

The *Heike* in Japan

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Significant scholarship on oral tradition in Japan has focused on the composition and performance of the *Tale of the Heike*, the medieval narrative recounting the Gempei War (1180-85 CE), the watershed event marking the fall of the aristocracy and the rise of the warrior class. The *Heike* exists today in about one hundred variants, ranging in style from documentary (often Chinese-language) chronicle to lyrical vernacular tale. One of the most entrenched academic paradigms for considering the work divides the variants between “read” and “recited” lineages; “recited” texts are the basis for performance of the *Heike*. From at least the fourteenth century, the *Heike* was recited by blind men accompanying themselves on the *biwa* lute; a sighted tradition emerged during the seventeenth century. Both of these, as well as related peripheral traditions, continue in reduced form today.

Orality in the development of the *Heike* has been debated since the early twentieth century, motivated by the perceived need to establish a “national epic,” orally performed and therefore orally composed. This was a questionable paradigm from the start, given the high degree of literacy during the period when the *Heike* was first performed. Early studies were oriented toward finding an original text that would suggest oral roots. They were driven by the general assumption that shorter tales, composed by itinerant performers, were strung together into a longer work that was finally committed to paper. However, advanced philological research has led to the conclusion that a written, “read lineage” variant (ca. 1309) is the oldest extant text, emphasizing the early (and possibly originary) importance of written composition. Although the *Heike*’s composition is no longer considered in terms that juxtapose lettered aristocracy against unlettered peripatetic, a sense of polarization between written and oral ways of thinking is still one of the major paradigms requiring further articulation in *Heike* studies today.

Work in musicology has helped frame the issue of orality for *Heike* studies, particularly concerning composition. Hugh DeFeranti’s work on

Kyûshû traditions (1995) emphasizes the role of peripheral performance practice in shaping the *Heike*, while Steven Nelson (2001) stresses the formative importance of religious performance practice. Komoda Haruko (1993) posits a model for composition drawing on both forms. All reveal the centrality of musical form and formula for the creation and transmission of *Heike* narrative. Equally promising are new directions in performance and reception studies reflecting a nuanced understanding of the development of the *Heike* within what we have come to realize is an extremely complex medieval context. Hyôdô Hiromi (2002) demonstrates the importance of the unfinished nature of the performance “text” and the need for thinking about the *Heike* as performance. Alison Tokita (2003), investigating the movement in *Heike* narratives across a range of performance genres, elucidates the effect of oral performance on the creation and transmission of meaning for *Heike* narrative. My own work (1999) also takes this tack, but focuses on interactions with other narrative traditions. Narratological studies by Yamashita Hiroaki (1994) and Michael Watson (1995) shed light on narrative structure’s effect on reception. These scholars’ engagement with the diversity of medieval reality is an important step towards understanding the various roles played by the work in its contemporary and later contexts.

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