

To What Extent are Heian Period Cultural Icons Appropriated
and Presented by Modern Japanese Animation?

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I. Introduction

Anime, short of (Japanese) animation, is a part of the increasingly popular ACG (anime, comics, games) culture amongst the younger generation. (Markwide Research) As a form of media, anime also serves as a medium for conveying authors' messages. But as opposed to more traditional forms of media like stage shows and novels, anime has lower restrictions in elements of storytelling and artistic expression, which offers greater creative freedom as a form of media, allowing the authors to better deliver their message to the viewers. For example, *Your Name*. (2016) provides an emotional catharsis while calling for remembrance of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake through a teenage love story, (Thelen) whereas *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) tells a conflict-free childhood story but strikes directly to the heart, calling for nostalgic memories of childhood. This paper discusses if the argument can be extrapolated for traditional figures in the Heian period. Here, the term *cultural icons* refers to a collection of both tangible and intangible aspects of culture representative of the history of interest. This paper will inspect specific plot scenes in Kyoto Animation's 2015 production *Sound! Euphonium* (響け！ユーフォニアム) set in Uji, Kyoto Prefecture (京都府宇治市). By comparing these scenes with historical narratives from *The Tale of Genji* and *Kokin Wakashu*, and exploring the depiction of Agata matsuri (県祭り) in the anime, this paper tries to answer the research question: to what extent are Heian period cultural icons reinterpreted in contemporary Japanese animation?

II. Background and Research Methodology

Sound! Euphonium is an anime series produced by Kyoto Animation, an anime adaptation of Ayano Takeda's same-name novel series set in the city of Uji, Kyoto. From the perspective of protagonist Oumae Kumiko, the story centers around the lives of high school students in the Kitauji High School concert band, specifically focusing on their participation in

the competitive band ensemble. As the students strive for excellence in national competitions, the anime explores themes of intricate friendship and personal growth, all set against the culturally rich backdrop of Uji.

Uji, in the southern part of Kyoto prefecture, is best known for its high-quality matcha, but the city's recorded history can date back to the construction of the Uji bridge in 646. Culturally, Uji boasts a rich cultural heritage that dates back to the Heian period. The Uji bridge is said to have housed the lonely demon of Hashihime (橋姫), (Kotobank)(Davisson) and has appeared in works of literature in *Kokin Wakashu* and *The Tale of Genji* and paintings and craft products¹; the Agata jinja is next to the world-renowned Byodo-in, and became the guardian deity when Fujiwara no Yorimichi built the Byodo-in in 1052, and the annual event of Agata matsuri, or the *Kurayami matsuri* (暗闇の奇祭) is believed to have existed since then². (Sakae)

In this project, primary and secondary sources will be employed to ensure a well-rounded understanding of Uji's cultural representations. Literary analysis involves examining depictions of Uji Bridge within classical Heian period texts such as *The Tale of Genji* (Author Waley's translated version) and *Kokin Wakashu*, supplemented by evidence from visits to the Tale of Genji Museum in Uji. With limited suitably translated sources for Agata matsuri, the primary form of evidence will be primary source through documentation from the Agata shrine, observations at the day of matsuri, and interviews. For the modern portrayal, detailed scene analysis from *Sound! Euphonium*³ will be conducted, focusing on episodes that prominently feature Uji Bridge and Agata Matsuri.

The analysis will proceed through a structured comparative framework. For Uji Bridge, the character and thematic significance ascribed to it in historical literature will be juxtaposed

¹ It is written on the monument of Uji bridge, located at the west shore.

² Based off oral evidence of a Miko at Agata jinja.

³ For future time stamp references, refer to the version used by bilibili.com.

with its representation in the contemporary media. This comparison will seek to identify potential continuity in cultural significance, evaluating how well modern portrayals align with or diverge from traditional interpretations. As to Agata matsuri, the focus will be on the depiction of rituals and community involvement in *Sound! Euphonium* as compared to actual practices observed during the festival. Special attention will be given to the spiritual and communal aspects, assessing the accuracy and depth of cultural representation.

III. Uji bridge: an emotional passage

In the Heian period Uji bridge symbolized transition and passage both literally and metaphorically, and had a melancholic atmosphere that mirrored the emotional states of characters. In *Hashihime*, the 45th chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, the setting of the story was switched to Uji as the prince Hachi no Miya moved to his residence in Uji along with his two daughters. This is a significant event in the story arc, and in the Tale of Genji museum a glass bridge separates the description of first two sections and the *Uji Jujo* section, metaphoric of the crossing of the Uji bridge. The exhibition includes several panels like “crossing the shimogawa” to “going through mountains”, and at the final panel the Uji lake is crossed to reach prince Hachi’s residence at the east shore, approximately the place of Uji Gamijinja (宇治上神社) today. In the Heian period, living in the Heian-kyo was believed to be superior, whereas it was a disgrace to live in the countryside. (Waley) In this sense, the torrents of the Uji river symbolically isolates prince Hachi and the Uji princesses with the Heian world, and Kaoru frequently crossing the Uji bridge for Oigimi despite barriers like the difference in identity and the vast distance between Heian-Kyo and Uji.

In *Kokin Wakashu*, the 825th poem writes:

忘らるる 身を宇治橋の なか絶えて 人もかよはぬ 年ぞへにける

This poem described the breaking of a relationship between two people. The poem used the imagery of standing alone on the Uji bridge, forgotten by the other half. The middle of the bridge is “cut off”, implying the bridge once metaphorically connected the two, but it had turned out to not be the case anymore. This poem further supports that Uji bridge is a means of passage, connecting two people physically and their relationship symbolically.

Uji bridge was also the place for emotional thoughts in *Wakashu*. In the 825th poem, the author wrote “in the Uji river [...] as the years too pass by”, describing an emotional thought process within the author with a melancholic atmosphere as she reflected on herself and evaluates her relationship with the other half. However, it is unclear if the author was standing on Uji bridge when she composed the poem, standing by the river watching it, or imagining it from memories. Similarly, the 904th poem writes:

ちはやぶる 宇治の橋守 なれをしぞ あはれとは思ふ 年のへぬれば

This poem reflected on the enduring presence of the swift currents under Uji bridge. The author expressed a sense of pathos by writing あはれとは思ふ. Here あはれ, or あわれ in modern Japanese, meant compassion or pity. Comparing the Uji river’s current to the constant flow of time, the author created a sense of emotional connection to the Uji river. From the evidence of the two poems, thinking about the bridge sometimes led to a melancholic thought process and sorrowness for the author. However, despite the extensive symbolism around Uji bridge and the river, there were no direct depictions of the physical appearances of the bridge itself from the texts. Therefore it is uncertain if the poem was composed on the bridge or not, and as a result the Uji bridge may have a symbolic character instead in the poems.

In *Sound! Euphonium*, one of the most important scenes that marked character development is season 1 episode 12 during Kumiko’s first-year at high school. As Kumiko

couldn't play a part of the competition piece well enough, Taki sensei decided to let Tanaka Asuka, a third year Euphonium player, play the part alone instead of both of them playing. As Kumiko was walking on Uji bridge on her way home, she remembered the scene when sensei said 「それからユーフォ、ここは田中さん一人でやってください」⁴, and was frustrated (悔しい) that she didn't meet sensei's standards despite practiced for a long time. Emotions burst out as she began running on the bridge repeating 「上手になりたい」⁵, or "I want to become [play the piece] better". In this scene, Uji bridge was the place where Kumiko's psychological depiction happens. The accumulation of emotion that built up culminated in the scene when Kumiko's final realization results in her running on the bridge with tears⁶. In this sense, crossing the Uji bridge also acts as an emotional passage. Symbolically the Uji river separated the emotional states before and after Kumiko's realization. Before she crossed the river, Kumiko was in self-regret and guilt for getting excluded for the Euphonium part. The self-realization aligned with the river as a passage of personal development. This could be further supported by the scene immediately afterwards when Kumiko met Shuuichi, a Trombone player who was also scolded by sensei for his part, as they exchanged messages to "become better", as Shuuichi said 「俺の方が上手になりたい」⁷. It can be seen that Shuuichi, on the other shore of the bridge, has made the realization and is en route to become better; and Kumiko joins his path as she makes the realization crossing the bridge. This scene aligned with the Heian depiction of Uji bridge where Uji bridge marked a symbolic transformation. The Uji river symbolized a gap or "difference" between mental states, yet Uji bridge, as the passage of change, marked a change in state of mind for both Hachi no miya in the past and Kumiko in the 21st century.

⁴ Season 1 Episode 12 (15:56).

⁵ Season 1 Episode 12 (16:12-16:30), the phrase was repeated 12 times.

⁶ Season 1 Episode 12 (16:22).

⁷ Season 1 Episode 12 (17:04)

In season 3 episode 11, Uji bridge became the background for yet another important scene and furthered the theme of friendship in the anime. Kumiko, now a third-year student but has been uncertain about her future, decided to not go to music college after high school⁸. As Kumiko and her best friend Reina, who had decided to go to music college since first grade, walked along the Uji bridge, Reina proposed to end their friendship as she said「久美子とはこれで終わりにする」⁹. Reina believed without the intersection in music the friendship they would have no reason to meet each other eventually lose contact and eventually part ways¹⁰. Again, the river beneath Kumiko and Reina was symbolic of their difference in paths as they made drastically different life decisions. Kumiko would likely enter a normal college, whereas Reina would enter music college to become a pro trumpet player. However, Kumiko walked along with Reina across the bridge to send her home. On the east shore of the bridge, Kumiko said「私たちは変わらない」¹¹, suggesting their friendship will not change over time even after graduation. She furthered her argument saying that Reina is special and important to her, and in the meantime she walked towards Reina to tag her hand onto Reina's, an action of goodwill and connectedness. Crossing the Uji river, the Uji bridge again symbolized the means of passage, a continuation of friendship between Kumiko and Reina, and Kumiko's acts of crossing the bridge and confessing to Reina suggests her will to continue their friendship despite their vast differences in life paths. Directly compared to the *Wakashu* poem, the Uji bridge did not symbolically “break” and the Uji river did not separate Kumiko and Reina in the anime. Instead, they walked together to the other side of Uji bridge, overcoming the current of passage of time as symbolized by the Uji river underneath them.

⁸ Season 3 Episode 11 (21:19).

⁹ Season 3 Episode 11 (21:29).

¹⁰ Season 3 Episode 5 (21:51).

¹¹ Season 3 Episode 11 (22:15).

There were also scenes that involve periods of self-reflection around Uji bridge. Particularly, the “Kumiko bench”, a bench on the west shore of Uji river that was coined by the Uji tourist association. In *Sound! Euphonium*, Kumiko bench was an important scene as it was the main scene for Kumiko’s frequent monologues and self-reflection. With the Uji bridge as backdrop, Kumiko frequently reflected on her relationships with other members of the team and the orchestra’s progress towards the national contest. (iakesi)

IV. Agata matsuri: the Kurayami matsuri

Agata matsuri is the largest annual event in Uji city. While there is no written evidence, it is believed that some form of such matsuri took place since the building of Byodo-in. The festival consists of three main parts. After Asamikenogi (朝御饌ノ儀) in the morning, about 700 street stalls open along the triangular roads of Honcho, Agata and Ujibashi streets on the west shore, attracting both locals and visitors. In the evening, at around 5pm, the Yuumikenogi (夕御饌ノ儀) is performed, marking the start of the main event. Preparations are made for the nocturnal events, including rearranging the main sanctuary and the Kagura hall. At 11pm, the Bonten (梵天) procession begins, carried by local youths from the Bon-ten association. The most mystical part occurs at midnight in complete darkness inside the main sanctuary, where a secret ritual of transferring the deity is performed. This rite marks the beginning of Demise, a procession that winds through the shrine grounds and exits through the torii gate. Once outside, the Bonten is swung around boldly and lifted in a display of vigor at the old Ōnusa front. The procession then returns to the shrine, and after the ritual of dressing at the Bon-ten Hōanjo, it proceeds back to the main sanctuary. The festival concludes with the Kangyo-sai, which takes place around 1am on the 6th, signaling the end of the festivities. (Agata) After the festival, an after-event called Taihei Shinji (大幣神事) takes place on June 8th, featuring a ceremonial

procession, including a run along Agata street, that culminates with the dramatic casting of the Taihei into the Uji River, symbolizing the dumping of misfortune and renewal of spirit. (Agata)

Sound Euphonium approaches Agata matsuri differently compared to the historical icon. The anime series mentions the festival in two episodes, both referring to the pre-festival street stall event, with the Agata street (県通り) as the main background. For example, season 1 episode 8 gives a depiction of the huge Agata torii gate at one end of Agata street where it intersects Uji bridge¹². As the perspective gradually shifts, scenes of Yatai activities like gacha mini games and street food were depicted, mimicking the real event¹³. The scene of the Agata jinja was shown, with Kaori, a third-year trumpet player, making the wish to pass the concert band audition for the Kyoto prefecture round, saying「オーディション上手く行きますように」¹⁴ with a ring of bell and two claps. This obvious Shinto ritual is representative of the matsuri, where Agata jinja, located at one vertex of the triangular Yatai streets, starts to get crowded after the Yuumikenogi¹⁵. People ring the bell and make wishes to the Kami for good fortune. Similarly, season 3 episode 5 shows the scene of the same Torii as the concert band players join the matsuri after practice¹⁶. However, the anime only gave a partial depiction of the matsuri. Specifically, there was no description of the main event nor the after event of Taihei Shinji, nor were there any mentions of the main event. The street stalls were emphasized as a break to the norm of daily practice and preparation for the contest. For example, when asked about going to the matsuri, Kumiko said she is adapted to such yatais and therefore didn't want to go. Disliking huge crowds, she rejected the proposal as she says「家の近くが屋台の通りでやりかたみも感じないし」¹⁷. This implies the main theme of Agata matsuri for the high schoolers in the conversation is the pre-event of Yatai and hanging out

¹² *Season 1 Episode 8 (10:59).*

¹³ *Based on personal experience at the matsuri.*

¹⁴ *Season 1 Episode 8 (15:21).*

¹⁵ *Based on observational facts.*

¹⁶ *Season 3 Episode 5 (15:46).*

¹⁷ *Season 1 Episode 8 (04:09).*

with friends instead of the Shinto ritual itself. Indeed, in the context of the anime where the goal is to advance in the orchestral contest, the matsuri is merely a short break from the daily practices.

V. The presentation of Heian cultural icons in the anime

There is clear evidence of alignment in the depiction of Uji bridge's character between *Sound! Euphonium* and in classical texts like *The Tale of Genji* and *Kokin Wakashu*. In both the contemporary and Heian period texts, Uji bridge is symbolic of connection, is a pathway for change, and has a melancholic thought-provoking atmosphere that frequently acts as background for monologic thoughts. Regarding the Agata matsuri, the anime does not fully present the historical icon well to the viewers, with the core Shinto elements of the matsuri - the Bonten procession and Taihei Shinji - found missing in the contemporary media.

One main difference between the bridge and the matsuri is their element of concreteness against abstractness. Uji bridge has a mostly unchanging physical presence even as it suffers wars and fires. Stories about the bridge and Uji river were written not only in Heian period literary texts but also throughout Japanese history. For example, in medieval Japan the story of Toyotomi Hideyoshi using Uji river's water from Sannoma on Uji bridge for tea ceremonial purposes was widespread in Uji¹⁸. Therefore, it is easier for the bridge to maintain its traditional imagery and significance in narrative media. On the other hand, the Agata matsuri is an abstract and complex ritual-oriented festival, and therefore is more likely to change throughout time. Additionally, the Agata matsuri does not have significant written evidence on the know-how, so reference and interpretation of the matsuri are only available through personal experience or hearsay, making its presentation more difficult than Uji bridge with more written evidence to support.

¹⁸ The story was written in Keihan Uji station tourist center.

The artistic genre of *Sound! Euphonium* also makes a difference between the depiction. *Sound! Euphonium* is an anime that focuses on high school life, with the main plot revolving around solving conflicts within the orchestra band and advancing in the orchestra contest. The main themes include themes of teenage self-development, especially Kumiko's personal development and relationship-wise revolvment from entering high school in season 1 to her graduation (and eventual winning of national gold prize as the band leader) in season 3. In this context, it becomes simpler from the producer's perspective to incorporate scenes of the Uji river as Uji river's depiction in classical texts - a place for self-reflection, a path of change and improvement, and a symbol of connectedness - align with the goals of the anime. On the other hand, the cultural significance of Agata matsuri as a religious event is difficult to be fully captured and presented in a high school life-centric anime like *Sound! Euphonium*.

Additionally, the Uji bridge in literature and media serves a symbolic function. There are clear symbols of the bridge that can be adapted and preserved across different contexts. In the Heian period, *The Tale of Genji* and *Kokin Wakashu* are two examples of drastically different media having similar interpretations of Uji bridge. Uji bridge's versatility to adapt to different contexts by authors' needs makes it easier for *Sound! Euphonium* as a visual medium to incorporate the element as well. On the other hand, Agata matsuri's elements, being functional and specific to the ritual's context, do not translate as readily into a modern narrative form that does have a direct relationship, possibly leading to its partial interpretation and representation in the anime.

Regardless of the interpretation of historical cultural icons, ideas cannot be delivered well without presentation. In this metric, Kyoto Animation, the producer of *Sound! Euphonium*, sets Uji bridge as background for important events to enhance viewers' understanding and memory

of the event. For instance, Kumiko's "iconic run" on the Uji bridge also acts as the concluding event of the episode and the first season of *Sound! Euphonium* in the context of the anime. This well concludes the season by forming a contrast with the beginning of the season when Kumiko could not understand her friend Reina's reaction of discontent and frustration over a disappointing result in the middle school orchestra contest. Now after a series of events throughout the season of Anime, Kumiko finally learns the emotion of bitter regret「悔しい」. The scene, along with the vivid voice cover of Kurosawa Tomoyo, renders one of the most important scenes in *Sound! Euphonium* and the bridge are often referred to by fanatics as "the regret bridge"「悔しい橋」. (Sound! news) Increasing popularity along with city-wide collaboration, including one with *The Tale of Genji Uji Jujo* enhances the presentation of the cultural icon of Uji bridge. (Sound! news) According to observational statistics by Uji tourist center, about one hundred people every day come to Uji tourist center for the so-called *Anime Pilgrimage* (アニメ聖地巡礼), visiting places in Uji when the scenes in *Sound! Euphonium* happens, Uji bridge and Kumiko bench being among them. "Years before there were a few and only from Japan, but in Uji right now we see way more people from around the world¹⁹," said the man at Uji city tourist center. Li, a college student from Beijing, confessed that "Although I came to Uji for [*Sound Euphonium's*] pilgrimage, I learned a lot of history of the city, like Uji bridge being the background of *Uji Jujo*²⁰." Some even came to Uji on the day of Agata matsuri. Andrew and his friends, college students from London, said: "I saw in the anime that Agata matsuri is the fifth of June, so we came." It can be seen that even Agata matsuri, an event that is not depicted as well in the anime, is capable of attracting viewers' interest and allowing them to know more about these

¹⁹ This is translated from an interview in Japanese.

²⁰ This is translated from an interview in Chinese Mandarin.

traditional cultural icons when they come to Uji. This can act as an opportunity for the viewers, mostly the younger generation²¹, to learn about the cultural traditions of a historical city like Uji.

VI. Conclusion

The analysis reveals continuity in the representation of Uji Bridge, which retains its traditional symbolic meanings of connection, passage, and emotional depth in both classical texts and modern animation. In contrast, the depiction of Agata Matsuri in the anime demonstrates a significant departure from its traditional religious and communal significance.

An important takeaway from the implications is the dual role of contemporary media in cultural adaptation and preservation. Modern media like anime can serve as a powerful medium for telling the stories of cultural icons and keeping traditional symbols alive in public memory. However, it should also be cautioned that the viewers' perspectives of these cultural icons are the ones that are adapted and reshaped by the producer. Such adaptations could be partially due to maintaining logical flow throughout the media but also possibly due to meeting viewers' desires. As cultural icons continue to be reinterpreted through various media, understanding these portrayals' impact on cultural memory and identity becomes crucial. Examining these adaptations, the continuity and evolution of cultural heritage can be better understood.

²¹ *Based on observational fact and oral confirmation of Uji tourist center.*

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