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# **Discourses of the Heian Era and National Identity Formation in Contemporary Japan**

**John L. Hennessey**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the relationship between history and national identity, specifically how “golden ages” in a nation’s past are used for nationalist ends. Using discourse analysis, it examines how two types of popular historical venues, museums and textbooks, present Japan’s Heian period (794-1185) and explores what this reveals about Japanese national identity formation. The Heian era has a mixed legacy, making it an interesting case study of nationalist uses of history. The study concludes that there seem to be two major discourses of the Heian era in contemporary Japan: a literary discourse celebrating the epoch’s aesthetics and a historical discourse that is less enthusiastic. The first is far more prevalent, but it depicts certain facets of the Heian period, like differing gender norms, that apparently challenge the nationalist narrative of public history venues. The second discourse endeavors to rehabilitate the Heian era as another “respectable” piece of the master Japanese historical narrative. The presence of a strong literary discourse of the Heian that runs against some Japanese elites’ aims renders the Heian period an unappealing choice as a “golden age”, despite its achievements.



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## Introduction

What is it that makes a historical period a “golden age” in a nation’s past? In his article “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal,” Anthony D. Smith discusses this question in detail.<sup>1</sup> Smith contends that, “The greater, the more glorious that antiquity appears, the easier it becomes to mobilize people around a common culture, to unify the various groups of which they are composed and to identify a shared national identity.”<sup>2</sup> According to Smith, golden ages are “an important, and probably essential, component of nationalism.”<sup>3</sup> Although Smith admits that they can be open for “reinterpretation,” both the antiquity of the golden age and its historical veracity, or “authenticity,” are important for its successful use for nationalist ends.<sup>4</sup> These factors, along with the epoch’s particular characteristics, help to determine the resonance that golden age rhetoric can have with a nation’s populace and thus its effectiveness in nationalist mobilization.

Keeping Smith’s ideas in mind, in this paper I will investigate the relevance of the Heian period (794–1185) to contemporary Japanese national identity as a case study of the link between history and nationalist sentiment. Japan is often cited as an example of nationalism, especially regarding depictions of the Second World War, but there is considerably less research on Japanese presentations of earlier periods in Japanese history and their impact on national identity. The Heian period, a historically distant era characterized by a stable state and a flourishing culture, is in many ways a good candidate for a golden age. Although there are several works on the relationship between Japanese national identity and the Heian era’s literature,<sup>5</sup> there appears to be little or no scholarship about the period’s history as presented in popular historical venues. This study will use discourse analysis to investigate how the Heian period is presented in two such venues, Japan’s national history museum and textbooks. By comparing these history discourses with what has been previously written about Heian literature and nationalism, I hope to generate insight into how (and why) history is presented in contemporary Japan and how this relates to Japanese national identity. What significance, if any, does the Heian period have for Japanese today? How important is historical accuracy to nationalist projects that employ golden ages? What makes a golden age “effective”?

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> See Shirane 2008; Yoda 2004; and Hirota 1997.

## Why the Heian Period?

The Heian period is interesting from the perspective of historical consciousness because of its complex historical legacy. On the one hand, in many ways the period can be considered a golden age. Often referred to as Japan's "classical age,"<sup>6</sup> it is widely considered to be the time when the Japanese began to adapt the Chinese cultural features they had copied in earlier periods to better suit their own taste, notably through the development of *kana* phonetic scripts. It is the age of the *Kokinwakashū* poetry collection and great literary romances such as *The Tale of Genji*, as well as mastery in numerous visual arts. Furthermore, by present-day standards, in some ways Heian society could be considered to be ahead of its time. Capital punishment was abolished for most of the period, perhaps making Japan the first country in the world to do so.<sup>7</sup> Heian aristocratic women arguably had more rights and freedoms than Japanese women in later periods, such as inheritance rights and legal protection from being beaten by their husbands.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Heian Japan had a stable central government for centuries, especially compared with subsequent ages.

Nevertheless, the Heian era was also marked by what could be considered less inspiring characteristics. For example, to many Japanese today, male Heian courtiers may appear excessively feminine with their intense expressions of emotion, strong interest in aesthetics, and preoccupation with costume, especially when compared with the warriors of later periods.<sup>9</sup> The Heian family structure, with its strong matrilineal traditions, polygamy, and what could be described as a high level of permissiveness towards extramarital sexual liaisons by both men and women,<sup>10</sup> combines with the aforementioned elements to create a gendered situation that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable for many modern Japanese. Moreover, the highly stratified and aristocrat-centered nature of Heian society clashes with more recent populist and democratic sentiments. These examples show the legacy of the Heian era to be ambiguous and therefore very much open to interpretation, making it valuable for a study of nation identity formation.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Shively 1999, p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt 2002, p. 191.

<sup>8</sup> Morris 1994, pp. 205–209.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144–147.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–26.

# Theory and Terminology

## Discourse Analysis

This paper will use the theoretical tools of discourse analysis to explore how the Heian era is presented in contemporary Japan, scrutinizing the language with which it is presented and searching for clues about the political goals of these texts' authors. There are many varieties of discourse analysis, but this study will mainly draw on the approaches outlined by Gee and Fairclough.<sup>11</sup> Discourse analysts like Gee recognize that all discourse is inherently political since one's choice of language necessarily reflects a certain position or viewpoint about what is "appropriate,' 'typical' and/or 'normal.'"<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the language used to discuss a subject affects how it is understood and interpreted. For these reasons, the control of discourse is a source of power.

Although everyone manipulates discourse on a daily basis, the ability to influence others through discourse is not equal due to differential access to venues of information dissemination.<sup>13</sup> Especially in an era characterized by mass communication, national school curricula and the like, whether intentionally or unintentionally certain discourses can become extremely widespread and naturalized to the point of blocking out alternate ways of thinking about a topic.<sup>14</sup> These are known as hegemonic discourses. This paper will attempt to identify whether such hegemonic discourses exist concerning the Heian era in contemporary Japan and speculate on how and why they came into being.

As a final note, discourse analysts delineate the "texts" they study with a great deal of flexibility. It is common for studies of discourses of national identity to treat museums as "texts,"<sup>15</sup> taking into account features of their presentation beyond what is written on signs, such as the arrangement of displays.

## Theories of Nationalism

An analysis of discourses of the Heian period becomes far more meaningful when related to theories of nationalism that can help to explain their role in the creation of a Japanese national identity. This paper follows Umut

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<sup>11</sup> Gee 2005; Fairclough 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Gee 2005, pp. 2,84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 81, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Fairclough 2010, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Thomas 1998.

Özkırmılı, who defines nationalism “as a ‘discourse,’ a particular way of seeing and interpreting the world, a frame of reference that helps us make sense of and structure the reality that surrounds us.”<sup>16</sup> Discourses of the Heian era in contemporary Japan could constitute one of the component parts of the overall discourse of Japanese nationalism. Özkırmılı describes the discourse of nationalism as being characterized by three claims: “identity claims” that divide the world “into ‘us’ and ‘them,’” “temporal claims” emphasizing the nation’s antiquity or timeless nature, and “spatial claims” to a particular territory designated as the “homeland.”<sup>17</sup> The second of these is the most relevant to the role of discourses of the Heian era in shaping contemporary nationalist sentiment. The propagators of this second discourse allege that their nation has its origins in the distant past, and that the modern inhabitants of a particular nation are the inheritors of longstanding traditions. As Özkırmılı notes, however, the conceptualization of nations as “imagined” or nationalism as a “discourse” does not deny their reality or meaningfulness.<sup>18</sup> Nationalism becomes important whenever people speak of and view the world in terms of nations, whether or not these nations are arbitrarily defined.

This study will take the position that nationalist discourse reflects the interests of different elites in society who are vying for control and influence. As Paul Brass puts it:

the study of ethnicity and nationality is in large part the study of the process by which elites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group’s culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the Heian era can be viewed as a tool that can be used to various ends via different discursive formulations in the process of constructing competing versions of Japanese national identity. Although sharing a focus on the historical myths and symbols used by nationalism, in particular the golden age, this paper will diverge from the ethnosymbolist position of Anthony D. Smith that elites are seriously constrained by the historical veracity of these nation-building tools.<sup>20</sup> Rather, as Özkırmılı argues, “It is true that the present cannot alter the past, but it can ignore certain elements and emphasize others, exaggerate the relevance of some, trivialize that of others, and it can

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<sup>16</sup> Özkırmılı 2010, p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Brass 1979, pp. 40–41 cited in Özkırmılı 2010, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Smith 1997, p. 59; Özkırmılı 2010, pp. 202–204, 214.

certainly distort realities.”<sup>21</sup> Although elites who depict the Heian era in museums, books, films and so on are somewhat constrained by known historical facts, this study will aim to show that such restraint is minimal, and aspects of the Heian period will freely be underscored, ignored, or even invented as the situation requires. Analyzing how this is done may provide some insights into the political goals of these texts’ authors.

At this point, it is important to note that this understanding of elite manipulation of history for nationalist ends is not intended to paint a picture of nefarious pseudo-historians seeking to brainwash the Japanese masses. Although the downplaying of Japanese atrocities during the Second World War in Japanese middle school textbooks is well known, this is an extreme example of a ubiquitous selection process in all history writing. As explained above, from the perspective of discourse analysis, all history (like all forms of discourse) involves a “selection bias” reflecting political goals. It is simply not possible to write a purely objective historical account – if nothing else, the sheer volume of historical documents and data available for most periods necessitates a selection of what the historian believes to be the most important, relevant, or interesting features for their text.<sup>22</sup> There is a discursive selection process at work in all history writing, not just in obvious cases of deliberate distortion.

### **Author, Text and Audience**

A last important theoretical perspective taken by this paper concerns the relationship between author, text and audience and will draw on insights from the field of media studies. This paper will take the position that it is possible to make hypotheses about authorial intent from texts, but that it is much more dubious to extrapolate audience reception from textual analysis. As numerous media scholars warn,<sup>23</sup> it is necessary to avoid the mistake of assuming that the media texts that people are exposed to strongly affect their understanding of the subject matter, without taking into account the possibility of multiple audience interpretations and reactions. Many studies of social phenomena such as nationalism take it for granted that media such as textbooks directly mold their audiences’ worldview, but media studies theorists strongly contest this assumption. Scholars in this field convincingly argue that it is difficult to gather reliable data about audience reception even through surveys since attitudes towards a text are largely subconscious and can

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<sup>21</sup> Özkırmılı 2010, p. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold 2000, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Wood 2007 and Stokes 2003, pp. 131–32.

be distorted by their very solicitation. This paper can therefore do little more than form broad conjectures about the audience reception of the discourses it analyzes, instead concentrating on the texts themselves as well as the apparent intentions of their authors. It will nonetheless focus on texts that seem to have large audiences and will include any available data about audience size and distribution. In this way, it can be argued that the texts analyzed in this paper represent some of the most widespread, and perhaps influential, discourses of the Heian era.

## Heian Literature and Japanese National Identity

Despite the lack of studies on the history of the Heian era and national identity, there are several works that examine the relationship between Heian literature, particularly *The Tale of Genji*, and the creation of “Japaneseness.” Tomiko Yoda examines this relation from a gendered perspective.<sup>24</sup> Most significantly for this paper, Yoda reveals that certain images and assumptions about the Heian period have become widespread in Japanese society as a result of familiarity with Heian literature and related commentaries. I will call this the “literary” discourse to distinguish it from the “historical” discourse(s) used at public history venues that I will examine below. The literary discourse emphasizes the feminine nature of the Heian era, placing a great emphasis on Heian women (the period’s most famous authors) as well as its elegant culture.<sup>25</sup> Heian men are depicted as having been effeminate, effete, inept and only interested in aesthetics. To summarize the literary discourse:

The picture of elegant Heian aristocrats inhabiting an exquisitely refined court society – immersed in the pleasures of art and literature and shunning prosaic concerns such as economic affairs, military training, and even official matters of the state bureaucracy – has circulated widely through the popular reception of mid-Heian texts such as *The Tale of Genji*.<sup>26</sup>

While praising Heian artistry, this depiction of the period is not entirely flattering or useful to a backward-looking nationalist.

The bulk of Yoda’s book traces the attitudes of scholars and literary critics from the eighteenth century to the present towards Heian literature. These scholars, she explains, have attempted to fit Heian literature into a contrived

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<sup>24</sup> Yoda 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 27. Ivan Morris gives a very similar description of this literary discourse. Morris 1994, p. 5.

nationalistic framework, obscuring a true understanding of Heian literary works and their historical context.<sup>27</sup> One of her central conclusions is that such texts' treatment of Heian female writers and their works serves to "sublate" the feminine, whereby "the feminine is recognized, canceled, and then contained within the national framework articulated in masculine terms."<sup>28</sup> In other words, both past and contemporary Japanese literary scholars have found it problematic to fit some of Japan's most celebrated literary works, those authored by Heian women, into a male-centered conception of Japanese national literature. As a consequence, they have pursued different strategies in their treatment of works such as *The Tale of Genji* that both praise them for their contribution to national literature and criticize them from a gendered perspective (for example, female writers' works fall short of being "truly universal" due to their feminine character).<sup>29</sup> The uneasiness with the Heian gender situation revealed by these literary scholars' paradoxical celebration and gendered critique of female-authored Heian literature will be important to my analysis of historical discourses later on.

Yoda also explains how Japanese scholars during the Meiji period (1868–1912) attempted to fit Japanese literary history into a Western schema consisting of classical, medieval and early modern periods.<sup>30</sup> In this framework, the Heian era was labeled as Japanese literature's "classical" period, whereas subsequent "medieval" periods plagued by constant warfare were seen to represent a period of decline.<sup>31</sup> The Tokugawa period (1603–1868), during which Japan was unified and largely peaceful, is considered "the second peak, topping the achievements of the Heian through the diversity of its literary forms and the types of people who participated in literary production, including not only aristocrats and warriors but also commoners."<sup>32</sup> I will designate this interpretation of Japanese history the "two peaks" model. The periodization of history, like the delineation of geographical boundaries, represents a subtle but powerful discursive tool. Assigning labels to historical periods like "classical period" similarly creates value judgments that affect the interpretation of history. Although the Heian period can be more or less objectively defined by the years that the capital was located in present-day Kyoto, whether this is a useful classification and what parts of this long period best represent "Heian" culture are debatable.

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<sup>27</sup> Yoda 2004, p. 20, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42,74–75.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



Lastly, based on this “two peaks” periodization scheme, Yoda makes the important claim that among Meiji scholars, “Heian court society and its culture were shunned more for their aristocratic exclusivity than for their effeminacy.”<sup>33</sup> Arguably, *both* conflict with modern Japanese sensibilities and values, making it harder to relate to this distant epoch. As some of the sources below will indicate, this distaste for the elitist, closed nature of Heian aristocratic culture seems to be shared by public history venues.

A second important analysis of modern attitudes towards Heian literature, this time *The Tale of Genji* in particular, can be found in the anthology *Envisioning the Tale of Genji: Media, Gender and Cultural Production* edited by Haruo Shirane.<sup>34</sup> Articles on contemporary presentations of Murasaki Shikibu’s seminal work in film and *manga* by Kazuhiro Tateishi and Yukia Kitamura, respectively, show that these media spread a literary discourse about the Heian period very similar to the one described above by Yoda.<sup>35</sup> Both articles show that although modern adaptations of *The Tale of Genji* tend to condense and even change the original story to a great extent, the elegance of Heian aesthetics remains an integral part of nearly all of them, indicating that this is one of the most widely recognized aspects of the period among Japanese people. Furthermore, film and *manga* adaptations have increasingly become explicitly sexual, with some bordering on the pornographic.<sup>36</sup> This trend, while surely more an attempt to increase sales than steer Japanese historical consciousness, undoubtedly reinforces the notion of Heian courtiers as pleasure-seekers who focused more on love affairs than important political matters. Whether the discourses of the Heian era these literary studies have uncovered are reinforced or countered by public history venues will be explored in the next section.

## Discourses of the Heian Period at Public History Venues

In the following sections, I will search for discursive patterns shared by a number of historical texts on the Heian period that could be indicative of a hegemonic discourse and discuss what implications these could have for the formation of Japanese national identity. With a goal of discovering and analyzing the most prevalent historical discourses of the Heian period in contemporary Japan, I have chosen texts that both reach a large audience and

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<sup>33</sup> Yoda 2004, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> Shirane 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Tateishi 2008; Kitamura 2008.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

can claim some kind of authority. I will therefore focus on two public history venues: the National Museum of Japanese History and school textbooks, as these are both open to and targeted toward the general public.

## The National Museum of Japanese History

There do not appear to be many Japanese museums that have permanent exhibits on the Heian period. I have chosen to examine the largest and most important, the National Museum of Japanese History (*Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan*, or *Rekihaku* for short). This museum also appears to be the only museum in Japan that presents the Heian period in a primarily historical way, the others mainly being devoted to art and culture. As its name implies, *Rekihaku* is a large, state-funded institution that contains exhibits presenting an overview of Japanese history from Paleolithic to modern times. It also contains a research institute employing several dozen specialists of different aspects of Japanese history, granting it a high degree of authority and a link to ongoing academic research. Somewhat surprisingly, given its impressive collection, apparent ample funding and good facilities, *Rekihaku* has relatively few annual visitors. In 2009, the museum only had 187,367 visitors, roughly the same as the annual attendance during the previous five years.<sup>37</sup> This undoubtedly has to do with its location in Sakura, a town in the Tokyo suburbs about an hour from the city center. Nevertheless, the museum's official nature makes it a good location to study historical discourses. As a nationally established institution, it is expected to provide an authoritative narrative of Japanese history. Furthermore, according to the museum staff, many of the museum's permanent exhibits, including the section on the Heian period, have remained unchanged since their creation nearly three decades ago, providing ample time for the spread of their discourses to many Japanese. There are no current plans to change the exhibit on the Heian period for the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup>

*Rekihaku*'s exhibit on the Heian period would seem to be the kind of place where nationalistic claims about Japan's greatness since antiquity would be made. The large museum complex boasts monumental architecture that endows it with a sense of authority. Despite having been established only in the early 1980s, *Rekihaku* is a traditional national history museum, being characterized by a relatively linear exhibit plan that guides the viewer through the historical progress of the Japanese nation more or less unambiguously. The geographical boundaries of the history presented correspond with those

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<sup>37</sup> Kokuritsu 2010, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> Museum Spokesperson, February 1, 2011.

of the modern Japanese state and the exhibits are clearly meant to represent the continuous development of a single nation. Moreover, the original target audience is clearly the Japanese population rather than foreign tourists, as there is only a partial translation of the museum's exhibits and materials into other languages.

The visitor's guide available for purchase at the museum contains what appears to be a proud, nationalistic presentation of the Heian period.<sup>39</sup> It emphasizes that the mid-Heian period saw the development of "a culture with distinctive Japanese qualities," as opposed to earlier emulations of Tang Chinese culture.<sup>40</sup> The guide also states that the development of *kana* "made possible the rich and nuanced expression of emotion," implying that this was not possible beforehand, when only Chinese characters were used.<sup>41</sup> The overview of the Heian era exhibit concludes with the extraordinary claim that,

The delicate, graceful, and refined sensibility that emerged out of this aristocratic culture exerted its influence far beyond the era and class that produced it, extending to warriors and commoners of the Edo period (1603–1686). Indeed, it is still felt by people ["us" in the Japanese version] today, making it fair to say that the aesthetic sensibility of the Japanese people has its roots in the aristocratic culture of the Heian court.<sup>42</sup>

In this citation, the guide celebrates mid-Heian court culture and attempts to link it to the contemporary Japanese nation.

This text exemplifies the type of elite manipulation of history for nationalist ends described by Brass and Özkırmılı.<sup>43</sup> The language of the text unmistakably treats the Heian period as a golden age, using ample adjectives like "rich," "delicate," "graceful," and "refined" to describe its culture. In this, it echoes the common aesthetic perceptions of Heian culture conveyed by the literary discourse described above. More important are the links it attempts to create between Heian court culture and modern Japanese people, especially in its claim that Heian courtly aesthetics underlie contemporary Japanese aesthetics. This kind of assertion attempts to show that there is some sort of national essence that remains unchanged across vast spans of time. The two mentions of class in the citation seem to indicate that the author is aware of

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<sup>39</sup> National Museum 2002, pp.16–17. While the actual museum displays and signs were only in Japanese apart from short English titles, this guide was available in English. A comparison of the Japanese and English versions shows that the translation is very complete and accurate, so it is used here. Citations from the signs in *Rekihaku*, however, are my translation.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> National Museum 2002, p.16; Gaido 2010, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Özkırmılı 2010, pp. 89–90, 214–15.

the possible difficulty of celebrating such an elitist culture in an age marked by democratic sensibilities. However, such snags are easily overcome. The first sentence in the passage attempts to bridge this gap by linking Heian aesthetics with later warrior and commoner culture. By the final sentence the author connects Heian court culture with all modern Japanese (“us”) in a way that subtly assumes a cultural uniformity within contemporary national boundaries. In these ways, the visitor’s guide is a classic example of how nationalist claims can be made about distant historical periods such as the Heian, making links with modern people and downplaying inconvenient contradictions. Nevertheless, the museum exhibit itself is far less ebullient and openly nationalistic than the guide in its description of the Heian era.

The exhibit is divided into three rooms covering four major themes. The first room presents maps of the capital and architectural models. The second room contains a display case with reproductions of Heian furnishings as well as life-sized mannequins dressed in aristocratic costume. The third and final room has an exhibit devoted to Heian court ceremony and religion as well as a display about developments in Japanese writing. Although the curators seem to have intended for visitors to follow the exhibit in this order, it is set up in such a way that visitors can easily pass through the first room into the exhibits about subsequent periods, bypassing the second and third rooms altogether.

The introductory sign at the entrance to the exhibit lays out the main themes of the exhibit and is worth quoting at length for analysis:

From the middle of the Heian Period, a court culture flourished that displayed Japanese characteristics while in the process of assimilating Tang culture. This culture had a strongly aristocratic, feminine and urban character and was characterized by literary works such as the *Kokinwakashu* and *The Tale of Genji*, as well as fine arts and crafts of a superior refinement and subtlety not possible in subsequent periods. Moreover, during this time the creation of *hiragana* and *katana* replaced *manyōgana*, making it possible to freely express oneself in writing in Japanese without using Chinese characters. *Kana* literature played an extremely important role in the later development and spread of culture within Japan. [¶] The [Heian] aristocratic lifestyle was full of splendor, but on the other hand, [Heian aristocrats’] anxiety and dread about the present and future was strong, as witnessed by the erection of numerous temples and statues of the Buddha as well as the frequency of temple visits.<sup>44</sup>

The overall view of the Heian period presented in this passage is positive, but more restrained than that in the visitor’s guide. Mid-Heian culture is

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<sup>44</sup> Kokuritsu 1983.

described merely as displaying “Japanese characteristics while in the process of assimilating Tang culture,” rather than as rejecting Tang forms in favor of purely indigenous ones.<sup>45</sup> Although *kana* is recognized as being “extremely important” in later Japanese cultural development (hardly a controversial statement), sweeping claims linking Heian aesthetics to modern Japanese sensibilities are absent from this text, as from the rest of the exhibit. In fact, this sign suggests that a cultural decline took place after the Heian era when it mentions that subsequent periods lacked the same level of craftsmanship. This introductory sign’s more reserved tone when describing the Heian period is consistent with the rest of *Rekihaku*’s Court Culture exhibit.

One of the most striking aspects of this text is the second paragraph’s treatment of Buddhism. The first sentence emphasizes the contrast between the luxury of Heian aristocratic life and their deep fear for their lives and afterlives. It seems to be aimed at preventing the reader from getting too carried away with Heian high culture by asserting that the period was also notable for the “anxiety” and “dread” that the aristocrats felt. It would have been easy for the author(s) of this text to glorify the Buddhist activities it mentions as another sign of civilization, craftsmanship, spiritual devotion, and so on, but it curiously treats these only as indications of a general malaise among the nobility. Several other signs similarly contrast sumptuous aristocratic lifestyles and religious-inspired fear, using Heian picture scrolls illustrating hell and the realm of hungry ghosts as support.<sup>46</sup> The craftsmanship of Heian ritual Buddhist objects is praised to some extent, but the overall theme of malaise remains prominent throughout the exhibit. There is a strong focus on the practice of creating sutra mounds, the burial of sutras to help enlighten future generations due to Heian nobles’ belief that the world was entering a decadent age.<sup>47</sup> Some 12 signs (of around 45 in total) describe sutra mounds and introduce archaeological finds from these mounds that are on display. The exhibit’s strong focus on this practice is undoubtedly due in part to the artifacts the museum was able to acquire, but it nevertheless reinforces the idea of Heian aristocrats as living in fear and feeling the need to earn salvation. This gloomy depiction of the Heian era serves to keep idolization of the period as a golden age in check, marking an important departure from the presentation of the Heian period in the visitor’s guide.

Another theme throughout the exhibit is the life of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027). This most powerful of Heian courtiers is present almost

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<sup>45</sup> At least one scholar convincingly rejects the idea that Heian aristocrats had any intention of distancing themselves from “foreign” influences. Itō 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Kokuritsu 1983.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

everywhere in *Rekihaku's* Heian exhibit, appearing in no fewer than nine signs covering architecture, official court duties, and religion. He is often presented with little or no introduction, suggesting that the exhibit's creators believed him to be well known by most Japanese. Other figures from the Heian era are mentioned in the exhibit, but receive nowhere near Michinaga's prominence. By relating multiple topics to him, the exhibit effectively uses Michinaga as a representative of the Heian era.

While it would seem that most Japanese are familiar with Michinaga, and while there is certainly a comparatively large amount of source material about his life, I would argue that he is not the only obvious choice to represent the Heian period. Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*, and her rival Sei Shōnagon, author of *The Pillow Book* also left ample documents behind and are probably more famous than Michinaga. However, each of these female writers is mentioned only once in the entire exhibit, and even *The Tale of Genji* is mentioned just three times, and then only in passing. It seems odd that any exhibit attempting to present an overview of the Heian period would largely ignore this most famous work of Japanese literature and the insights that it provides into life during this period. Consciously or unconsciously, the prominence of Michinaga and near total absence of the Heian era's most celebrated female authors in the exhibit reflect an important choice in its design.

Although Michinaga is nearly omnipresent in the exhibit, it is not immediately apparent in what light the museum curators hoped to depict this powerful noble and his fellow aristocrats. One display, however, provides some clues. In the third room there is a detailed schedule covering one month in the lives of Michinaga and a lower-ranking courtier, Fujiwara no Yukinari, based on their diaries. A sign introducing the schedule reads:

Regarding aristocrats' political life, at court there were many cases of different rituals and ceremonies, and among them important annual events were not few. Because precedents were closely followed for these, not only the agenda but also the etiquette concerning their official duties relating to official functions was scrupulously recorded in their appointed journals /... / For the majority of the month, the practical business and daily work assignments were not only undertaken by lower grade public servants, but the nobility's daily schedules were also very busy with work.<sup>48</sup>

The entire text (and indeed, the inclusion of an elaborate schedule in the exhibit culled from two prominent courtiers' journals) clearly indicates a

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<sup>48</sup> Kokuritsu 1983.

desire to portray Heian nobles as busy, likely in an effort to rehabilitate them from their widespread image as effete, lazy literati who whiled away the hours in artistic pursuits while more serious warriors took control of the country. The passage opens by emphasizing the number of rituals and events Heian aristocrats took part in, laying the ground for the later assertion that even the highest-ranking aristocrats had a great deal of work to do. The second sentence could be interpreted as emphasizing the seriousness of Heian courtiers in their scrupulous record keeping. Finally, the last sentence explicitly contradicts the notion that the highest aristocrats frittered away their days in pleasurable pursuits.

A second explanatory text generally reinforces this view of Heian aristocrats as hardworking, but this time it seems to make an exception for Michinaga:

The days that Minister of the Left Fujiwara no Michinaga visited the imperial palace numbered 19 and there were 7 days when he was confined to his home on unlucky days. On the other side, for Fujiwara no Yukinari, who was at that time the Head Keeper of the Imperial Archives /.../ every day was completely occupied with going to and from the imperial palace, Michinaga's mansion and other places, keeping him under exceeding pressure from his civil service work.<sup>49</sup>

This text repeats the emphasis of the previous sign on hard work concerning Yukinari but diverges when it comes to Michinaga. The author's choice to juxtapose these schedules and count out the number of days Michinaga was absent makes Michinaga look indolent by comparison with Yukinari. The passage's indirect criticism of the custom of unlucky days and directional taboos commonly observed by high nobles in the Heian period further depicts Michinaga in a negative light. By mentioning Michinaga's frequent confinement to home on such days right before saying that Yukinari was occupied by official business every day, the caption effectively makes such taboos seem not only silly, but a pretext by Michinaga for shirking his duties. This text's implicit comparison suggests that the museum's fascination with Michinaga is perhaps not indicative of admiration. The positive light in which Fujiwara no Yukinari's hard work is depicted nonetheless reinforces the previous sign's attempt at making Heian nobles in general look less lazy than is commonly thought.

It is also important to note aspects of the Heian era that are absent from the exhibit. The signs about Michinaga's and Yukinari's schedules reflect two

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<sup>49</sup> Kokuritsu 1983.

important ways that the exhibit's creators chose *not* to present the mid- to late Heian period: as feminine, and as characterized by decadence and numerous sexual liaisons. Although the introductory sign describes Heian culture as feminine, the choice of presenting the daily lives of two *men*, as well as the absence of any description of female life (apart from their costume), definitely steers the emphasis away from women in the museum's presentation of the Heian era. This is certainly not for lack of primary sources on the daily life of women, *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon being the best example. Although it is debatable whether *The Tale of Genji* is mostly realistic, many prominent historians like Ivan Morris use literary sources such as *The Tale of Genji* as historical evidence of the conditions of the Heian period.<sup>50</sup> By relying almost exclusively on non-fiction sources in their exhibit such as the journals of men, while barely mentioning famous literary works by female authors, the exhibit's creators effectively seem to be taking the position that period literature does not accurately reflect Heian life. Instead, the exhibit tries to recreate the image of Heian aristocrats as more serious, hardworking and respectable individuals. In any case, the conspicuous absence of any discussion of Heian family life and sexual mores is noteworthy – this could be a sign that the museum curators want to downplay the differences of the Heian nobility from Japanese in later periods.

A second aspect of the Heian era that is not mentioned at all in *Rekihaku's* exhibit is the ways in which the period could be considered peaceful, such as the absence of major wars during most of the period and the abolition of capital punishment. Surely these could be significant for its presentation as a golden age, especially postwar Japanese governments and private organizations have long sought create an image of their country as a peace-loving nation. With regard to the exhibit's stance on Heian Buddhism, it seems odd that the exhibit's authors would associate dread and anxiety so closely with the Heian era, given the near-constant warfare and instability of subsequent periods. Nevertheless, despite the absence of any mention of the Heian period's relative tranquility, *Rekihaku* is not quiet about its admiration of the later Tokugawa period's peace and stability. This later period's accomplishments are displayed in far more detail and its peacefulness is repeatedly mentioned.<sup>51</sup> This, combined with the fact that the long, tumultuous period between the Heian and the Tokugawa eras is accorded relatively little attention, suggests that the designers of the museum may have thought along the lines of the

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<sup>50</sup> Morris 1994, pp.146–147.

<sup>51</sup> Kokuritsu 2008.



“two peaks” periodization of Japanese history described by Yoda, holding the Tokugawa period in higher esteem than the Heian.

In summary, in spite of its enthusiastic visitor guide, *Rekihaku*'s exhibit about the Heian era is no unmitigated nationalistic celebration of a golden age in Japan's past. On the one hand, it does choose to only present aristocratic culture from the time it was at its peak. The exhibit is not stingy with praise for Heian arts and crafts and it clearly reflects pride about the contribution of *kana* writing to the expression of the Japanese language. It also seems to attempt to improve the image of Heian courtiers by portraying them as busy and hardworking. Nevertheless, it makes sure to remind visitors of the Buddhist-inspired anxiety Heian courtiers felt and fails to make note of the relative stability and peacefulness of the period. Most of its signs unemotionally present technical information such as craft techniques or architectural details. It completely omits apparently undesirable details about Heian family structure. It does not really make an effort to help the visitor connect to or see him- or herself in the aristocrats of the Heian period in a way that could inspire a sense of national identity.<sup>52</sup>

### Japanese Secondary School Textbooks

Unlike the rather static view of history provided by *Rekihaku*'s longstanding permanent museum exhibits, the content of Japanese history textbooks, which is screened by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), is very fluid and sensitive to political changes. As an important study of such textbooks' treatment of the Second World War has shown, historical discourses in these books change with every screening as authors test the boundaries of this process and the government revises its guidelines.<sup>53</sup> Content is added and removed and attention is paid even to footnotes, pictures and small details, which are frequently modified from edition to edition.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the content of the textbooks examined here cannot necessarily be said to reflect longstanding discourses of the Heian period, only recent ones, even if they are currently very widespread.

Japanese public secondary school students seem to typically study the Heian period's history only at three points during their education, once each when they are in elementary, middle, and high school. Modern history, however, is

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<sup>52</sup> A longer, unpublished version of this paper argues that the Tokyo National Museum largely reflects this discourse of the Heian period, including its near-total absence of Heian women, although this latter museum is less negative about Buddhism and does not adhere to the “two peaks” periodization scheme.

<sup>53</sup> Nozaki 2008.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

studied more frequently, as it is taught in the same historical overview courses that the Heian era is studied in as well as in additional courses exclusively dedicated to later historical periods. This already provides some clues about the importance of the Heian era to Japanese national identity in the minds of Japanese elites. According to my interview with one high school history teacher, high school Japanese history is no longer mandatory and of those who do take the course, many students studying for college entrance exams frequently skip their Japanese history classes or do not take them seriously.<sup>55</sup> Middle school textbooks have been selected for this study since they are used in mandatory courses and because they presumably have more detailed information than elementary school textbooks.

I examined three Japanese middle school history textbooks, giving preference to those from publishers with a relatively high market share in an attempt to find the most prevalent discourses of the Heian period. The texts I chose came from three publishing firms (out of a total of 15) that had a combined middle school textbook market share of 40.3% in 2009.<sup>56</sup> The textbooks are 1) *New Society: History*, 2) *History: Gazing at the Future*, and 3) *History for Middle School Students: Japan's Progress and the World's Development*.<sup>57</sup> For the sake of convenience, these texts will be referred to by these numbers for the remainder of the paper. Although it is difficult to gauge audience reception of the texts, it is hoped that as some of the most widespread textbooks their discourses of the Heian era will at least reflect how prominent Japanese educators hope that the period will be thought about.

All three texts are very similar, both in form and content. The format of the books consists of a main text surrounded by supplementary texts in boxes, explanations of key concepts, maps, diagrams, pictures, and cartoon students and teachers who lead the reader through the book. The illustrations are often taken from history and art museums around Japan and the texts share the same types of images. The main narrative of each textbook (the “main text” as opposed to the text boxes that surround it) also shows little variation. All of these points indicate that there are certain key concepts that MEXT expects to be included in all middle school history textbooks in Japan, which strongly suggests that even those books not examined here are very similar in design and content. The control of historical discourse by political elites is therefore much more direct and easier to detect in Japanese textbooks than in other venues.

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<sup>55</sup> History Teacher, February 4, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Shuppan 2009, p. 55. I am grateful to Professor Yoshiko Nozaki for her help in identifying this source.

<sup>57</sup> Gomi et al. 2006; Sasayama et al. 2006; Kuroda et al. 2006.

Even a cursory glance at these textbooks indicates that the Heian era does not seem to be considered especially significant by Japanese educators due to the brevity of the sections covering this period. Of just over 200 pages, the first two books only devote around eight pages to the Heian period, with the third only granting slightly more space: about 11 out of 238 pages. By comparison, the Tokugawa period receives more than 40 pages of treatment in all of the texts. Whereas *Rekihaku* gave overviews of life in the period, arts and crafts, architecture, costume, and the like, the textbooks have a greater focus on historical events and figures, although there is a fair amount of material similar to that presented in the museum, as well. They also cover certain subjects entirely left out of the Court Culture exhibit, such as agriculture and taxation, which are important for understanding the period's politics but probably less interesting to the general public than what *Rekihaku* displays. A brief summary of the elements that all of these textbooks' main historical narratives share serves as a useful introduction to the following discussion and emphasizes the uniformity of their content.

All of the textbooks begin with a brief explanation of how the capital was moved by Emperor Kammu to modern-day Kyoto to escape the influence of powerful Buddhist temples in Nara. They then all describe how the court launched a series of military campaigns to subdue a minority group in northern Honshu. Next, the Fujiwara family's ascendance to power is described. After an overview of new Buddhist sects in the period, all three textbooks explain that official contact with China was discontinued following the decline of the Tang Dynasty. This led to the flourishing of a "national-style culture" (*kokufū-bunka*), which included the development of *kana*. Finally, in a new section on Japan's "middle ages," the texts all recount the rise of warriors and the consequent close of the Heian era. These elements form the bulk of the central text in all three of the textbooks and there is generally little else covered there. The majority of the differences between the books are in their treatment of these subjects and the additional material they choose to add around the main text, even though these, too, show relatively little variation.

The light in which the textbooks depict the Heian period is certainly not exclusively positive, and although all three describe the flourishing of "national-style culture," this too is far from a nationalist celebration. The discourse of the development of a new cultural style specially adapted to Japanese people's unique lifestyles and needs is present in all of the textbooks, as we shall see, mandatorily based on MEXT's guidelines.<sup>58</sup> The development

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<sup>58</sup> Monbukagakushō 2002.

of *kana* is also described as liberating the Japanese people to express their emotions freely in writing in almost exactly the same way as it is in *Rekihaku*. The texts are much more sparing than the museum with the familiar adjectives such as “elegant,” “refined,” “exquisite,” however, presenting the development of national culture in a more neutral tone. One aspect the textbooks do present is the breadth of this “national” culture, mentioning new, *kana*-based literary forms, *shinden-zukuri* architecture, *yamato-e* Japanese painting, and aristocratic costume as numerous examples of this trend of “Japanization.” Thus, the apparently proud recognition of the Heian era as an important period for the development of indigenous Japanese culture is present in all of the textbooks as in the museum, although this is more muted in the textbooks.

In contrast, all three of the textbooks unhesitatingly include descriptions of the darker sides of the Heian era alongside its achievements. The third book goes the farthest, stating that “[Heian] aristocrats had a brilliant lifestyle, but on the other hand, they were afflicted by the problems of a capital city like garbage and contagious disease.”<sup>59</sup> The text goes on to describe how deforestation around the capital led to destructive floods and soil erosion.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, while giving a long presentation of splendid female court costumes with numerous pictures, the third book reminds its audience that the clothes were highly impractical, being extremely heavy, difficult to move in, impossible to put on by oneself, and too hot above the waist while too cold at one’s feet.<sup>61</sup> Such reminders do much to dampen the sense of nostalgia that could potentially surround the epoch. They echo the warning in the Court Culture exhibit that, despite their showy lifestyles, Heian aristocrats suffered from anxiety and dread. In fact, both the first and the third textbooks also mention how social decline in the Heian era led to anxiety and a turn to Pure Land Buddhism,<sup>62</sup> suggesting that this is a common presentation of the period. Such intentional efforts to curb too enthusiastic a view of the Heian era hardly indicate a nationalist attempt to celebrate the period as a golden age.

In addition to these reminders that life was not perfect for Heian aristocrats, these texts contain a number of critiques, some scathing, of the socio-economic inequality of the period. Of the three, the second textbook is the most critical, describing in detail the suffering of peasants in both the Nara and Heian periods due to heavy taxation, military conscription, *corvée*

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<sup>59</sup> Kuroda et al. 2006, p. 44.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>62</sup> Gomi et al. 2006, p. 43.

work, and so on.<sup>63</sup> The breakdown of the *ritsuryō* system, with its centrally controlled taxation and agricultural planning, is also thoroughly presented and the second book explains that this led to an increase in poor peasants.<sup>64</sup> The *shōen* owned by nobles and large temples that succeeded the *ritsuryō* system are also criticized for leading to abusive local overseers and the reader is reminded that the splendor of Heian nobles was paid for by these provincial landholdings.<sup>65</sup> The other two textbooks, while less sharp in their criticism, also describe the *ritsuryō* system as broken in the Heian period, riddled by tax evasion and corruption, and point out that absentee landlordism led to lawlessness and disorder in the provinces.<sup>66</sup> This strong social critique, largely absent from *Rekihaku*, further causes the cultural achievements of the Heian era to lose their luster.

Along with the emphasis on the period's social inequality, the textbooks generally portray the Heian era as being characterized by violence and the ruthless suppression of revolts. While there definitely were outbursts of violence at various times, especially near the two ends of the epoch, this is certainly not a self-evident interpretation of the period, which has been praised elsewhere for the clemency of the aristocracy and the comparative scarcity of major wars.<sup>67</sup> All of the textbooks devote a large section to the early Heian court's war against the minority people in northern Honshu. In particular, the unsuccessful resistance of the northern people's leader Aterui and the court's rejection of their own general's request for him to be spared execution are prominently featured in all three textbooks.<sup>68</sup> Not only is the repeal of capital punishment later in the Heian period entirely absent from all of the texts, but they also all choose to prominently feature the story of a brutal execution pushed forward by the court. Furthermore, the textbook accounts do not dwell on the culturally flourishing mid-Heian period, instead moving quickly from the epoch's rocky beginning to its tempestuous end. In these ways, the authors of these texts chose to overlook peaceful aspects of the mid-Heian era, instead focusing on the warfare at the beginning and end of the period.

Another noteworthy facet of the textbooks' presentation of the Heian era is their avoidance, like the Court Culture exhibit, of nearly all mention of Heian women and family life. Like *Rekihaku*, the first and second textbooks only briefly mention Heian women in conjunction with literature and their

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<sup>63</sup> Sasayama et al. 2006, pp. 28–30.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Gomi et al. 2006, p. 41; Kuroda et al. 2006, pp. 41, 54.

<sup>67</sup> Morris 1994, p. 122; Schmidt 2002, pp. 10–13.

<sup>68</sup> Gomi et al. 2006, p. 41; Sasayama et al. 2006, pp. 34–35; Kuroda et al. 2006, p. 41.

elaborate court costume. Only the third textbook devotes some space to discussing both aristocratic and lower-class women's lives in the Heian period. This is done in two relatively small text boxes, rather than in the main text.<sup>69</sup> The first explains how talented women, like Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, were recruited to tutor the daughters of the Fujiwara clan to prepare them to become empresses and that this led to a flourishing of literature.<sup>70</sup> The second analyzes a painting depicting lower-class women at a market both buying and selling various items, describing them as hardworking and apparently at the heart of the Heian marketplace.<sup>71</sup> Heian families, with their matrilineal and polygamous structure, are nowhere described in the textbooks. As in the Court Culture exhibit, Heian women and families are largely made invisible in the textbooks, either because the books' authors (or MEXT) viewed these topics as unimportant or because they deliberately hoped to conceal them.

Within the texts, Ancient Japan's achievements are put into perspective by their juxtaposition with large sections about other ancient civilizations throughout the world, such as Ancient Egypt. The second textbook includes a comparison of civilizations and the first includes a section on major world religions.<sup>72</sup> These descriptions do not make the favorable comparisons between Ancient Japan and these other civilizations one might expect from a proud, nationalistic account, instead leaving the impression that Japan's distant past was not particularly special. Furthermore, Japanese creation myths recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* are described in the third textbook as obviously written with the political goal of legitimizing Japan's imperial line, and parallels are drawn with similar creation myths from other parts of Asia.<sup>73</sup> Most significantly of all, both the first and the third textbook explain that Japanese *kana* writing was only one of a number of indigenous writing systems derived from Chinese that developed around the periphery of the Chinese cultural sphere of influence, even providing visual examples of these scripts.<sup>74</sup> Thus, these schoolbooks even call into question the uniqueness of the Heian era's proudest, and supposedly most Japanese, achievement, the development of *kana* writing suited to the Japanese language.

As has been shown, the content of these textbooks is remarkably similar, but a look at MEXT's specifications for the middle school history curriculum

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<sup>69</sup> Kuroda et al. 2006, p. 45.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Sasayama et al. 2006, pp. 36–37; Gomi et al. 2006, pp. 44–45.

<sup>73</sup> Kuroda et al. 2006, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Gomi et al. 2006, p. 43; Kuroda et al. 2006, p. 43.

shows that the guidelines about the Heian era are unexpectedly short and vague.<sup>75</sup> Apart from stating that students should gain an understanding of the regency government and the shift from internationally influenced culture to “national-style culture,” there are no specific requirements for the Heian period.<sup>76</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean that MEXT’s regulation of textbooks is loose and relaxed. As Nozaki’s work on government censorship of textbook sections about the Second World War indicates, in the past the Ministry has often concealed its more specific guidelines from public view, only making them known to textbook authors when rejecting certain passages during screening.<sup>77</sup> The uniformity of the textbooks’ presentation of the Heian period strongly suggests that this system of control has persisted, and moreover that MEXT scrutinizes not just the more controversial aspects of modern history but of all Japanese history in its screenings of schoolbooks. This has the effect of dramatically reducing the diversity of discourses of the Heian period in Japanese education, in an attempt to impose discourse hegemony in a direct and deliberate way.

In spite of this control, the discourses of the Heian era present in the three textbooks analyzed above are hardly nostalgic or nationalistic in their treatment of the period, apparently showing that this is not MEXT’s goal with the screening. Although the textbooks discuss the development of “national culture” in positive terms, the negative aspects of the Heian period, such as its violent wars against peripheral minority groups and its tremendous social inequality are also given a prominent place. Moreover, only a fraction of each book is devoted to the Heian era and comparisons with other civilizations make the period’s achievements seem less significant. Claims that the Heian era’s aesthetics underlie the sensibilities of modern Japanese like the ones made in the *Rekihaku* visitor’s guide are completely lacking from these texts. This kind of presentation is certainly a far cry from the nationalistic celebration of the Heian period as a golden age of Japanese civilization that one might expect. Why would MEXT’s system of government control over historical discourses through textbook screening be applied here, if the Heian era is not considered an especially important component of Japanese national identity? The following section will propose a theory to explain the discourses of the Heian period presented in the textbooks and museum exhibits examined above.

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<sup>75</sup> Monbukagakushō 2002.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Nozaki 2008, p. 164.

## A Comparative Analysis of Public History Venues and Literary Sources

As described in the introduction, the Heian period could in many ways be considered a golden age, having numerous traits that could make it a “useable past” for nationalists.<sup>78</sup> Anthony Smith points out four types of golden age: economic prosperity, political and military glory, religious “purity and holiness,” and “the golden age of intellect and beauty, in which philosophical, literary and artistic creativity was particularly concentrated.”<sup>79</sup> The Heian era falls squarely into the fourth category, with its greatest achievements being in the visual arts and literature.<sup>80</sup> The development of *kana*, which all the textbooks and *Rekihaku* describe as freeing Japanese authors to express their inner feelings in a way that was not possible using Chinese characters,<sup>81</sup> surely is decidedly “useable.” All of the sources presented above describe the emergence of an indigenous, “national-style culture” during the Heian period in favorable terms. There is certainly much potential for nationalism here, especially as a number of studies have argued that Japanese traditional arts are one of the primary building blocks of contemporary Japanese national identity.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, apart from the guidebook in *Rekihaku*, which most visitors probably never purchase, all of the public history venues examined by this paper largely refrain from shaping their discourses to celebrate the Heian period as a proud achievement that unites all Japanese. As demonstrated above, the Heian era is not granted a very prominent place in either *Rekihaku* or the textbooks. Achievements such as the relatively high status of women or the long-term stability of the state are omitted. The authors do not hesitate to list the problems of the era, from socio-economic inequality to religious-inspired dread. The textbooks even go so far to suggest, through their juxtapositions of Ancient Japan with other civilizations, that the Heian period was hardly special in world history, rather than being an era the Japanese could show off to the rest of the world. Why do the Japanese elites who authored these public histories seemingly ignore the Heian period’s potential as a golden age of Japanese civilization and an important source of Japanese national identity?

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<sup>78</sup> Smith 1997, p. 37.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>80</sup> The period was not noted for its philosophy, however, and Ivan Morris argues that mid-Heian aristocrats were far more interested in “non-academic forms of culture” than “abstract speculation.” Morris 1994, p. 177.

<sup>81</sup> A number of scholars contest this notion. See, for example, Ury 1999, pp. 341–342.

<sup>82</sup> See Thomas 1998, p. 1477.



Smith's article provides several possible answers to this question. "Some pasts are more useable than others," contends Smith, arguing that, "...the heroic epoch must be able to kindle the imagination, not just of a few romantic intellectuals, but of large numbers of the population /.../ it must contain a widely believed tale or tales of a heroic or sacred past that can serve present needs and purposes..."<sup>83</sup> It could be that knowledge of the Heian era is not widespread enough to excite a large segment of the Japanese population. It could also be the case that the Heian era does not fit what the Japanese elites consider to be the "needs and purposes" of modern Japan. Smith also contends that "a past that can help to form nations" requires "authenticity, inspiration and the capacity for reinterpretation."<sup>84</sup> This is Smith's "authenticity" argument that Özkırımlı takes exception to;<sup>85</sup> Smith believes that nationalist accounts of "golden ages" must be strongly rooted in historical fact, otherwise they will just lead to cynicism.<sup>86</sup> From this perspective, perhaps the historical fact that the Heian era had many problems, like those pointed out by the textbooks, makes it "unusable" by Japanese elites; they cannot hide these problems from the population and therefore they cannot use the Heian period as a source of common pride. Lastly, one of Smith's descriptions of what a golden age is suggests another explanation: a golden age should "present a standard of heroism, glory and creativity which subsequent ages failed to match, but which can spur modern generations to emulation."<sup>87</sup> As noted above, according to the "two peaks" model arguably reflected in *Rekihaku* and the textbooks, the Tokugawa era is viewed as the foremost peak of Japanese history. Perhaps Japanese elites consider the Tokugawa era a better golden age on which to model Japanese national identity than the Heian. Smith does note that nationalists sometimes have the option of selecting from among several possible "golden ages" for political reasons.<sup>88</sup> These theories provide some illumination, but are too numerous to answer the question posed above.

A comparison of the discourses of the Heian period from the public historical venues and the literary discourse helps to eliminate some of these hypotheses. Recalling Yoda's description of the literary discourse, the sumptuous, elegant lifestyle of the Heian aristocracy is viewed with nostalgia, and aristocrats are depicted as being so caught up in aesthetic pleasures that

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<sup>83</sup> Smith 1997, pp. 55–56.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> Özkırımlı 2010, pp. 203–204.

<sup>86</sup> Smith 1997, p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

they neglect practical matters.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the lives of women, their numerous romantic liaisons, and their sentiments are a central part of this discourse. The literary discourse is extraordinarily widespread because of its transmission through popular media venues such as film and *manga*.<sup>90</sup> Kitamura reports that the most popular *manga* version of *The Tale of Genji* alone sold over 17 million copies, and there are a great many versions popular with numerous demographics.<sup>91</sup> This, coupled with the fact that all Japanese students are required to study the Heian period, rules out the possibility that the Heian era is not sufficiently well known among the Japanese population for it to have resonance as a golden age.

As should be clear even from the brief description above, what I term the literary discourse of the Heian era contrasts sharply with most of the features of the discourse presented by *Rekihaku* and the textbooks. For one thing, it is overwhelmingly positive, although arguably not in a way conducive to nationalism. It is enjoyable to imagine a world where appreciation of the arts and nature and romantic liaisons occupy all of one's time, but this can hardly provide the basis for a serious political program. The popularity of the literary discourse has more to do with its commercial and entertainment value than its political implications. Nevertheless, the disparity between these two discourses of the Heian period manifests the possibility for the discursive manipulation of the past by elites. The public history venues' depiction of the Heian era's darker side and especially their omission of the situation of women was certainly not the only way these texts' authors could have chosen to present the period. They were not constrained by a need for "authenticity," as Smith would have it, but rather clearly chose to include certain aspects and render others invisible. This is exactly Özkırmılı's point: while there certainly are historical facts, elites working towards nationalist ends can easily manipulate these to make them suit their own needs, leaving out inconvenient parts and portraying what they do include in a carefully-tailored light.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the "inconvenient truths" of the Heian period's inequality, violent wars against the people of northern Honshu, and so on, were deliberately selected for inclusion, ruling out the conjecture that the demands of authenticity "disqualify" the Heian era from use as a golden age.

This affirmation that the discourse presented by the museum and schoolbooks was carefully selected, however, brings us back to another important question. Why would the authors shape their discourse so

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<sup>89</sup> Yoda 2004, p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> Tateishi 2008; Kitamura 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Kitamura 2008, pp. 334, 339, 349.

<sup>92</sup> Özkırmılı 2010, p. 214.

deliberately if they were not interested in using the Heian period as an important basis of Japanese national identity? Why would MEXT care so much about controlling the content of the textbooks? My theory is that the public history venues' discourse represents a feeble attempt to fight back at the literary discourse, which has already prevailed as a hegemonic discourse of the Heian period in contemporary Japan. Even if the creators of the exhibitions and textbooks do not seem to consider the Heian era to be a golden age important for Japanese nationalism, it still is a part of Japanese history, the master narrative of which *is* significant in their eyes. Quite simply, certain parts of the Heian era are inopportune for them, deviating from the overall story of Japanese history they hope to tell.

The most obvious example is the gendered situation of the Heian age. The relatively high position of women, high tolerance for extramarital affairs by both sexes and matrilocality of the Heian era are markedly different from Japanese gender and family norms in subsequent historical periods, which would come to be recognized as "traditional" in Japanese society.<sup>93</sup> It is difficult to claim that something is "traditional" if it has not been that way from time immemorial – differing Heian social norms therefore pose a direct threat to the very idea that gender norms such as the woman joining her husband's household are "natural" or "traditional" or "Japanese." Elites with an interest in perpetuating such norms may therefore seek to silence this facet of the Heian period. Unfortunately for them, the literary discourse has already made this knowledge widely available to most of the Japanese population through its media outlets. Japanese elites with a vested interest in perpetuating "traditional" gender norms from more recent history must therefore fight this powerful discourse in their depictions of the Heian period.

The presentation of the Heian era in the public history venues mentioned above in effect tries to present an alternative discourse to the literary one, in which unwanted facets of the epoch such as its gender norms are erased. Rather than "sublating" (recognizing, and then canceling, but retaining) the feminine, which Yoda describes as being widespread among academic studies of Heian literature,<sup>94</sup> the museum and the textbooks hardly recognize the presence of women in the Heian period at all. Instead, the Heian period is presented as being more masculine and consistent with subsequent, warrior-dominated ages. Heian noblemen are described as being very busy and hardworking, the court's military campaigns against the people of the north

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<sup>93</sup> Another aspect of aristocratic Heian gender norms was polygamy, although this continued in later periods. It is not legal in modern Japan, however, and is therefore probably still unfamiliar and "exotic."

<sup>94</sup> Yoda 2004, p. 8.

are described in detail, and an air of gravity is added to the depiction of their lives by reminders that they were deeply religious and lived in constant dread of the afterlife.

Furthermore, the sources used to compile these texts are all non-fiction: artifacts, men's diaries, scrolls recounting matters of ceremony and custom, but not contemporary works of fiction, which also contain detailed descriptions of the aristocracy's lifestyle. This sends an indirect message that Heian literary works are not a valid source for the writing of history, and thereby tries to undermine the literary discourse, portraying it as mere fiction. In these ways, I believe that *Rekihaku* and government-approved textbooks use their authority in the historical field to send the message that the Heian era was in reality not like *The Tale of Genji* or its modern spinoffs, but rather a "normal" and "respectable" period in Japanese history similar to those preceding and following it. They try to combat the fascination with Heian aesthetics and sexuality by sending signals that, while it had some impressive achievements, the Heian period was not all that special and does not merit too much interest. In effect, the Heian era itself is sublated, much as Yoda argues that Heian women are in nationalistic literary studies.<sup>95</sup> Attracting too much attention to the Heian period, whether as a nationalistic golden age or not, would only end up feeding into the already hegemonic literary discourse, making downplaying the Heian era's accomplishments the most expedient course of action.

This is my answer to why the creators of the museum exhibit and the textbooks examined in this paper would bother controlling their discourse so carefully if they did not plan on using the Heian period for nationalist ends: the already prevalent view of the Heian era from literary sources runs counter to their political goals. This also partially answers the original question of why the achievements of the Heian period are not fully exploited by Japanese nationalists: they do not serve these elites' "needs and purposes."<sup>96</sup> I believe that the other part of the answer has to do with the "two peaks" theory of Japanese history, in which the Tokugawa period surpasses the achievements of the Heian.

In many ways, the Tokugawa era is simply more useful to contemporary political elites' conception of Japanese national identity than the Heian. For one thing, as *Rekihaku* points out, the Tokugawa period had more participation by the masses in cultural innovation, reflecting modern Japanese democratic sensibilities much better than the elitist Heian period. The

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Smith 1997, p. 56.

inconvenient fact that the Tokugawa period was characterized by a rigid caste-like social structure can be easily overlooked, especially since favorable comparisons can be made with the situation of the commoners who lived during the Heian era. Furthermore, the Tokugawa period is temporally much closer to the present era, as are its culture and gender norms. This period is not only a less threatening version of “traditional” Japan, modern Japanese find it more familiar and it therefore has a greater potential for resonance with the population than the Heian era.

Although this is more speculative, the public history venues’ omission of the Heian period’s achievements in peace, notably the abolition of the death penalty, combined with praise for the Tokugawa era may also reflect many Japanese elites’ political sensibilities. In a country where capital punishment is still applied and many feel threatened by belligerent neighbors, elites may be more comfortable with the “armed neutrality” or “peaceful warrior” culture of the Tokugawa period. For a government already facing international and domestic critics questioning continuing capital punishment, gender inequality and militarization, it could be embarrassing for too many to discover that in some ways, the Japanese state could be seen as having been more progressive in the distant past than in the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there seem to be at least two major discourses of the Heian era in contemporary Japan: 1) a literary discourse celebrating the epoch’s aesthetics and differing gender norms and 2) a historical discourse present in public venues such as *Rekihaku* and schoolbooks portraying the Heian era in a less enthusiastic way that omits certain unwanted details such as Heian family structure and the lives of women. These discourses share an appreciation for the indigenous artistic creativity of the Heian period, but diverge sharply on other points. The first discourse seems to be the most prevalent in Japanese society, spread by the popularity of modern adaptations of Heian literary classics such as *The Tale of Genji*. The second discourse appears to arise partially in reaction to the first, attempting to portray itself as more “realistic” and “legitimate” in its depiction of the period and working to rehabilitate the Heian era as another “normal” and “respectable” piece of the master historical narrative of the Japanese nation. In so doing, the second discourse tends to downplay the achievements of the Heian period and dampen enthusiasm that may further spread the embarrassing first discourse. In addition, a different glorious epoch, the Tokugawa era, arguably provides Japanese elites with a

golden age that better serves their needs. In short, the presence of a hegemonic literary discourse of the Heian era that runs against political elites' aims combines with the greater desirability of the Tokugawa period to render the Heian period an unappealing choice as a nationalistic point of pride for contemporary Japanese, in spite of its many achievements.

In investigating historical discourses of the Heian period, a previously underexplored topic, this study has provided a reminder that the manipulation of discourse in the writing of history is a ubiquitous process that does not only surround high profile issues such as atrocities during the Second World War. Beyond its study of texts about the Heian period, this paper has attempted to make a broader theoretical contribution through its examination of an unused "useable past." It is important to examine not only the most obvious examples of nationalist manipulation of history, but also cases where history is not effectively used to contribute to the formation of national identity in order to gain a more complete picture of how and why national histories are written.<sup>97</sup> Several studies have already shown how attempts to use "golden ages" to mobilize a nation can sometimes fail. Smith mentions that the Shah of Iran failed to gain support through his appeals to Ancient Persia and Mary Fullbrook documents the German Democratic Republic's unsuccessful attempts to impose a golden age discourse on its population.<sup>98</sup> This study, however, shows not only that potential "golden ages" can fail when elites push them on uninterested populations, but that certain prospective "golden ages" are left on the shelf by political elites for various reasons. Grand achievements in a nation's past are apparently not always exploited by nationalists, in spite of the impression given by the multitude of academic studies on the phenomenon.

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<sup>97</sup> Özkırımlı 2010, p. 218.

<sup>98</sup> Smith 1997, p. 59; Fullbrook 1997.

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