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VISIONS OF GOLDEN CITIES IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN: HEIAN-KYŌ AS THE PURE LAND OF AMIDA

The Tale of Heike, a thirteenth century literary record of the Genpei War (1180-1185) records the social and political upheaval typically found in accounts of warfare, but also provides a glimpse into medieval Japanese understandings of the capital of Heian-kyō. Within the Tale of Heike, Heian-kyō is both conflated and contrasted with views of paradisiacal afterlife known as the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, a world often visualized in tapestries and paintings known as Taima mandara as an idyllic city made of gold.

Heian-kyō (founded 794 CE, contemporary Kyoto), the classical capital of Japan has been examined by scholars throughout the ages as it has long been understood as a symbol of Japanese past and national identity. However, writings on the associations of the city from the pre-modern era exist only as idealized poetic references – such as the “jewel-strewn capital” – and stand in contrast to the lived reality of the city. As the Genpei War war signalled a shift of power from a Chinese-style bureaucracy of Heian-kyō to military rule located in Kamakura, the Tale of Heike provides a seemingly contradictory view of the imperial capital as both the site of real-world disasters and an earthly manifestation of a Buddhist heaven.

The Tale of Heike catalogues examples of urban destruction and states that these events stem from the onset of the quasi-apocalyptic age known as mappō. Conversely, it records aristocrats longing for their city while they are safe in Buddhist sacred spaces. The conflation of the Western Paradise and Heian-kyō is furthered by architectural works such as the Phoenix Hall at Byōdō-in (1053 CE) as well as extant examples of Taima mandara through shared architectural styles and form, and suggest that one may be able to see the golden light of Amida’s Western Paradise beyond the destruction of Heian-kyō.

Introduction

The capital city in medieval Japan (12th-14th centuries) was frequently referred to as an idealized space even when it was beset with disasters. Established as Heian-kyō 平安京 in 794, the Capital (*miyako* 都) as it would have been called during this period was the centre of the aristocratic world, and was frequently discussed in terms of the elegance and refinement of the court and the elaborate rituals of state performed there. Even today, the Heian period (794-1185) is still considered a golden age of Japanese art and culture. In literature, the Capital was conceived as being the city of the shining Prince Genji (an epithet not without some association with gold) the beloved protagonist from the celebrated romance story the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語). The idyllic world of the Capital existed primarily in literary works and stood in sharp contrast to the disasters that plagued those actually living in the city. The Genpei War (1180-1185) effectively destroyed large portions of the capital city and led to the establishment of a new seat of political power in the north at Kamakura. During this period of civil war, the Capital became associated with the utopian lifestyle of the past as well as contemporary disasters. This paper is an initial examination of how the Capital was described in texts, primarily focusing on the Kamakura period (1185-1334) *Tale of Heike* (*Heike monogatari* 平家物語), a literary record of the Genpei War. The *Tale of Heike* provides an unusual amount of attention given to describing the city, as the narrative records the Capital in a sustained moment of crisis, and yet persists in representing the city as an idyllic space. This idealized world described in this narrative would have stood in stark contrast to the disasters that befell the city beginning in the late 12th century, but would have maintained currency among the social elite living in the Capital.

The manner in which the Capital is discussed throughout the *Tale of Heike* suggest a conflation between the Capital as a utopian city and the heavenly realm known as the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, an afterlife associated primarily with the new Pure Land Buddhism that gained popularity during the Kamakura period. Devotions to Amida and rebirth in his heavenly realm were thought to be the only viable path to enlightenment during the quasi-apocalyptic age of *mappō* 末法, which had begun in 1052. In Buddhist belief, the age of *mappō* was a period reached when the original teachings of the Buddha were inevitably impossible to understand completely and was characterized by increased suffering and disasters. Salvation could only be reached through the intercessions of specific divinities, such as Amida who would escort his devotees to his Pure Land upon their deaths. *Taima mandara* 当麻曼荼羅 images depicted the Pure Land as a golden city, filled with aristocratic mansions like those found within the Capital during the 12th century.

This paper argues that within the *Tale of Heike* the Capital is described as a paradise in decline due to the onset of the age of *mappō*, and that the Pure Land of Amida effectively becomes characterized as a new Capital reached after one escapes the destruction of the world after death. This understanding coincides with attempts to naturalize Buddhism within the Japanese landscape by identifying various “pure lands” throughout the countryside that retained a sacred identification through their maintenance by Buddhist temples and monasteries. While in actual practice, it does not seem that the Capital was seen as a sacred space within Buddhism, its idealization within the *Tale of Heike* parallels other conflations of the city with the sacred, specifically at Byōdō-in 平等院 in Uji; a secular aristocratic mansion that was converted into an architectural recreation of the Pure Land.

The *Tale of Heike* fluctuates between a historical text and literary account of warfare, but its treatment of architecture has been overlooked as it has been largely examined as a war tale with Buddhist undertones.¹ The narrative is deeply indebted to the rise in popularity of Pure Land Buddhism throughout Japan, and often includes Buddhist interpretations of political events. The tale is predominantly concerned with the rival Taira 平 and Minamoto 源 families, who found themselves on opposite sides of an imperial succession dispute: when Taira no Kiyomori's two-year-old grandson inherited the imperial throne, a rival imperial prince issued an edict that the Minamoto family rise and destroy the Taira clan. This sparked a civil war that ended once the Minamoto warriors rose to a position of political authority where they were able to back their own figurehead emperor in the Capital, and openly gained political authority and established military rule in their capital at Kamakura. The exact date of the writing of the *Tale of Heike* remains unknown, the 14th

century monk Yoshida Kenkō 吉田兼好 (1284-1350) recorded in his *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草) that it was composed during the early 13th century. Musical versions of the tale were sung throughout the countryside during the same period when Pure Land Buddhism was spread through the efforts of evangelical monks. The *Tale of Heike* was performed by blind musicians who were equated with the supernatural, and often had affiliations with Buddhist monasteries due to their training.²

The most vivid discussions of architecture within the *Tale of Heike* surround the disasters in the Capital. Originally named Heian-kyō 平安京, or the “peaceful and tranquil capital,” the city was based on the plan for ideal imperial capital found in the Classical Chinese text the *Rites of Zhou*. Heian-kyō was modelled on the Tang dynasty (618-907) Chinese capital of Chang’an. While previous capital cities in Japan had been based on this plan, Heian-kyō became the most long-lived. The plan for the ideal capital outlined in the *Rites of Zhou* synthesized urban planning, political bureaucracy and pre-Buddhist cosmological beliefs. Cities constructed according to the model in *Rites of Zhou* were built with a rationally gridded plan in which a boulevard extended from the centrally-located Imperial Palace, a planning decision that represented the emperor’s theoretical supremacy over the rest of cosmos. This street divided the city between the left and right, which were overseen by the Ministers of the Left and Right, the two highest ranking positions in the bureaucratic system of rule.³ Each half of the city was subsequently divided by four additional streets running south, while eight streets running east to west divided the city south of the Imperial Palace, forming fifty-six blocks. Six additional streets running east-west began at the enclosure around the Imperial palace and extended to the edge of the city. Aristocratic mansions lined the major streets, while the lower classes lived within the narrow subdivisions of the main blocks of the city’s grid.⁴ In classical Chinese thought, the emperor was conflated with the pre-Buddhist divinity Shangdi 上帝, who bestowed upon the monarch the Mandate of Heaven, allowing him to rule. Shangdi was identified as the pole star, as it remains in a fixed place while the rest of the night sky revolves around it paralleling how the emperor’s relationship with society. Japanese philosophical thought did not directly associate the emperor with the pole star, but maintained a clear interest in cosmology as a means of structuring life within the city. A branch of the bureaucracy known as the Yin Yang Bureau, (*onmyō-ryo* 陰陽寮) was tasked with examining the night sky, setting calendars and calculating districts of the city deemed unsafe for travel due to astrological interpretations. Calendric festivals punctuated the year and were celebrated throughout the Capital, suggesting some degree of sanctifying the urban space.

The City in the Kamakura Period

Few visual depictions of the city in the Kamakura period exist. The earliest and most celebrated representations of the Capital were only produced beginning in the 15th century on gilded folding screens, while monuments and districts of the city are occasionally found in illustrated handscrolls narrating historical events.⁵ The most prominent imagery depicting urban space during the 13th century is the *Taima mandara*. As the *Taima mandara* was Pure Land Buddhist ritual image, it had little overt connection to cities in terms of its use, as its iconography was a representation of the Pure Land based on its descriptions found in two of the three sutras associated with Pure Land Buddhism, namely the *Teaching of Measureless Life* (*Muryōjūkyō* 無量壽經), *Sutra of Amida* (*Amidakyō* 阿彌陀經) that were introduced to Japan via China which include no mention of urban space.⁶ The iconography found in *Taima mandara* was developed in China, with an early example found in the cave paintings at Dunhuang, specifically the Tang dynasty (618-907) murals in cave 217 that show Amida and his attendants surrounded by a Tang dynasty city.⁷

Kamakura period *Taima mandara* imagery often included Chinese-styled palatial architecture like that found in the Dunhuang mural, but its new cultural context in Japan would have created a new interpretation for these scenes, and allowed viewers to understand the gilded heavenly realm as a parallel to Chinese-styled cities such as the Capital.⁸ A woven copy of the *Taima mandara* image was originally imported from China and placed in the Buddhist temple Taima-dera 当麻寺 in the 8th century, where it was subsequently forgotten until it was “rediscovered” in the 13th century and became central to Pure Land Buddhist practice.⁹ The image was popularized by monks as they spread Pure Land Buddhism both inside the Capital and throughout the countryside. At this point the *Taima mandara* became linked to imperial capitals through the legends surrounding its production. The handscroll *Illustrated Legends of the Taima Mandara Handscroll* (*Taima dera engi emaki* 当麻寺縁起絵巻), thought to have been originally produced during the 13th century, records the creation of the original *Taima mandara* tapestry by Chūjō-hime 中将姫 (753?-781?), an 8th century Japanese princess who wove the tapestry based on a vision she received while living in a monastery.¹⁰ While Chūjō-hime did not live in Heian-kyō but rather in the previous capital at Nara, the Chinese-styled city shown in



FIGURE 1 *Taima mandara* tapestry, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the *Taima mandara* would have paralleled the styles of architecture associated with imperial cities in Japan writ large, allowing aristocratic viewers to project their own experiences within these urban spaces into depictions of the Pure Land as a sacred cityscape.

Both the *Taima mandara* and the Capital of Heian-kyō can be understood as idealized worlds situated within an urban framework. However, the 12th century wars that came to dominate Heian-kyō were clearly at odds with the original vision for the city's future. In terms of its construction, the utopian Capital is now seen as a failure by scholars: Heian-kyō should have had 1,136 blocks created by the gridded plan of the city, but surviving documents record the vast amount of unused space in the city, and by the 9th century, only 580 were constructed. The remaining space was later allocated for farming, contravening the original attempts to keep agriculture outside of the Capital.¹¹ Even though the city's utopian plan failed to be fully realized and maintained, some memory of the original ideological underpinnings survived at least until the 11th century. Jōjin 成尋 (1011-1081) an aristocratic monk made a pilgrimage to China and recorded his discussions of the Tang dynasty plan of the Capital and elite culture of Heian-kyō to the Chinese emperor, along with other somewhat aggrandized descriptions of life in Japan. Jōjin's exaggerations of certain aspects of Japanese history have been interpreted as demonstrating his pride in his homeland,¹² which would suggest that the Tang dynasty style and organization of Heian-kyō was not only still recognized but valued, even though the idealized urban plan was being destroyed. Thirty years after the Genpei War brought chaos and destruction to the Capital, a Buddhist hermit named Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明 (c.1153-1216) famously recorded the disasters he had witnessed in the Capital in the *Hōjōki* 方丈記; however, amidst descriptions of ruin he persists in referring to the city as the "jewel-strewn capital" (*tamashiki no miyako*) suggesting that an idealized view of the city continued until after the Genpei War had ended.

The City of Buddhist Thought

Keeping this in mind, descriptions of the Capital within the *Tale of Heike* point to a Buddhist interpretation of the urban space and the social system it framed. At one point during the narrative, a group of angry warrior-monks are deterred from murdering an envoy from the court after he sends them a message saying "when soldier-monks perpetrate acts of violence, that is the work of evil spirits; when the Emperor reprimands them, that is the proof of the protection of the Buddha."¹³ Even though the conflation between the emperor and Shangdi was not as strong in Japan as it was in China, there still remained a sense of the centrality of the emperor within the urban space. The *Tale of Heike* maintains a sense of the sanctified nature of the emperor, but replaces Shangdi with the Buddha. If the emperor could be seen as the Buddha, his realm is characterized by a Buddhist sense of suffering. On the most basic level, the political upheaval outlined in the *Tale of Heike* speaks to the chaos felt within the city, but additionally, the narrative includes references to popular beliefs that the age of *mappō* had begun, firmly linking the city to Buddhist thought. The burning of the imperial palace as well as various halls of state were directly associated with the onset of *mappō*. Architecture is mentioned in the *Tale of Heike* almost exclusively in the context of disaster, usually as a means of cataloguing the damage. One of the more prominent examples of this records the destruction of the imperial palace and various halls of state:

On the Twenty-Eighth Day of the Fourth Month...a fire broke out at Higuchi Tomo-no-kōji...It burned the greater part of the capital, fanned by a strong southeast wind...The conflagration claimed sixteen mansions belonging to senior nobles and more than thirty establishments famous in the past and present, among them Prince Tomohira's Chigusa Mansion, the Red Plum Hall at the Kitano Shrine, Tachibana Hayanari's Haimatsu Mansion, the Demon Mansion, the Takamatsu Mansion, the Kamo Mansion, the Tōsanjō Mansion, Fuyutsugi's Kan'in Mansion, and Mototsune's Horikawa Mansion...In the end, the winds carried the flames to the Greater Imperial Palace. Everything burned to the ground in no time...¹⁴

The documents and family treasures that were destroyed, along with the lives that were lost, are briefly lamented without detail. It is interesting to note that one of the most significant disasters, the burning of the imperial palace is not attributed to warfare, but to a *kami* (or nature spirit) angered by the violence occurring on his mountain who took revenge on the city. This clinical listing of the districts of the city harmed by the fire stands in stark contrast to the significance of what was destroyed. The record of the burning of the Imperial Palace complex emphasizes its location in relation to the remainder of the city by using the gates to the Imperial Palace enclosure as landmarks suggesting that the original plan of the city maintained some currency as a means of understanding the space of the city. Defining the extent of the fire through these monuments required for a city built according to the *Rites of Zhou*, as well as the bland

listing of the buildings effected recalls the highly organized regulations of the bureaucratic proceedings taking place in the city itself that were linked to the plan of the Capital.

Despite the fact that the Capital had become directly tied to the realities of the age of *mappō*, other passages within the *Tale of Heike* suggest that despite the horrors of living in the city, it was still idealized in the minds of its inhabitants. This is best illustrated when Taira no Kiyomori attempted to move the imperial capital from Heian-kyō to Fukuhara-kyō. Historically, capitals were frequently changed, but the establishment of a new seat of power was seen as the last of the outrageous political decisions made by Kiyomori, and prompted one of the more detailed descriptions of Heian-kyō in the *Tale of Heike*. In this instance, the Capital is described as a shadow of its former glory, and links the city's importance with its illustrious past:

The old capital had been a magnificent city. Its guardian gods manifested their soft radiance in the four directions; its wonder-working temples ranged with tiled roofs aligned from north to south; its common folk knew no hardships; it offered easy access to the Five Home Provinces and the Seven Circuits. But now all the street crossings were torn up, and it was almost impossible for carriages to go back and forth...The dwellings that had vied for space fell deeper into ruin with every passing day. Dismantled houses were made into rafts and floated down the Kamo and Katsura rivers; household effects and miscellaneous belongings were loaded onto boats and transported downstream to Fukuhara. Most sadly, the brilliant capital gradually merged into the rural landscape.¹⁵

In addition, the *Tale of Heike* records two poems that were carved into the pillars of a palace in the Capital that lamented the desolation of the Capital after the move, further emphasizing the survival and eternal beauty of the Capital throughout the previous disasters in the city:

No fewer, by now,

Than four times one hundred years

Have passed since the days

That saw this city's founding:

Must it now fall to ruin?

Farewell to the flowers

Blossoming in the Miyako

And off on the wind

We blow to Fukuhara

Eyes out for peril ahead.¹⁶

Even though large portions of the city had been destroyed by this point, it is only with the move to Fukuhara-kyō that the city is seen as ruins. The destruction of the city framed in Buddhist rhetoric does not suggest a decline of the Capital, but simply the arrival of a new Buddhist era where disasters are more pronounced. The association of the Capital with the age of *mappō* points more directly to a Buddhist interpretation of the space. The Capital was conceived of as an idealized city that was linked to the cosmos when it was founded, the events of the *Tale of Heike* would have been understood as the inevitable Buddhist progression to a world filled with disasters. Despite this, the Capital was still seen as a kind of paradise on earth that seems to have been conflated with Amida's Pure Land.

The identification of various "pure lands" throughout the Japanese landscape has been well documented, and it seems plausible that the idealization of Heian-kyō within the *Tale of Heike* positions the city as part of the sacred landscape. In the *Tale of Heike*, the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Kumano 熊野 – favoured by the emperor Go-Shirakawa 後白河

(r.1155-1158) and believed to be a worldly manifestation of Amida's Pure Land – is contrasted with Heian-kyō.¹⁷ In the tale, Yasuyori, an aristocrat exiled after plotting against Taira no Kiyomori travels to Kumano. The text notes his longing to return to the Capital despite his refuge in a sacred space. While at Kumano, Yasuyori has various miraculous dreams predicting his return to the Capital suggesting that despite the sacred nature of Kumano, life in the Capital is still more ideal.

Phoenix Hall at Byōdō-in

Early representations of the Pure Land of Amida in architectural form such as the Phoenix Hall at Byōdō-in directly show the secular and aristocratic world of the Capital transformed into sacred space. Byōdō-in was built as an aristocratic villa just outside of the Capital in present-day Uji, but was converted into a family temple in 1053 under the auspices of Fujiwara no Yorimichi after he had inherited the site from his father, the illustrious aristocrat Fujiwara no Michinaga. The present-day structure preserves the style of an aristocratic palace, which on one hand serves as an architectural version of the buildings found within the *Taima mandara* but also is reminiscent of the palaces within the Capital. The Phoenix Hall is the only structure that remains from this original temple complex, and is an architectural representation of the *Taima mandara* and houses a gilded seated figure of Amida.¹⁸

It has been noted that the creation of the Phoenix Hall was a private response that combined a concern about the plagues and disasters associated with the age of *mappō*, with personal life events.¹⁹ The practice of building these architectural Pure Lands under the patronage of high-ranking court officials, and the stylistic similarities between these spaces and palace architecture found in the Capital suggests some attempt to associate the city with the Pure Land. Furthermore, the representation of the Pure Land as a palatial architectural space within images like the *Taima mandara* suggests a direct conflation of the two spaces, and establishes a clear link between the capital and the Pure Land by suggesting that the built environment of the Pure Land exists as a perfected version of the Capital. Byōdō-in is directly compared with the Capital within the *Tale of Heike*, when the temple is stormed during a battle. A bridge on the grounds was dismantled for protection, and yet one warrior was able to cross it as if it were an avenue in the Capital.²⁰ While this passage of the *Tale of Heike* seems to be more concerned with describing the effects of the age of *mappō* even in sacred areas of the Japanese landscape, the comparison with the Capital suggests some attempt to understand paradise and urban space as linked.

While the Capital itself could be described as “jewel-strewn,” the Pure Land is shown as being an entirely golden city. Gold is frequently incorporated into Buddhist images; it suggests the radiant light emanating from Buddhist divinities, and its application to an entire city in the *Taima mandara* points to this heavenly urban space as being particularly sacred. The impossibilities of the architecture in the *Taima mandara* further situate it as an idealized space reflecting the idyllic nature of the Pure Land. The built space appears to hover between an undefined pond from which lotuses rise and bloom, supporting the souls of the deceased followers of Amida, and a similarly undefined sky that serves mostly as a backdrop for the descent of various heavenly beings. Chinese-styled palaces are stacked upon one another, (many with verandas filled with Buddhist divinities), the roofs of which compete with walkways and bridges extending between neighbouring structures. The buildings illustrated above Amida and his entourage seem to simultaneously float above the structures below and exist behind them. Similarly, the placement of tiled courtyard flanked by the two golden palaces on the left and right seems to exist on the same plane as the platform upon Amida sits as well as the surfaces below or in front of him. All is visible to the viewer—as it is to Amida—conveying notions of the power of the central authority of the city, not unlike the omniscient gaze of the emperor in Heian-kyō, where the left and right sections of the city are neatly splayed out before him, under his panoptic vision, and thus, his control.

Conclusion

In Buddhist imagery, gold was often used to evoke the miraculous light that emanates from the divine, and is seen in both Byōdō-in as well as the *Taima mandara*. But in these instances, it becomes possible to understand the use of gold as something that departs from a single interpretation. As a former aristocratic mansion, the golden representation Amida installed at Byōdō-in directly places the divine within a formerly aristocratic space transforming a palace into the Pure Land. Likewise, it becomes possible to view the golden city visualized in the *Taima mandara* as

a representation of an idealized space that parallels the Capital whose “guardian gods manifested their soft radiance in the four directions.” In these instances, the boundary between religious space and the architecture of the city become blurred, and the urban space of Heian-kyō simultaneously becomes the site of disaster and of a Buddhist paradise. Indeed, it is essential to note that the Pure Land, is after all, an afterlife, and that death is implicit in its creation as a heavenly ideal. Thus, the jewel-strewn Capital becomes both a secular and sacred space, linking the disasters of civil war to notions of escape, paradise and the promise of a gilded Buddhist land.

Within medieval imaginations, the Capital seems to parallel the Pure Land as a paradisiacal space that declines along with the changing eras of Buddhism and is effectively replaced by Amida’s afterlife. Throughout the *Tale of Heike*, most of the significant warriors who die in battle have devoted themselves to Amida and are ensured rebirth in the Pure Land at the moment of their demise with the exception of Taira no Kiyomori. Kiyomori’s exclusion from their ranks may be attributed to his role in the destruction of the Capital and a primary instigator of the disasters that befell the city. Thus the Capital becomes transposed onto the Pure Land as the bureaucrats and aristocrats that populated the original city are brought to a new utopian realm. If the emperor as the centre of the universe may speak the words of the Buddha in this life, having Amida Buddha as the centre of the Pure Land is not much of a difference. It seems that the survival of the pre-Buddhist geomantic principles that structured cities in China and Japan continued the belief in the permanence of the capital. Therefore, even though new rulers may flourish and the old regimes decline, the Capital remains eternal, whereas a Buddhist sense of transience pervades everything else.

Endnotes

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