

## Oka Masao and Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl: The Japanese Legacy of German Volkskunde

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<https://hdl.handle.net/2324/7408084>

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出版情報 : pp. 8-, 2026-02-14. 九州大学大学院人文科学府広人文学コース  
バージョン :  
権利関係 :



*Oka Masao and Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl:  
The Japanese Legacy of German Volkskunde*

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During the 1930s, Oka Masao spent many years in Vienna, first as a student of the culture-historical school of ethnology (culture circle theory) under Wilhelm Schmidt, Wilhelm Koppers, and Robert Heine-Geldern, later as the founding director of the Institute of Japanese Studies at Vienna University. This paper traces Oka's engagement with German-language approaches to ethnology and folklore studies (*Volkskunde*). It starts with a discussion of the diffusionist culture circle theory Oka encountered in Vienna and which he used to frame his PhD dissertation on Japanese ethnogenesis (*Cultural Strate in Ancient Japan*, 1935). Special emphasis is then placed on Oka's reception of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, an early German proponent of folklore studies, who was rediscovered in the 1920s and stylized as the founding father of *Volkskunde* under the Nazi regime. The paper traces Oka's shift from culture-historical ethnology to the politically utilizable and present-oriented *Volkskunde* he found in Riehl's works. It examines to what extent Oka's reception of Riehl's voluminous and often contradictory oeuvre was shaped by National Socialist reinterpretations and selective readings, how Oka utilized Riehl's thought to advertise ethnology's political usefulness for the Japanese colonial empire during the wartime, and finally how he attempted to reconcile culture-historical ethnology with Riehl's present-oriented approach in the postwar period. Throughout, the paper highlights how the different methodological approaches are reflected in (and give shape to) Oka's use of the term *minzoku* (folk, ethnic group).