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Heather Blair’s *Real and Imagined*—focusing on elite lay pilgrimage to Kinpusen during the Heian period—represents 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 Shugendō, were proscribed by the Meiji government—because of their inability to fit into a strict binary of either “Shinto” or “Buddhism”—the 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 “traces” reflecting kami (indigenous deity) cult idioms, Blair’s 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*’s nine chapters (including the epilogue) are further organized into three major parts: “The Mountain Imagined,” “The Real Peak,” and “Changing Landscapes.” 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  

"ritsuryō" (centralized bureaucratic) state to bring religious practice everywhere under its supervision. Only with the attenuation of such  

"ritsuryō" oppositions, Blair argues, was Kinpusen seen by the mid-Heian period no longer as a site of “illegal retreat” but rather as part of an “increasingly civilized mountainscape,” attractive even to elite members of the court aristocracy (pp. 28, 34). Such changes help to contextualize the actions of Fujiwara no Kanei (of the Fujiwara regents’ 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 Zaō, 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 Zaō’s frequent depiction in the style of an esoteric Buddhist divinity, “nowhere in the canon of Buddhist scriptures, ritual manuals, or iconographies” does such a deity appear, and yet this “resolutely local, idiosyncratic cult” continuously attracted the attention of the central elite back in the capital (pp. 63, 61). Blair illuminates the Zaō cult with a lucid explanation of  

"honji suijaku" (fusion of buddhas and "kami") doctrine, and in presenting her model of “narrative theology” (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 combinatorial 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 Toshio’s influential discussion of power blocs associated with the court, religious institutions, and warrior houses, Blair productively extends the discussion with her notion of “ritual regimes” that helped consolidate the power blocs presided over by the regents and retired emperors. Drawing on an attentive reading of courtiers’ diaries, Blair demonstrates that the ritual regimes of Fujiwara regents and retired emperors alike followed a consistent symbolic logic, combining “signature sites, rites, and texts” 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 Shirakawa’s 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, “The Real Peak,” 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 Ōe no Masafusa’s diary that Blair herself unearthed from the archives of the Imperial Household Agency, recording conversations with Shirakawa during their pilgrimage to Kinpusen in 1092. Masafusa’s 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, Shirakawa’s 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 Zaō was burned to the ground by monks from Kōfukuji, a response in part to Shirakawa’s maneuvering. What follows in the final third of the book is a history of that fallout, detailing the rise of Kōfukuji as a power bloc capable of subsuming such temples as Kinpusen within its network, retired emperors’ 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 Shugendō 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 Blair’s book (Real and Imagined), reflected in its organization (“The Mountain Imagined” versus “The Real Peak”), 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 “real and imagined emperor,” the “real and imagined Ise shrine,” or even the “real and imagined Kamo River.” It is also because almost as soon as these categories arise they tend to dissolve, as in the opening pages of the section titled “The Real Peak,” where we learn of the fascinating ways in which pilgrims envisioned their journey to “the real peak” 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. Blair’s 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 “that I may become male” (p. 89). Analytically, Blair argues that “pilgrimage depended on conceptual binaries in order to retain its significance as a boundary-crossing exercise that yielded special powers,” and that with the lessening of ritesuryō oppositions to mountain religious activity, “the need to maintain Kinpusen as a symbolically other world became more pressing,” 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 Moerman’s 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


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