Uncovering Doorways to the Conceptual World of Medieval Japan: Comparing Kanseki in the Kakuichi and Engyō Variants of the Heike Monogatari

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Uncovering Doorways to the Conceptual World of Medieval Japan: Comparing Kanseki in the Kakuichi and Engyō Variants of the Heike Monogatari

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Excerpts from Chinese texts, kanseki, are a prominent part of many variants of the Heike Monogatari. These have tended to be neglected as merely unnecessary embellishments that detract from the main narrative of the tale. However, the kanseki in fact contribute significantly to their framing episodes, changing the range of impressions and meanings through their presence. This becomes particularly evident when comparing the well-known Kakuichi variant, which has a comparatively smaller number of kanseki, and the Engyō variant, which has a larger number.

In order to reveal the different functions and meanings conveyed by these episodes by their presence, the present study takes several Heike Monogatari episodes which exist in both variants and compares them, noting that both in cases where there are kanseki but of different lengths, and in cases where kanseki are present only in the Engyō variant, the presence of the kanseki substantially raises different issues and fosters the emergence of different interpretations of the framing Heike Monogatari episode. Moreover, analyzing these kanseki in context offers an opportunity to enter the conceptual framework of the compilers, and in so doing to better understand the intellectual world of medieval Japan.