



**Jonathan Stockdale, *Imagining Exile in Heian Japan: Banishment in Law, Literature, and Cult***

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TODAY JAPAN punishes its most wanton criminals with capital punishment. It is a brutal system where a condemned criminal must sit in virtual solitary confinement until one day without any warning he is summarily executed. I personally was briefly a suspect in a series of brutal killings while a student at Waseda University in Tokyo in 1969. The true murderer, a drifter named Nagayama Norio (1949–1997) was caught in late winter, 1969, and soon convicted, but he remained on death row

until 1997 during which time he got a college degree, wrote two published novels, and even married. Nevertheless, his fate was sealed, but if he had lived during the Heian period (794–1185), his punishment might have been exile.

Jonathan Stockdale, an associate professor of Japanese religion at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, has made an important and original contribution to our understanding of the culture of the noble ruling classes in Japan during the Heian period. *Imagining Exile in Heian Japan*, traces and examines “themes and patterns regarding exile that circulated within early and classical Japanese literature, law, myth and cult” (viii). Many of those banished from the seat of power were central figures in the political center of Japan who lost out in power struggles. Stockdale introduces us to a key figure in Heian Japan, Sugawara no Michizane (c. 845–903), a celebrated poet and scholar and a leading politician of the late ninth century. Michizane experienced defeat in a political showdown at court and had to go into exile at a very remote posting in Dazaifu in what is now Fukuoka Prefecture. Michizane died in exile, but when many ranking officials experienced hardships and unexplained early deaths, many at court believed that Michizane’s spirit had returned to wreak havoc in Kyoto. Throughout the tenth century the Heian government sought to placate Michizane’s spirit by posthumously awarding him with many honors and high government posts. Thus, as Stockdale notes, Michizane achieved in death something unimaginable in life: the highest ranks and office in the court bureaucracy as well as a shrine at a new center of worship that was supported by the powerful Fujiwara clan and the emperor.

Stockdale summarizes the key theme of the book by noting:

During the Heian period, the use of exile as a political strategy was perfected by the regent’s line of the Northern Fujiwara above all others, initiating fraught moments of reorganization within the entire court hierarchy. When several high-ranking members of court died in exile, or under guard away from the capital, exile became a contributing factor in the emergence of the cult of vengeful/honored spirits, who were believed responsible for a variety of misfortunes befalling the capital area. In every case, the pacification of these spirits involved returning them to the capital, where they were enshrined in sacred sites newly established for their worship. Decrees of banishment were rescinded, titles reconferred, in a concerted effort to erase any wrongdoing from the public transcript and to restore the figures to positions of centrality within the Heian imagination... [I]n Michizane’s case, the political sanction of exile was met with a religious rejoinder, through which an exiled noble was reinstated in the capital in divine form, continuing the reconfiguration of the political and religious landscape in new and significant ways (81–82).

The idea and practice of banishment was far more than a mere political tool to rid victors at court of unwanted power seekers. It caught the public imagination and became a central feature of popular literature and legends and an oft noted subject in poetry and diaries. Stockdale looks at length at two major works of Heian literature: the fairy story, *Kaguyahime*, and *The Tale of Genji*. In *Kaguyahime* (English titles *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* or *The Moon Shining Princess*), a lowly old

bamboo cutter discovers a precious tiny little girl inside a stalk of bamboo. Nearby he finds vast quantities of gold. He and his wife nurture the baby who in a short time grows up to be the most beautiful and sought after potential bride in the kingdom. But despite the entreaties of many high-ranking courtiers, she rebuffs them and finally reveals that she is a princess among people living on the moon. She was sent to earth because of a misdemeanor committed on the moon and will soon return there. Although the emperor sent two thousand armed guards to repel an honor guard from the moon who came to fetch her, Kaguyahime made good her return from exile on the earth. Stockdale also deals with the saga of the “Shining Prince” and his brief exile in the *Tale of Genji*.

Stockdale in this work demonstrates a firm understanding and appreciation for Heian culture and his attention to the importance of the theme of banishment is very well placed. His thesis is clear and his use of examples from literature support his argument very well. The research is solid and the writing is clear. This is an enjoyable and quite fascinating read, and a highly original and important contribution to the study of Heian literature and culture.

Daniel A. Métraux  
*Mary Baldwin College*