‘Slaves, Outcasts, and Torture: New Perspectives on Japanese Oral Performance and Media’

Professor Haruo Shirane
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Japan has a slave literature, one that describes the torture of slaves in the late medieval period, and it has a long and complex tradition of oral and musical performance, from Heike biwa (lute) to noh theater to sekkyô-bushi (sermon ballads), performed by outcasts (hinin), beggars, the blind, and other socially discriminated groups. Why did Japan give birth to slave literature? And why were Japanese performers social outcasts? How were these two connected? Using the example of sekkyô-bushi narratives such as Sanshô dayu, Shintoku-maru, and Oguri-hangan, and noh plays such as Jinen koji, Shirane examines the issues of slavery, scapegoating, and the social and religious functions of oral/musical performance and places these in a broader comparative framework that includes the story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ in the Bible.

Haruo Shirane, Shincho Professor of Japanese Literature and Culture and chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University, is author of many books, including The Culture of the Four Seasons. He is presenting completing a new book called Media, Performance, and Popular Culture: De-centering Japanese Literature.

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