 跡), which she proposes to understand within the concept of *trace-ism* (131).

Like chapter 4, chapter 5 draws from diaries and also excavated sutra tubes, textual fragments, and votive inscriptions. Blair focuses on the ways that Michinaga and Moromichi inscribed themselves onto the real space at Kinpusen through public offerings and private sutra burials. She also suggests that this “involved activities that were at the heart of Kinpusen’s cult and ritual regimes more generally: the textualization of place and the emplacement of text” (160). Blair connects sutra burial in particular to the ritual regimes model, suggesting that due to its connotation with preservation of traces and with its “novelty, sutra burial was attractive as a signature rite,” creatively integrating both ritual regimes and *trace-ism* (161). Importantly, her focus on sutra burial shows that as a multidimensional practice, interring scriptures were not necessarily the result of anxieties related to *mappō* 末法, as earlier scholars have suggested.

Chapter 6 illustrates how the retired sovereign Shirakawa’s activities at Kinpusen ultimately displaced the mountain as a premier pilgrimage site, and ultimately contributed to its subordination to Kōfukuji, integrating it into a medieval landscape of factional power blocs. These positions are grounded in a journal fragment containing an extended citation from Ōe no Masafusa’s *Gōki*. Blair reveals how this document depicts the mounting friction between Kinpusen and Kōfukuji, and further illuminates Shirakawa’s motivations for using Kinpusen and its partisans to further its own political agendas.

Addressing the aftereffects of Shirakawa’s activities at Kinpusen, part three comprises two chapters. Chapter 7 explores the skirmishes between Kinpusen and Kōfukuji in the years following Shirakawa’s pilgrimage to Kinpusen, looking forward to the effects pilgrims had on the later developments at Kinpusen, its conflicts, and reconfigurations of its theological and ritual geography. Blair argues that Kinpusen’s defeat set the stage for its integration as a power bloc of Kōfukuji and as a result, contributed to its “processes of expansion, transforming the real-and-imagined Peak of Gold,” extending its influence and presence (224).

Chapter 8 addresses the genre of *engi* in the ways they represented the religious culture of Kinpusen, and the Yamato mountains more broadly. Discussing numerous *engi* manuscripts concerning the Ōmine mountains, collectively called the Ōmine *engi*, Blair argues that *engi* were “repositories for traces,” both of elite pilgrims and eminent practitioners, and were thus sources of authority (248). Such

texts were used to elevate the layman En no Gyoja as a founding hero, and further by developing a *spatial soteriology*, establishing bases for viewing mountainscapes as spaces for transformation. Despite claims of originality and independence, such expressions relied on numerous religious constituencies from both the Nara revival and Kōfukuji to both produce and disseminate the *engi* texts that would articulate such ideas. Blair emphasizes the movement of *engi* manuscripts, showing that *engi* were characterized by social hybridity and mobility, circulating in and out of mountains, lowlands, and cities.

Propelling this work further in history, an epilogue questions previous positions taken towards the development of Shugendo at Kinpusen. Blair departs from earlier Shugendo scholars by addressing the importance of rupture, as opposed to continuity, in its development, especially in terms of Heian-period pilgrimage practices. Blair argues that historically, “neither the practices nor the personae of elite, Heian-period pilgrims and proponents of fully developed Shugendō can be said to be the same” (288). She does well to connect these developments to the earlier concepts she introduces throughout the book, for instance, noting that like *engi*, Shugendo “grew out of the interface between religious communities associated with the mountains,” and lowlands (273).

Blair’s work is thoughtful, well-researched, and for a work on a specific cultic site, decidedly broad in connecting Kinpusen to wider political and religious developments to contextualize the site in premodern Japan. R. Keller KIMBROUGH (2007) has noted the risk of lacking in comparative perspective for works taking a similar approach, but here we see constant recognition of Kinpusen’s connection to other places and practices. Furthermore, throughout this work, Blair makes a point to outline multidimensional reasons as to why regents made long journeys to the peripheral mountains, something that has long peaked my interest in considering the role of the polity at what would later become significant Shugendo centers. Blair does well to integrate factors such as courtiers’ draw to the charisma stemming from mountain practice, as well as Kinpusen’s role in ritual regimes, literary productions, and what she calls the mountain’s *cardinal ideology*, a “loose system of directional values based on continental geomancy, five-phase theory, and social custom” (100). This is helpful in showcasing the variety of factors that contributed to a mountain’s apotheosis as one worthy of grand procession.

In addition to catering to those in premodern Japanese studies, another high point is that Blair appeals largely to Buddhist studies in general by engaging with issues of fluidity and canonicity with Zaō specifically, and with *trace-ism* more broadly. Blair notes early on that a key objective is to show how *trace-ism* was central to Heian discourse and religious life in offering access to both past precedent, along with the deities and otherworlds of the golden peak. In section one of the book in particular, Blair shows how it traces across multiple facets of Kinpusen’s cult. Traces also come up in the ritualized lifestyles of courtiers, which were based on ritual precedent. Further, considering Michinaga and Moromichi in chapter 4, she notes that

they were in “an ongoing, intertextual call-and-answer, by turns seeking out and leaving traces,” suggesting the importance of trace-based discourse to ritual regimes as well, especially in terms of pilgrimage preparation and enactment (134).

Kinpusen is infamous in Japan for being a quintessentially patriarchal mountain, barring women practitioners with a time-honored *nyonin kekkai* 女人結界. Although this raises significant issues regarding gender and the role of female practitioners at the peak, Blair does well to excavate the presences of women at the peak. For instance, in chapter 1 Blair takes up issues of alterity and exclusivity, specifically with regard to male practitioners from various social classes as having considerable bearing on the development of Kinpusen’s *nyonin kekkai*. Kinpusen’s deities and their popularity among women practitioners is taken up briefly alongside discussions of the Kinpusen pantheon, along with a useful translation of a votive inscription to the goddess Komori on a *mishōtai* 御正体, connected to an eleventh-century female patron (89). Blair also draws on the role of women in chapter 5, who used their sons and husbands, the regents, as proxies for taking and burying copied texts at the sutra mound (*kyōzuka* 経塚), showing “that the physical ban on women did not prevent them from participating” in the religious world at Kinpusen (180).

In addition to these merits, the vast array of sources that Blair consulted is worthy of further commendation. Blair engages with archival sources, sutra and journal fragments, bronzes, votive texts, diaries, and other materials from Kinpusen’s *kyōzuka*. This reveals interdisciplinary methods taken in approaching the site through not only writings, but corporeal leavings as well. As Blair argues early on, the use of such ranging—and often archaeological—sources “make it possible to develop a tightly focused history of practices at Kinpusen,” an aim that is successfully met, locating the regents *in situ*, with this impressive range of materials (13). Blair’s chapter on *engi* similarly speaks to her sources, here with a genre that has recently received considerable attention, represented in a recent issue of this journal, coedited by BLAIR and KAWASAKI Tsuyoshi (2015).

Alongside these triumphs, Blair’s overall meticulousness should not go overlooked. She does well to weave in the technicalities of manuscript and archival work to make the book readable. The issue of *honzan* 本山, for instance, as denoting either a main temple (Kōfukuji) or Kinpusen in a vie for independence, which takes up a considerable discussion in Blair’s dissertation, is relegated to a footnote for those with interest in her process (233). It should be noted here that the work has been significantly reevaluated and updated in the period between dissertation and publication. Furthermore, a significant portion of her references are taken from both Western and Japanese scholarship as late as 2014, seven years after the dissertation was completed.

While the claims within *Real and Imagined* are well supported and difficult to dispute, the book is not without a few shortcomings. Blair’s use of Michinaga, Moromichi, and Shirakawa for their well-documented pilgrimages to Kinpusen and the breadth of sources available, while useful in representing specific phases of pilgrimage and precedent, presents a few issues. For instance, using Michinaga and

Moromichi as a way to depict the importance of precedent in looking at the ritual activities of the regents as “multiple iterations of a single, shared protocol,” became in my mind a way to use the experiences of each individual to create a single narrative, picking up at times with one when less information seemed available for another (163). While this did not detract from her argument, and is likely more so a matter of style than anything else, the emphasis on precedence and traces should have been paired with a more comprehensive look at the activities of *both* men at every relevant instance, as opposed to looking at the activities of one or the other to make claims for both. Since this was an issue primarily confined to chapter 4, a potentially helpful way to amend this could have been to render “quoted passages side by side,” as in chapter 5, which made “parallels and divergences readily understandable (164).

Similarly, Blair’s argument for the private nature of sutra burial versus the initial, public donations in chapter 5 was interesting, but also had problems. Again, Blair uses Michinaga and Moromichi, obviously distinct individuals, and moreover observes their activities at different instances of the ritual to make this point. This does not convey the sort of dramatic distinction in how the rites were conducted to which she alludes, and due to the fact that the *kyōzuka*’s location was not secret in any way (it was even marked by Masafusa during Shirakawa’s pilgrimage), the private nature of this practice becomes less convincing. This does become slightly more convincing, however, when we look at Shirakawa’s experience, who sent Masafusa to bury his sutras in a situation that seems to have indeed been solitary, though more comparative data seems necessary to further any definitive claim about this practice (200).

Another minor issue appears on page eighty-two, where Blair mentions that buried texts in Japan were always canonical. Interestingly, chapter 8 mentions at various points that *engi* manuscripts were often described as being buried, which were certainly not canonical texts. Furthermore, regarding one such text, the *Shozan engi*, Blair says that there was tension inherent between the Katsuragi range as likened to the *Lotus Sutra* and the Omine and Kumano mountains, which were envisioned as *mikkyō* mandalas, since both ranges were conflated in the *engi* (264). Although she notes that texts like *Shozan engi* “assured its audiences” and cleared up such tensions by showing their pantheons to be overlapping, Blair seems to assume that otherwise such textual templates would be viewed as more rigid than they probably were. Considering contemporaneous *engi* texts, as well as the fluidity characterizing the theological dimensions of sites such as Kinpusen in general, esoteric cosmologies and scriptural references being conflated were in no way rare or contentious occurrences. For instance, Kinpusen itself was often compared to a Pure Land, amidst its other imaginings, both canonical and idiosyncratic.

In addition to these secondary issues, there were also a few things that, if included, could have benefited the book’s overall presentation. Chapter 5, for instance, reveals many intricacies of Kinpusen’s fight for autonomy by presenting a hitherto unstudied manuscript fragment. While Blair translates the manuscript fragment depicting this event, the translation is woven into the book’s text in such a way that one loses the

source as an independently exciting object study in its own right. While the chapter would be fine unchanged, an appendix with a transcription and annotated translation of the fragment alone and without commentary would have been useful for those interested in closely observing this exciting archival discovery. It is also worth noting that Blair's focus on the material movement of *engi* manuscripts was exciting and raised numerous questions regarding manuscript histories, but it was too short and left much to be desired, spanning only around two pages in length.

Despite these very minor shortcomings, Heather Blair has crafted an important work of true academic rigor and clarity that has splendidly reached its goals of illuminating the real and imagined histories of Kinpusen, and simultaneously of various facets of Heian religious and political life. With Blair's novel engagements with sources and the theoretical models contributed, *Real and Imagined* will undoubtedly become a mainstay in the fields of premodern Japanese studies and religious history. Blair has introduced key issues in the study of Shugendo that scholars and graduate students in the subfield will have to address, and surely benefit from, for years to come. In addition to treading new ground, she has uncovered numerous avenues for further scholarship on pilgrimage, *engi*, and cultic sites. It is my hope that her equally erudite and accessible work will serve to spur continued research on "place studies" at both famous and peripheral cultic sites, and in following Blair's example, attempt to trace such sites not only in their particularity, but in their connections to other places, people, and epistemes.

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