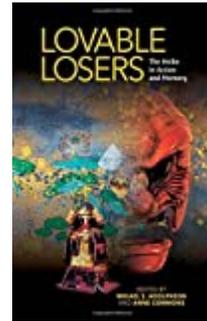




Mikael Adolphson, Anne Commons, eds. *Lovable Losers: The Heike in Action and Memory*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015. 284 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-4675-6.



Reviewed by Naama Eisenstein (PhD Candidate, Department of History of Art and Archaeology SOAS, University of London)

Published on H-Buddhism (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Erez Joskovich

Heike Legacies

The close relationship of religion and politics in medieval Japan is well known and studied. In this new publication several scholars examine the calculated combination of religious politics and faith in Taira no Kiyomori's (1118-81) rise to power. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, this book may not seem relevant to scholars of Japanese Buddhism at first, but it is precisely that nature that exposes just how deeply embedded was Buddhism in premodern Japan. Kiyomori has been immortalized as a temperamental and selfish tyrant, but from *Lovable Losers* he emerges a sharp leader, who understood well the religious, political, and social workings of his time, as well as how to use and adapt them. Patronage of religious centers and ceremonies was not only a key point in Kiyomori and his kin's strategies, but also in the actions of their enemies in the aftermath of the Taira demise at the Genpei War (1180-85). Many of these religious acts were an expression of the amalgamation of Buddhism and the local *kami* worship, highlighting their unity. But religion was not only a tool in the hands of

the elites, and had the power to give new life to figures almost forgotten by history.

Lovable Losers is the result of a four-year process, beginning with an international conference in 2011 focusing on the Heike family and their cultural legacy. The discussions from that conference echo in the book even for those who, like me, were not lucky enough to participate in it. The common ground of the chapters is laid out in a well-written introduction, which surveys the chapters and clarifies the intentions and aims of the writers, unifying twelve different papers into one coherent book. The book has two parts: the first focuses on the Heike and their activities during their prime in the late twelfth century; the second part follows the image and memorialization of the Heike from the aftermath of the Genpei War to modern times. As the editors point out, the differentiation is not quite clear in the years following the Genpei War because much of the memorialization activity of the fallen Heike was done by surviving kin. I did not always understand the choice of chapter order within

these parts, but this does not reduce the reading experience. I do not keep to the order of the chapters in this survey; rather I follow the chapters' points of intersection.

One of the declared aims of the book is to question the image we have of the Heike, which greatly depends on the thirteenth-century *Heike Monogatari* (平家物語), and to contextualize the changes to their image over time. In this I think it succeeds greatly. One of the key figures in this approach is renowned Japanese medievalist Takahashi Masaaki, whose first publication in English is in this book (chapter 7). His focus is the disparity between representations of Heike characters in the *Heike Monogatari* and their true actions, as understood from contemporary Heian period documents. His discussion is a reminder that the importance of *Heike Monogatari* as a classical literary work does not suggest transparency of the text; on the contrary, the writers had agendas and used literary tactics to retell history as they saw fit. The chapter does not add much to Takahashi's former works, but is an important introduction of his prevalent scholarship to English readers.

The literary legacy of the Heike is discussed in Anne Commons's fascinating survey of the Heike poetic circle (chapter 5), which bloomed in the capital during the 1170s and early 1180s. The activities of the circle—mainly Taira no Tsunemori (1124-85), Tadanori (1144-84), and Tsunemasa (ca.1147-84)—were part of the Heike's broader search for cultural prestige and political power. However, they were also part of greater changes in the position, function, and style of *waka* (和歌), and their poems demonstrate some of the characteristics of later medieval poetry. Thus Commons shows that the Heike understood the rules of their time but also dared to break them, and that these breaks became their—often underestimated—legacy.

The neglect of studies of the Heike legacy is a repeated point in the book, seen most clearly in the discussions of Taira no Kiyomori by Mikael Adolphson, Charlotte von Verchuer, and Heather Blair. Adolphson (chapter 2) is very straightforward in reminding us that figures who failed may still have had strong impact on historical development. His focus is Kiyomori's attempt to move the capital to Fukuhara, near present-day Kobe. While scholars often ask why Kiyomori wanted to leave Kyoto, Adolphson asks why he *chose* Fukuhara. One of the answers is Fukuhara's favored location for trade with the continent. This trade included a dramatic rise in imported copper coins, which were mostly melted and

reforged as Buddhist artifacts for the numerous rituals Kiyomori sponsored during his rise to power. However, these coins had a crucial part in the later development of monetary trade in Japan, a later impact of Kiyomori's actions. Kiyomori's trade with the continent is von Verchuer's main focus (chapter 3). She shows that in clear contrast to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the main aim of the trade with China in Kiyomori's time was cultural and political prestige. Exotic items were not sold; they were treasured and displayed in banquets or presented as gifts or donations. It is interesting to see that Kiyomori's gifts to and sponsorship of temples extended to China as well as Japan. The fact that many of Kiyomori's actions were modeled after Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1127) indicates that this was the accepted, even expected, course of action to gain courtly prestige and power.

Adolphson's and von Verchuer's discussion of Fukuhara's importance is complemented by Heather Blair's examination of the vital part ritual played Kiyomori's rise to power (chapter 4). She proposes that Kiyomori was not a proto-Kamakura ruler, as is often suggested, but a clear case of a Heian-style ruler, adapting political tactics initiated by previous examples as the Fujiwara and retired emperors. In this she continues the repositioning of the Heike as innovators working within their contemporary context. To analyze Kiyomori's ritual activities Blair uses her model of ritual regime that focuses on a triangular structure of 'signature sites, rites and text' (p. 59).^[1] In Kiyomori's case the triangular points were Fukuhara and Itsukushima as sites, the grand *Thirty Lotus Readings* as rite, and the Lotus Sutra as text, demonstrated in the lavish copy known as the *Heike n'kyō* (平家納経). Kiyomori further strengthened his position by gaining imperial approval, having retired emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-92, r. 1155-58), and later Emperor Takakura (1161-81, r. 1168-80), pilgrimage to Itsukushima and participate in rituals he initiated in both Itsukushima and Fukuhara. Blair uses the ritual regime model to demonstrate how well calculated were Kiyomori's innovations within the conventions of political power displays in his time.

Monika Dix's discussion of the *Heike n'kyō* (chapter 6) reminds us that the fact that it had very clear political aims does not mean that the Heike did not believe it had a religious function. On the contrary, it was the very combination of political and cultural capital with personal devotion that made this act of dedication so valuable. Dix gives a fascinating discussion of sutra-copying history in Japan and situates the *Heike n'kyō* within

it. The *nĀkyĀ* includes a dedication vow by Kiyomori, which Dix parallels with its contemporary understanding of sutra-copying practices. She demonstrates that the extravagance of the *Heike nĀkyĀ* was not only a political show of power in emulation of aristocratic practices; it also had a deep devotional meaning. It was believed that sutra-copying and dedication could aid in creating or strengthening a karmic affinity, *kechien* (çµç), with a deity. Thus, the richness of the *Heike nĀkyĀ* was not intended only to impress Kiyomori's peers and rivals at court, but also to gain favor with the Itsukushima deity. Although Dix's approach is not art-historical, I think this point could have gained from the Buddhist concept of *shĀgon* (ĕĀ³) that explains lavish and extravagant decoration of religious artifacts as an expression of faith.[2] Dix continues to detail the complex relationship of the Itsukushima deity with Mount KĀya and the Buddhist deities Dakiniten and Benzaiten and how it was represented in descriptions of Kiyomori's devotion. Returning to Kiyomori's words in his vow, Dix traces the representations of Kiyomori's miraculous dream in *set-suwa* (ĕ^a-ĕ©±) and *Heike Monogatari* variants. These stories explain Kiyomori's remarkable success in religious terms, giving much of the credit to his devotional acts towards the Itsukushima deity, like the dedication of the *Heike nĀkyĀ*.

Lori Meeks and Naoko Gunji examine the topic of spirit pacification. Gunji (chapter 9) focuses on one temple, Amidaji near Dannoura, and positions it in a wider frame of spirit-pacification activity, while Meeks (chapter 8) takes a private perspective, focusing on the figure of KenreimonĀin (ca. 1155-23), daughter of Kiyomori and mother of the child-emperor Antoku (1178-85, r.1180-85). Gunji shows how seemingly separate activities—including rituals in Amidaji, the erection of YĀfukuji, and the composition of the *Heike Monogatari*—all return to the same group of leading political and religious figure. These include enemies of the Heike, such as Go-Shirakawa and Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-99), as well as Heike descendents such as ChĀkai (1162-1227). The similar timings and commissioners of these activities suggest a wider project of spirit pacification, aimed to protect the state not only from Antoku and his kin, but from vengeful spirits in general. Meeks discusses the key position KenreimonĀin had in pacifying the spirits of her fallen kin. KenreimonĀin was often judged in literary works and by modern historians for not committing suicide after their demise. But Meeks's study of Heian documents shows that this ideal arose later, and did not prevail in KenreimonĀin's time. In fact, the common act

for a woman in her position was to do exactly as she did: take the tonsure and pray for the pacification of her deceased kin. Furthermore, Go-Shirakawa and Yoritomo had personal interest in KenreimonĀin's devotional acts because they feared the wrath of the fallen Heike spirits. Meeks claims that in her actions, KenreimonĀin continued to fulfill the same position of mediator between Go-shirakawa and her family as before the war.

The last three chapters of the book engage with the changes in representations of Heike figures in later periods, specifically in visual arts. X. Jie Yang (chapter 10) focuses on Taira no Morihisa (years unknown), a minor figure who appears only in the *Nagato-bun* variant of the *Heike Monogatari*, and who became famous for the miraculous tale of his salvation from execution by the Kiyomizu-dera Kannon. Yang examines three versions of this story in three mediums: the *Nagato-bun* text, the *nĀ* play *Morihisa* from the early fifteenth century, and the *Kiyomizu-dera engi emaki*, made ca. 1520. The *emaki* is the main focus of the discussion, which shows how text and image work together to create the meaning and message and includes a fascinating comparative discussion of execution scenes in painting. By the Edo period Morihisa was widely known and loved for this tale, and his story is an early example of a Heike figure becoming popular.

The discussion of Heike representations during the Edo period continues in Adam L. Kern's (chapter 11) discussion of *kusazĀshi* (ĕĀç') comic books. By this time the Heike World already included adaptations to drama, literature, and visual art, creating a vast field of creativity which the humorous *kusazĀshi* joined. Kern focuses on the theme of blindness: both a reference of the blind jongleurs who first recited *Heike Monogatari* and an allusion to the blind spots in society. Through this example, Kern demonstrates how stories of Genpei heroes, which were used to criticize and poke fun at the Tokugawa shogunate and the *Heike Monogatari*, simultaneously, and inevitably, asserted the regime of the shogunate and the position of the *Heike Monogatari* as a classical text. A similar use of Heike figures is presented by Hitomi Tonomura (chapter 12), who asks what we can learn about the past and present from historical films. Her case study is Kenji Mizuguchi's 1955 film *Shin Heike Monogatari*, based on a novel by the same name by Eiji Yoshikawa. Tonomura examines how Mizuguchi's cinematic adaptation differs from the novel, particularly in the representation of women, and how the film succeeds in combining valid readings of twelfth-century society with the early postwar notions of democracy and liberalism. The film presents a very different Kiyomori, who

instead of the greedy usurper of power is a young individualist, hailing a new age—that of warrior rule in his time and of democracy in Mizuguchi’s time.

Yang, Kern, and Tonomura bring fascinating case studies that show how the image of the Heike was adapted and reimagined in later periods. The disparity between early and later representations of the Heike echoes the disparity Takahashi finds between the historical figures and their representation in the *Heike Monogatari*. The fact that the same figures, places, and events reappear in different chapters of the book highlights the intricate ways in which they connect and how much we can gain from interdisciplinary studies such as this. The book balances on the contrast between a thematic focus—the Heike—and a very wide time span, from the twelfth century to modern Japan. Clearly, one book cannot cover such a wide scope and many Heike related materials did not make the cut. For instance, there is no discussion

of any of the numerous theatrical adaptations of Heike figures, possibly because many have been discussed elsewhere. One can also question why Tonomura’s was the only discussion of modern representations of the Heike included. The answer is probably that the editors were working on one book, not a series, and thus these gaps are mainly a reminder of how much more research can be done.

Notes

[1]. 59. The religious regime model was first introduced in Heather Blair, “Rites and Rule: Kiyomori at Itsukushima and Fukuhara,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 73, no. 1 (2013): 1-42.

2. Blair mentions *shōgon* and references to Cynthia J. Bogel’s 2010 book *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icons and Early Mikkyō Vision* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Naama Eisenstein. Review of Adolphson, Mikael; Commons, Anne, eds., *Lovable Losers: The Heike in Action and Memory*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45958>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.