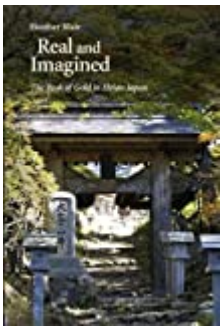
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Heather Blair. *Real and Imagined: The Peak of Gold in Heian Japan.* Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. Illustrations, maps. 364 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-50427-1.

Reviewed by Jonathan Stockdale (University of Puget Sound)

Published on H-Shukyo (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Jessica Starling (Lewis & Clark College)

Elite Mountain Pilgrimage in Heian Japan

Heather Blairâs *Real and Imagined*âfocusing on elite lay pilgrimage to Kinpusen during the Heian periodârepresents a superb contribution to the steadily growing body of English-language literature concerning Japanese mountain pilgrimage that has emerged over the last decade.[1] For the same reason that early modern mountain religious sects, such as ShugendÅ, were proscribed by the Meiji governmentâbecause of their inability to fit into a strict binary of either âShintoâ or âBuddhismââthe study of mountain religious activity until recently remained rather opaque, no doubt reflecting our own disciplinary boundaries.[2] The emerging body of literature, however, demonstrates that mountain pilgrimage is if anything a privileged site from which to examine Japanese religion in all of its intersectional complexity. Whereas studies of a particular sect, founder, or doctrine may legitimately hew closely to that sect, founder, or doctrine, studies of mountain pilgrimage demand that a scholar attend to the complex web of religious interaction woven together at a particular site, resulting arguably in a much fuller historical picture of actual religious praxis. In sifting through strands of Daoist inflected longevity practice, Buddhist-inspired sutra copying, offering, and burial, and localized âtracesâ reflecting *kami* (indigenous deity) cult idioms, Blairâs study of elite mountain pilgrimage provides one of the finest archaeologies of Heian religious practice and thought in recent years. Further, in her rich analysis of the power-bloc relations that never lay far from the field of religious practice, Blair provides an exemplary model for the study of the religious sphere as inseparable from the overall production and circulation of power within society.

*Real and Imagined*âs nine chapters (including the epilogue) are further organized into three major parts: âThe Mountain Imagined,â âThe Real Peak,â and âChanging Landscapes.â In the first chapter, Blair traces the historical development of (Mount) Kinpusen as an important locus of religious activity up through the mid-Heian period. While as early as the seventh century the greater Yoshino area was being depicted as the realm of Daoist immortals, Blair notes that the very presence of religious specialists in the mountains conflicted with the desire of the *ritsuryÅ*

(centralized bureaucratic) state to bring religious practice everywhere under its supervision. Only with the attenuation of such *ritsuryÅ* oppositions, Blair argues, was Kinpusen seen by the mid-Heian period no longer as a site of âillegal retreatâ but rather as part of an âincreasingly civilized mountainscape,â attractive even to elite members of the court aristocracy (pp. 28, 34). Such changes help to contextualize the actions of Fujiwara no Kaneie (of the Fujiwara regentsâ patriline), who in 969 made the earliest lay pilgrimage to Kinpusen on record.

Blair evokes the rich symbolic worlds pilgrims projected onto and encountered at Kinpusen in chapter 2, where she explores the pantheon of divinities associated with the mountain, most notably ZaÅ, described variously as a *kami*, a transformation body of Maitreya, a provisional manifestation of Shakyamuni, a divine treasury king, and/or a dragon. She notes that despite ZaÅâs frequent depiction in the style of an esoteric Buddhist divinity, ânowhere in the canon of Buddhist scriptures, ritual manuals, or iconographiesâ does such a deity appear, and yet this âresolutely local, idiosyncratic cultâ continuously attracted the attention of the central elite back in the capital (pp. 63, 61). Blair illuminates the ZaÅ cult with a lucid explanation of *honji suijaku* (fushion of buddhas and *kami*) doctrine, and in presenting her model of ânarrative theologyâ (in the absence of theoretical treatises, the cumulative stories and revelations through which pilgrims disclosed their convictions), she argues persuasively that elite laypersons, as much if not more than ecclesiastical specialists, were at the vanguard of combinatory ideas and practices concerning buddhas and *kami*.

With chapter 3, Blair shifts her discussion to the power-bloc relations that would prove so calamitous for Kinpusen in the years to come. Invoking Kuroda Toshioâs influential discussion of power blocs associated with the court, religious institutions, and warrior houses, Blair productively extends the discussion with her notion of âritual regimesâ that helped consolidate the power blocs presided over by the regents and retired emperors. Drawing on an attentive reading of courtiersâ diaries, Blair demonstrates that the ritual regimes of Fujiwara regents and retired emperors alike followed a consistent symbolic logic, combining âsignature sites, rites, and textsâ to link a sacred site in the capital with a related site on the periphery (p. 110). The ritual regime paradigm helpfully illuminates the lavish ritual system that consistently led Fujiwara regents to Kinpusen during the height of their power to mark the mountain as their own; it also helps contextualize retired emperor Shirakawaâs striking pilgrimage to Kinpusen in 1092 as a significant attempt to wrest Kinpusen as a sacred source of cultural capital from the regents.

In part 2, âThe Real Peak,â Blair pauses her historical chronology somewhat in order to zoom in on the actual symbolic practices undertaken by elites at Kinpusen, focusing on the routes taken (chapter 4), the ritual offerings conducted at the summit and interred therein (chapter 5), and the personnel (and resulting politics) involved (chapter 6). One highlight here is the fragment from Åe no Masafusaâs diary that Blair herself unearthed from the archives of the Imperial Household Agency, recording conversations with Shirakawa during their pilgrimage to Kinpusen in 1092. Masafusaâs diary reveals that even in the midst of the rituals he was sponsoring at the peak, Shirakawa was considering how to overwrite the mountain as his own, discussing mid-ceremony his plans to promote priests from outside the Fujiwara client network, while expressing wariness about the strategic implications of such maneuvers.

In retrospect, Shirakawaâs 1092 pilgrimage was both a kind of pinnacle of glory for Kinpusen and the beginning of an end: one year later the mountaintop hall to ZaÅ was burned to the ground by monks from KÅfukuji, a response in part to Shirakawaâs maneuvering. What follows in the final third of the book is a history of that fallout, detailing the rise of KÅfukuji as a power bloc capable of subsuming such temples as Kinpusen within its network, retired emperorsâ migration to other mountain pilgrimage sites (for example, Kumano), and the appearance of new *engi* (origin narratives) legitimating new organizational affiliations for such sites as Kinpusen. With her epilogue, Blair takes aim at one final target: dismantling once and for all any notion that premodern religious sects such as ShugendÅ are simply the teleologically natural continuations of mountain-religious practices seen earlier in the Heian period. In place of such timeless narratives, Blair offers instead a historiography well attuned to rupture, upheaval, and violent conflict, as well as to accident, error, and faulty calculation.

In reflecting critically on *Real and Imagined*, two considerations arise, neither of which significantly detract from the merit of the work as a whole. First, within the emerging literature on mountain pilgrimage, it seems to be normative for scholars to discuss mountains as both *physical* places and *imaginary* spaces, two categories that then interact in a kind of dialectical fashion. This is announced in the title of Blairâs book (*Real and Imagined*), reflected in its organization (âThe Mountain Imaginedâ

versus âThe Real Peakâ), and embedded throughout the narrative. Notwithstanding its prominence, I found this the least satisfying element of the book. In part, this is because I can think of no culturally important example that is not at once real and imagined; yet it would be cumbersome continually to refer to the âreal and imagined emperor,â the âreal and imagined Ise shrine,â or even the âreal and imagined Kamo River.â It is also because almost as soon as these categories arise they tend to dissolve, as in the opening pages of the section titled âThe Real Peak,â where we learn of the fascinating ways in which pilgrims envisioned their journey to âthe real peakâ as, actually, an ascent through the stages of the bodhisattva path.

A second consideration relates to gender. Given that elite Heian pilgrimage to Kinpusen emerged alongside the introduction of prohibitions against women entering the peak (*nyonin kekkai*), and that Kinpusen remains the only sacred mountain in Japan today that excludes women year-round, a study such as this faces a choice: whether to take up the topic of gender exclusion head on or to stay closer to the historical record, mentioning the few examples of female presence as they arise. Blairâs analysis falls somewhere between the two. She carefully notes the few instances of female presence related to the mountain, including the female *kami* enshrined at the peak, one or two *miko* (female spirit mediums) linked to Kinpusen, and the example of a Heian noblewoman who sent prayer offerings with the wish âthat I may become maleâ (p. 89). Analytically, Blair argues that âpilgrimage depended on conceptual binaries in order to retain its significance as a boundary-crossing exercise that yielded special powers,â and that with the lessening of *ritsuryÅ* oppositions to mountain religious activity, âthe *need* to maintain Kinpusen as a symbolically other world became more pressing,â resulting in the prohibitions against women (pp. 48, 56, emphasis added). Here, I would simply wish to sharpen the language a bit: exclusion (for the benefit of some, at the expense of others) is of course never a *need*, though it may be a choice, a strategy, or a desire. All of which is simply to say that for those wishing an extended discussion of gender and mountain religion, *Real and Imagined* could usefully be paired with other work dealing with mountains in which there is a greater female presence: the final chapter of D. Max Moermanâs *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* (2005) comes to mind.

Such minor hesitations do nothing to detract from the superb contribution Blair has made here. In giving us a micro-history of Heian religious practices at Kinpusen within a macro-history of early and medieval Japanese mountain religion, Blair has produced a magnificent work, one deserving a wide readership among those interested not only in mountain religion but more broadly in premodern Japanese religion, history, and politics as well.

Notes

[1]. Major English-language studies since 2005 include D. Max Moerman, *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005); Sarah Thal, *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods: The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573-1912* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Barbara Ambros, *Emplacing a Pilgrimage: The Åyama Cult and Regional Religion in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008). On pilgrimage more generally, see Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawaiâi Press, 2005).

[2]. Earlier English-language work includes H. Byron Earhart, *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of ShugendÅ: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970); Paul Swanson, âShugendÅ and the Yoshino-Kumano Pilgrimage: An Example of Mountain Pilgrimage,â *Monumenta Nipponica* 36, no. 1 (1981): 55-84; and Allan Grapard, âFlying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions,â *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982): 195-221. See also the translations of work by Miyake Hitoshi: *ShugendÅ: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion*, ed. H. Byron Earhart (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, 2001), and *The Mandala of the Mountain: ShugendÅ and Folk Religion*, ed. Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo: KeiÅ University Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-shukyo

Citation: Jonathan Stockdale. Review of Blair, Heather, *Real and Imagined: The Peak of Gold in Heian Japan.* H-

Shukyo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44641

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.