

BOOK REVIEW

*Imagining Exile in Heian Japan:
Banishment in Law, Culture,
and Cult*

By Jonathan Stockdale

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ix + 179 pages.

Reviewed by Sara L. SUMPTER



The motif of exile, whether imposed or self-directed, is a recurrent theme in the myths, legends, stories, and poems of Japan. The ubiquity of this motif naturally gives rise to the question: why does exile resonate so strongly? This is the question underpinning Jonathan Stockdale's richly researched and thought-provoking study, *Imagining Exile in Heian Japan*. Focusing on the Heian period, the book examines the implementation of the exile motif in Japan's early myth-histories, works of fiction, cultic practices, and legal system. In adopting this approach, Stockdale looks beyond disciplinary boundaries to explore how constellations of power—defined by one's proximity to the “privileged ‘center’” (p. 2)—were imagined, and reimagined, through narratives of exile that were characterized by their constantly shifting function: on the one hand to reify, on the other to disrupt, established power hierarchies.

In the first of the book's four main chapters, Stockdale examines how the story of the exile of the god Susano-o, as recounted in the myth-histories of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, served to bolster the authority of the newly emergent Yamato court. In his analysis, which locates these myths within the framework of Yamato politics, Stockdale builds from, and challenges, the theories of Orikuchi Shinobu, who first categorized exile narratives as belonging to a distinct literary genre that he called *kishu ryūritan* (lit. “tales of exiled and wandering nobles”) (p. 19). For Orikuchi, such tales are depoliticized and reveal perspectives unique to the Japanese people. Stockdale, however, rightly rejects this interpretation as ahistorical, noting that the varying versions of the Susano-o myth found in the court histories and regional *fudoki* records in fact reveal a multiplicity of perspectives and objectives in line with the liminal nature of the exile narrative.

In the following chapter, Stockdale turns his attention to the deployment of the exile narrative in fiction, taking for his example the early-ninth century text *Taketori monogatari*. Again, Stockdale's analysis is sharply critical of ahistorical interpretations of the work, notably Michele Marra's, which casts the tale as a triumph of Buddhist values over those of Daoism. Arguing instead that the story's employment of the exile narrative “links the story . . . to the political and legal realities of the Japanese court” (p. 54), Stockdale turns to a contemporary perspective on the *Taketori monogatari*, namely Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari*, which was written a century later. Focusing on the picture contest chapter,

which references the earlier work, Stockdale argues that *Genji*, like the *Taketori* before it, envisions a world where—via the exile narrative—cultural power, if not political power, can be made to rest in the hands of the marginalized.

Building off this argument, Stockdale next turns his attention to cultic practices to explore the story of the life, death, posthumous revenge, and subsequent apotheosis of the ninth-century courtier Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). Michizane's exile serves as one of the most prominent examples of how narratives of exile could be turned against the status quo—what Stockdale refers to as the “dialogic nature of exile in Heian Japan” (p. 82). In Michizane's case, the reversal of legally imposed punishment in response to public ritual practice functioned as a recognition that the political hierarchy could be reordered, if not an outright admission of political weakness.

Finally, Stockdale returns to concepts first raised in his discussion of the *Taketori monogatari*, a story set in a world where transgressions are punished with exile in a clear mirroring of existing legal proscriptions. Expanding upon this point, Stockdale considers the early *ritsuryō* legal codes as imaginative texts that envision “a particular constellation of power enacted in part through the trope of banishment” (p. 86). For this, he draws heavily on Rebecca French's theory of “legal cosmologies” and Michel Foucault's concept of the “microphysics of power,” suggesting that the Heian court's emphasis on exile over execution served to articulate a vision of power that was determined by one's proximity to, or removal from, the “courtly center” (p. 94). The Heian court's long-standing avoidance of execution gave way during the Hōgen Disturbance of 1156, when several high-ranking nobles were put to death for their involvement. It is in his exploration of the disturbance and its history, *Hōgen monogatari*, that Stockdale begins to move away from an analysis of exile. In describing the shock and horror with which the late-Heian-period executions were met, Stockdale hints—perhaps unwittingly—at a society in which exile no longer dominates the cultural imagination. Instead, the narrative of exile gives way to the narrative of execution as the Heian period passes into the Kamakura.

While the interdisciplinary structure of Stockdale's argument gives it an occasionally disjointed feel, that approach is exactly what makes it such a valuable resource to scholars and students of history, religion, literature, and art. Moreover, as I noted above, being predominantly a study of exile in the Heian period, Stockdale's work invites further exploration of the topic. In his conclusion, the author suggests that exile should be understood alongside such “structuring categories of thought” as *mujō* (impermanence), *mappō* (the end of the dharma), and *mono no aware* (poignant awareness) as one of the major frameworks by which the people of the Heian court understood their culture, their society, and its norms (p. 121). He also argues that exile narratives became, with the influx of modernity in the Meiji period, “not merely irrelevant, but contradictory to the national imagination” (p. 120). This raises questions about the exile narrative's place, not just in modern-day discourse, but in the intervening centuries between the end of the Heian period and the beginning of the Meiji. If exile does not appear within the modern Japanese world as a viable trope, what replaced it? And when? And how do we understand it now in light of its supposed extinction?