

Fall 2020 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Heroes & Villains in Asian Art and Culture
Sponsored by the *Society for Asian Art*

Arrogance, Bravery, and Betrayal – Visualizations of Some Towering Figures in Japan's Medieval War Epic *The Tale of the Heike*

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The mon (family crests) of the Minamoto and Taira clans

The Tale of the Heike tells stories of individual bravery, betrayal and tragedy during the tumultuous transition of power in 12th-century Japan, ending four centuries of peaceful rule by Heian Era emperors. Minamoto Yoritomo was the warrior-class victor in a vicious, decades-long struggle between Imperial troops, Buddhist armies, and two military clans, the Taira (Heike) and the Minamoto (Genji). In the end, the Minamoto killed or executed all members of the Taira clan. The warfare spawned numerous oral narratives with *The Tale of Heike*, based on oral performances and written down in the 15th-century, dominant among them.

This 15th-century version, steeped in Buddhism, writes large and with considerable drama its warriors and other participants in the war, but with an overall Buddhist perspective that heroes and villains both will meet their end as no one is free from the suffering of this world. This creates an interesting layer that brings heroes and villains closer to one another.

The Tale of Heike inspired and continues to inspire stories, paintings, Noh drama, Kabuki drama, films, video games, and other arts. Below are a few of the individuals who have been most frequently at the center of these depictions.

Known for fighting skill & bravery

Minamoto Yoshitsune

Brother to Yoritomo, who would become the leader of the country instead of him when his brother, wrongly believing rumors of betrayal turned the Minamoto army against him, forcing him to commit suicide.



Image: Detail from Katsukawa Shunshō, *The Night Attack at Horikawa* ca. 1780, color woodblock print on paper; nishiki-e
The Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, public domain. [Link](#).

Tomoe Gozen

A female warrior of exceptional strength who fought on the side of the Minamoto.



Image: Detail from *Tomoe Gozen Departs*
By Shitomi Kangetsu, Edo period.
Tokyo National Museum. [Link](#).

Nasu no Yoichi

A brave archer who fought for the Minamoto.



Image: Detail from a woodblock print. Kabuki. Actor Otani Hiroji as Nasu no Yoichi on opening night of play 'Mutsu no hana mume', at the Ichimura theatre, 1759.
By Torii Kiyomitsu. Edo period. The British Museum. [Link](#).

Known for strength & loyalty

Benkei

A Buddhist warrior who loyally served Yoshitsune.



Image: Detail from *Danjūrō VII's Benkei as Fudō Myōō*, ca. 1824
By Utagawa Kunisada.

"Fudō Myōō, particularly at the Shinshōji temple in Narita, is a protector of the Ichikawa [a famous Kabuki actor] family." The Met Fifth Avenue (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). [Link](#).

Two who honored the warrior code: one successful, one not

Taira Atsumori

A teenage, untrained warrior who nevertheless faced death honorably when confronted by a Minamoto.



Image: Noh mask "Atsumori" (also called "Sixteen") [Link](#).

Kenreimon-In

Kiyomori's daughter and imperial consort.
Mother of Child-Emperor Antoku who failed to follow him in death and subsequently became a nun.



Image: Detail from Taira no Tokuko [Kenreimon-In], frontispiece illustration from the literary magazine *Bungei kurabu*, vol. 7, no. 13 [Meiji Period—1901]

By Mizuno Toshikata. Woodblock print with color blocks.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [Link](#).

The most villainous of leaders

Taira Kiyomori

Leader of the ill-fated Taira clan (Heike).

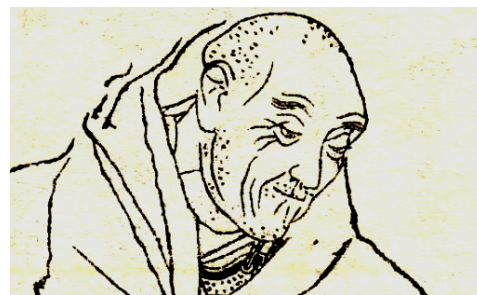


Image: Detail from Taira no Kiyomori in his later years, in book illustration.

By Kikuchi Yōsai. Edo Period. [Link](#).

A schemer

Shunkan

A monk who plotted Kiyomori's overthrow, was caught, exiled and never forgiven. He died from self-imposed starvation.



Image: Detail from *Shunkan* by Katsukawa Shunshō, Edo Period.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. [Link](#).

Translations of *The Tale of Heike*

- McCullough, Helen Craig. (1988). *The Tale of the Heike*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Watson, Burton and Haruo Shirane. (2006). *The Tale of the Heike* (abridged). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tyler, Royall. (2014) *The Tale of Heike*. Penguin Classics.