



Etoki from Japan

Picture-Storytelling



Performance and Music by
Yamaoka Bumyō, Masuda Eishin, and Nagino Akihito
with Hanging Scrolls of the Life of Prince Shōtoku



March 11, 2025 (Tue)

Performance: 6–8 PM
Exhibition: 5 PM

The Forum, Columbia University

Greeting from the Organizer



Haruo Shirane

A thousand-year-old tradition of *etoki* (picture-storytelling) will be presented in North America for the first time, with three *etoki* masters, who will present the life of Prince Shōtoku, the legendary founder of Buddhism in Japan. The event begins with the oldest tradition of picture-telling, transmitted at Shitennōji Temple, which was established by Prince Shōtoku himself. Next is a performance of “super-*etoki*,” incorporating new media. Last is a performance with the traditional *biwa* (lute). Fourteen hanging scrolls of *The Life of Prince Shōtoku* will be exhibited at the venue.

PROGRAM

Greetings ● Haruo Shirane

Introduction ● Abe Mika “What is *Etoki*?”

Abe Yasurō “The Illustrated Biography of Honshōji Temple and *Etoki*”

Etoki Performance ● Yamaoka Bumyō

“*Etoki* Performance of the Illustrated Biography of Prince Shōtoku”

Masuda Eishin

“The King of the Buddhist Law and of the Imperial Law:
Prince Shōtoku and His Friends in New York City”

Nagino Akihito

“*Biwa* Storytelling: The Moriya Battle in the Tale of Prince Shōtoku”

Discussion Session ● Yamamoto Satomi

closing ● Haruo Shirane



About the Sōshitsu Sen XV Distinguished Lecture on Japanese Culture

The Sōshitsu Sen XV Distinguished Lecture on Japanese Culture was established in 1988 by an endowment from the Urasenke Foundation of Kyoto, Japan, and named in honor of Sōshitsu Sen XV, the former Grand Master (*Iemoto*) of the Urasenke School of Tea. This public lecture series is held annually at Columbia University, in order to expand awareness and understanding of Japanese culture. Sōshitsu Sen XV gave the first Sen Lecture, entitled “The Heart of Tea,” and subsequent lecturers, to name a few, have included composer Takemitsu Tōru, novelist Shiba Ryōtarō, author Setouchi Jakuchō, architect Ban Shigeru, and, more recently, actor/author George Takei, novelist/filmmaker Ruth Ozeki, and comedian Watanabe Naomi.



About the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture

Founded in 1986 at Columbia University, the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture (DKC) is named in honor of Professor Donald Keene, internationally renowned scholar, Columbia University teacher, and interpreter of Japanese literature and culture to the West. The Center is dedicated to advancing the understanding of Japan and its culture in the United States through university instruction, research, and public education. In addition, the Center seeks to encourage study of the interrelationships among the cultures of Japan, other Asian countries, Europe, and the United States.

Donald Keene Center <https://keenecenter.org/>
https://keenecenter.org/sen_2025.html



Introducing the Mai

Prince Shōtoku

The main character. He is the Shakyamuni of Japan and an incarnation of Kannon the Savior (Guze Kannon). He supported Empress Suiko with the aim of building a country based on Buddhist teachings.



The orange robe is my distinctive feature!



Kurokoma from Kai

A famous black horse donated by Kai Province, celebrated also for climbing Mount Fuji.



Chōshimaro

An attendant who leads Prince Shōtoku's horse Kurokoma.



Daruma (Bodhidharma)

The founder of the Zen School. Fulfilling a vow made in a previous life, he appears as a starving man on the hill of Kataoka and reunites with Prince Shōtoku.

The Icons of Prince Shōtoku



As a two-year-old child

Namu Butsu!
(Homage to the Buddha!)

Pressing his hands in prayer, he symbolizes the sacred relics.

As a young boy



Since childhood, he shows amazing skills.



In the form of the regent

The scepter he holds in his hand is the symbol of the statesman.

Performers' Profiles and *Etoki* Explanation

Yamaoka Bumyō

Head Deacon of Shitennōji Temple,
Headquarters of the Wa Sect of Buddhism
Head Priest of Aizendō Shōmanin Temple

He is the person in charge of transmitting to the world the spirit of harmony (*wa*) of Shitennōji Temple. He created the contemporary style for the *etoki* of the Tales of Prince Shōtoku performed in the Picture Hall.



Masuda Eishin

Temple Guardian of Midasandō, Jōdo School
Member of the Mikawa Super *Etoki*-za

Using a richly diverse *etoki*, he spreads contemporary Buddhist education and activities, going beyond the frame of temples and sects. His special technique is called "narikiri *etoki*," and consists in becoming fully one with the characters.



Etoki of the Illustrated Biography of Prince Shōtoku

The origins of the *etoki* performance in the Picture Hall of Shitennōji date back to the eighth century CE. This tradition is brought back to life at Shitennōji on the 22nd of each month, when the *etoki* is performed using illustrations by the artist Kenkichi Sugimoto in the Picture Hall. The performance includes many episodes of the life of the Prince, such as his birth in a stable on the 15th of the second month, his chanting "Namu Butsu!" when he was two, his ability to listen and understand numerous people as they spoke at the same time, and the construction of Shitennōji Temple when he became regent. Pointing at the illustrations, the monks tell the stories of Prince Shōtoku's life and his achievements, preaching the Dharma by way of adding the spirit of harmony and the Buddhist teachings to the biography of the Prince. What is the spirit of harmony of Prince Shōtoku? We hope to convey its essence through the *etoki* performance of the Tales of the Prince.

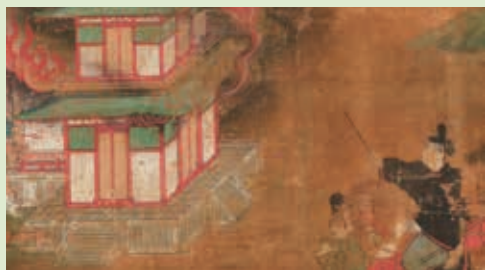
The King of the Buddhist Law and of the Imperial Law: Prince Shōtoku and his Friends in New York City

Kurokoma, Chōshimaro, listen! I, Prince Shōtoku, am not a monk but a statesman. My mission was to support the Emperor, to support and protect Japan, or rather to shape Japan. Listen to the tale of my deeds! When I was two, I recited three times "Namu Butsu! Namu Butsu! Namu Butsu!" and this episode was the beginning of the practice of chanting the name of the Buddha (*nenbutsu*) in Japan. They even say that in a previous life I was a friend of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen. I built Shitennōji Temple, started the practice of lectures on the Buddhist scriptures, and even wrote the first commentaries. It was me who created the Seventeen-Article Constitution, the first founding law of our country Japan, which included Buddhist teachings. I wanted to spread the values of peace, humility, and equanimity.

n Characters

Mononobe no Moriya

Because of his reverence for the gods of ancient Japan, he destroyed Buddhist images and temples, but he achieved the opposite result of playing a role in the establishment of Buddhism in Japan. He is enshrined as a deity at Shitennōji Temple, where he continues to protect both the temple and Buddhism.



Moriya's shrine

The Four Heavenly Kings (Shitennō)

The main object of worship at Shitennōji Temple. They are Buddhist deities that reside on Mount Sumeru, at the center of the world, and protect the world from the four directions of east, west, south, and north. Their names are Jikokuten, Zōchōten, Kōmokuten, Tamonten.



Image of the Shitennō made by Prince Shōtoku himself

Yukimaru

The PR character of Ōji town, where the temple of Daruma is situated, in Nara Prefecture. A friendly appearance in the performance.



tion

Nagino Akihito

Chief Priest of Honchōji Temple
Shinshū Ōtani Sect Second-generation Leader of the Mikawa Super Etoki-za

Inheriting the Shinshū sect tradition of *Fushidan* chanted preaching, he performs *etoki* while playing the *biwa* lute and chanting. He is the leader of the Mikawa Super Etoki-za, a group of priests and laypeople who volunteer in the practice of *etoki*.



Biwa Storytelling:

The Moriya Battle in the Tale of Prince Shōtoku

Using the passage “the sound of the bells of Gion Monastery” from the introduction to the *Tale of Heike*, I will tell the scene of the Moriya battle. When Prince Shōtoku was 16, a conflict started between him, who revered Buddhism, and Moriya, who rejected Buddhism and wanted to thoroughly eliminate it. Prince Shōtoku climbed Mount Shigi and prayed to the Shitennō, which led to his victory. After the battle, Prince Shōtoku promulgated the Seventeen-Article Constitution, explaining in its first article the spirit of harmony. Furthermore, he did not destroy the defeated Moriya clan, but instead protected it by appointing its members to various positions at Shitennōji. With the spirit of harmony, he spread the teachings of Buddhism without distinguishing friends and enemies. This is why, even today, he is called “Prince Shōtoku, the Holy Sovereign of the Land of Harmony (=Japan).”

Cultural Highlights

【The Seventeen-Article Constitution】

1. Harmony is to be valued, while controversies should be avoided.
2. Sincerely revere the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
10. Abstain from wrath and reject anger, do not be angry when people differ from you. Everyone has a heart, and every heart has its attachments.
14. Ministers and officials, do not be jealous or envious.

【Shitennōji Temple】

A temple founded by Prince Shōtoku and dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings (Shitennō). Its Shōryōin hall, where Prince Shōtoku is enshrined, and the Picture Hall are considered the origin of the Prince Shōtoku halls that have spread all over Japan. It is also a stage for *etoki* performances. Shōtoku added to the temple hospitals, pharmacies, and facilities for social welfare (*shikain*). Shitennōji temple continues to preserve today these traditions, together with the spirit of *wa* (harmony).

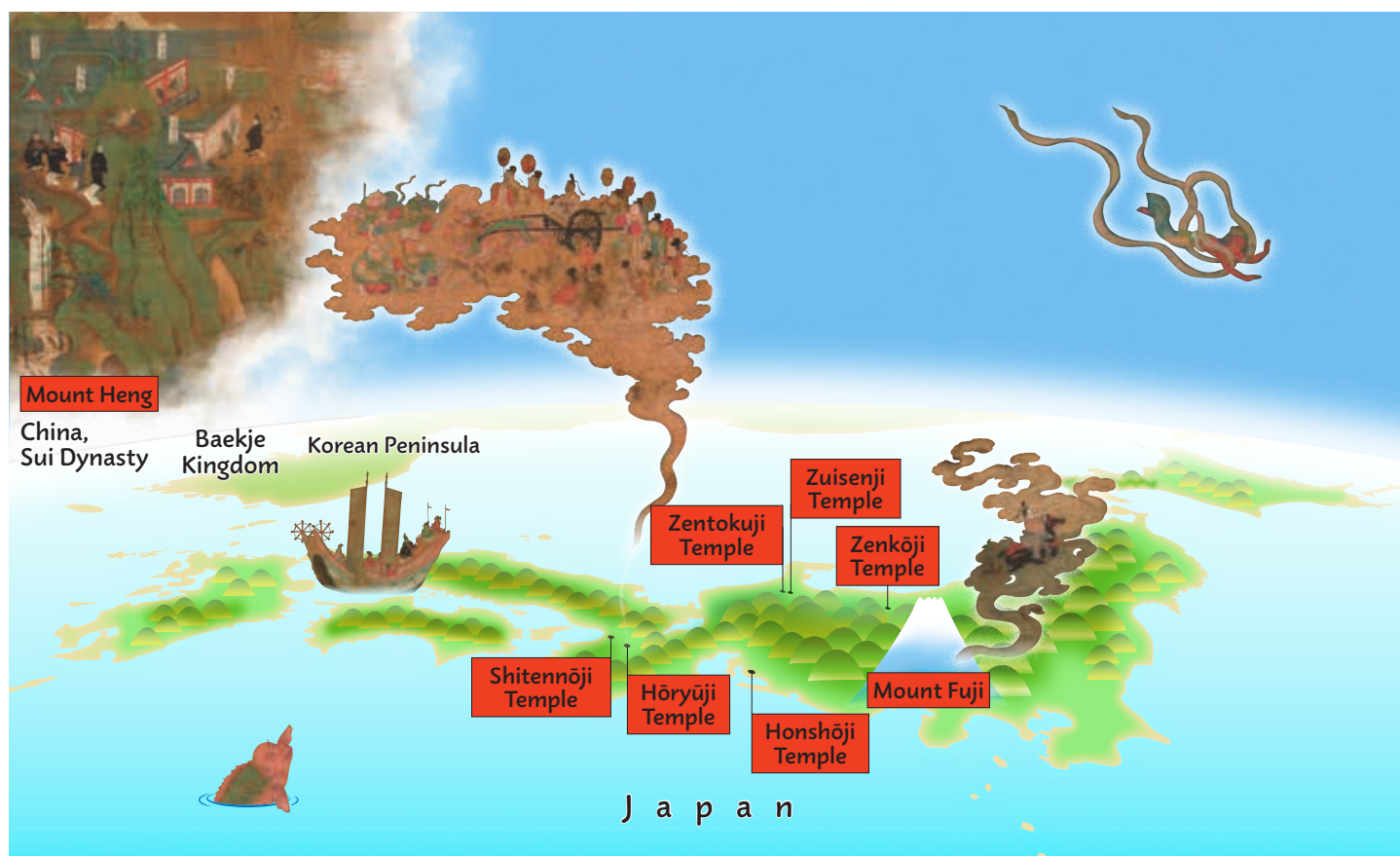


【Fushidan Sekkyō (Chanted Preaching)】

A form of preaching that adds melody to words, conveying Buddhist teachings and stories in a dramatic way through voice intonation and gestures. It developed as one of the techniques of the Japanese storytelling art, and its preservation has been revalued today.

【Tools for the *etoki* performance】





Related Chronology

- 552 Introduction of Buddhism to Japan
- 574 Birth of Prince Shōtoku
- 587 Moriya is defeated
- 593 Prince Shōtoku becomes regent and establishes Shitennōji Temple
- 604 The Seventeen-Article Constitution is promulgated
- 622 Death of Prince Shōtoku
- 752 Construction of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji Temple; around this time, the Picture Hall of Shitennōji Temple is established
- 1069 Construction of the Picture Hall at Hōryūji Temple; the oldest existing wall paintings are made
- 1224 The Tendai monk Jien rebuilds the Picture Hall of Shitennōji Temple
- 1317 At Shitennōji, the “Shōbōrinzō” script for the *etoki* of the biography of Prince Shōtoku is compiled; around this time, the illustrated biography at Honshōji Temple is created
- 1983 Reconstruction of the current Picture Hall of Shitennōji; Artist Kenkichi Sugimoto paints the walls with the Illustrated Biography of Prince Shōtoku
- 2022 1400th anniversary of Prince Shōtoku’s death
- 2025 The *etoki* of the Illustrated Biography of Prince Shōtoku is publicly performed in New York City!

The “Illustrated Biography of Prince Shōtoku” and the “Zenkōji Amida Tathāgata Illustrated Biography” are provided thanks to the collaboration of
Honshōji Temple, Oyama Kōen

Representative for the Religious and Cultural Heritage Archive Project

Abe Yasurō

Professor at Ryukoku University and Guest Lecturer at Nagoya University

Commentator

Yamamoto Satomi

Professor at Waseda University, Faculty of Letters, Arts and Sciences

Coordinator

Abe Mika

Research Fellow at Nagoya University Research Center for Cultural Heritage and Texts

Technical Support for *Etoki* Films and Other Visuals

Souda Tomotsugu

Vice Chair of the Mikawa Super Etoki-za

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