Akira Kurosawa’s *Dreams*, released in Paris 1990, provides three brief visually stunning episodes that turn on Japanese folklore, each episode offering the teacher and student special insight into the context of folklore in Japanese life, even into the late twentieth century. The Warner Brothers home video contains the eight complete episodes, each of approximately eight minutes; however, only the first three are the concern of this review. Episode Five, “Crows,” focused on van Gogh, and the concluding “Village of the Water Wheels,” although outside the limits of the article, is treated briefly in the conclusion as interesting in themselves and capable of providing special discussion in the classroom. Despite the film’s often dismal reviews, it has recently enjoyed frequent showing on American television—perhaps the comments herein will help position portions of the film within literature and humanities courses offered by high school and college teachers.

Elementary teachers from grades three onward will find their pupils readily engage episodes one and two. The spirit of the foxes in the first and the age of the narrator in the second are especially appropriate. Episode three should be reserved for grades nine or later. College instructors will work easily with all three episodes in their discussions at the folkloric level. Extensions such as selective remembrance, nostalgia, filmic quality, and Kurosawa’s agenda come easily to mind as students open to the material.

The film purports to be a demonstration of Kurosawa’s life (b. March 1910, Tokyo) as revealed through a series of recollected “dreams.” The eight dreams are framed within an entry wedding procession (Episode One, “Sunshine Through the Rain”) and an exultant funeral dance (Episode Eight, “Village of the Water Wheels”) as witnessed by a young traveler who grows without comment from a disobedient boy of nine, spying on a wedding, to a questioning young man at a funeral. Although the film has been publicized as springing from Kurosawa’s youth, literally no mention of it is made in any of the reviews accompanying its premiere.

Nobuhiko Obayashi, Kurosawa’s most thorough biographer in his *Cahiers du cinéma*¹, has nothing to say of the folklore embedded in the first three episodes, nor does his documentary film, *The Making of “Dreams,”* at any point in an otherwise illuminating revelation on production and cinematic technique, contribute one word other than to suggest that the house in “Sunshine” “was very similar to my old one in Koishikawa.”²³

**SETTING THE STAGE**

Kurosawa expresses himself in terms of the vernacular culture, exposing a life common to everyone, but now beset by industrial pollution, environmental decay, and nuclear fears. Central episodes of *Dreams* are replete with atomic horrors, human monsters, and war. The folkloric quality in *Dreams* is established immediately in Episode One but falls away after Episode Three as if to suggest that the content of the central portions of the film have tragically abandoned it.

The teacher may be well served to suggest on opening that as Dorson notes,⁴ Japan is an ideal place for folk legends to develop in abundance: the people remain in a single geographic locality; there is no frontier (as in America); there is no colonial empire save in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the village (*mura*) is fenced in by mountains, there is ritual at *mura’s* edge on returning, there are local deities from whom the villagers believe they are descended, hence there is a powerful sense of individuality and tradition. What travelers there are will carry leg-
ends about the land, and these are enlivened by the spectacular landscape of water, rivers, lakes, hot springs, pools, shorelines, forests, and volcanoes. A common term for folklore or folk stories is minwa, whereas legends are properly called densetsu, being simpler in structure and flexible in length, depending upon the narrative.

BEAUTY is found to be fleeting, temporary, and fragmentary here on earth. As in most literatures, even sorrow is seen as beautiful—witness the cherry blossom falling almost as soon as it comes to life.

THE POINT OF VIEW is often the singular Japanese use of the narrator’s peering from behind something such as a tree or screen (Episode One).

GODS, MAGIC, AND FOLKLORE are removed from the film after the third episode, but the gods, thriving on dance, music, and ritual, return in the last episode. In the same vein, as there is music only in the first and last episodes, there is dance only in the first and last, again to say that the gods are happy solely with the traditional ways.

IN FORMER TIMES, people sought dreams at shrines and Buddhist temples; thus, through these dreams, Buddhist divinities would signify their wills and further reveal themselves in waking events. Perhaps this film is Kurosawa’s way of returning us to a better and often forgotten time.

For each of the episodes, a brief narrative summary will be followed by the folkloric tradition and suggested classroom application. Printed sources for Japanese folklore are given in endnotes and the bibliography.

“Sunshine Through the Rain” (Kitsune no Yome- tori)

EPISODE ONE

NARRATIVE—

The opening dialogue between the boy (Kurosawa-narrator) and his mother has the mother admonish the boy that he mustn’t go out. “There is sunshine but it’s raining. A fox will become a bride when the weather is like this, and she doesn’t want to be seen by anyone. If someone sees her, something horrible could happen to that person.” Of course, the boy goes out anyway, spies on the foxes proceeding as from a wedding, and returns home to find himself locked out by his mother, who, of course, knows what has occurred. “You saw it. You saw something that you shouldn’t have seen. I can’t let someone who does such things back in the house. Just a while ago, the fox came here and was very angry with you. She left this knife and asked you to kill yourself to apologize. I can’t let you in until the fox forgives you.”

The boy doesn’t know where to find the fox.

The mother responds that the fox’s house is under the rainbow, and the boy departs, knife in hand, across a flower-brightened field toward the overarching rainbow.

TRADITION—

Foxes are associated with Inari, the god of plenty or the God of Rice. They may serve as messengers, perhaps harkening back to fox worship. Foxes, badgers, and serpents can assume the guise of other animals and of human beings. They may even marry human beings without the human knowing the least thing about it. Likewise, they may bring treasure to their friends, but cause death or humiliation to their enemies. Dorson maintains that the Japanese fox “inhabits a different universe from the European fox, for he is no animal but a demon, a transformer, and a degenerate deity.”5 The Japanese fox is different from the European fox which is typically sly and tricky (see Aesop’s fables); the American Pueblo Indian fox of the Southwest is a trickster or a totem object.

APPLICATION—

Kurosawa interweaves the fox, the wedding, and the rain shower as told by Redesdale in his Tales from Old Japan.6 In Redesdale’s version, the old fox gives up his place as the head of the family, and his son, who is a white fox, works very hard to earn enough money to marry. The son hears of a beautiful lady-fox and resolves to marry her. A meeting is soon arranged, wedding presents are sent from the bridegroom to the lady’s house, and there are speeches all round. When this is concluded, a special day is set aside for the bride to go to the bridegroom’s house. She is carried in a most solemn procession through the forest during a light sunshiny rain. A shower during sunshine, which is called “the devil beating his wife,” in the West, is called in Japan “the fox’s bride carried to her husband’s house.” Hence, the whole of Kurosawa’s central
procession and delightfully suspicious dance of the foxes’ wedding procession. Later, cubs are born and carried off to the temple of Inari Sama, the patron saint of foxes.

Students may question whether or not the mother is serious about shutting her son out of the house, and then giving him the knife with the suggestion of suicide. Younger students especially will respond at this level, whereas high school and college students may well want to question whether or not this is a good way to introduce folklore. How could it be celebrated without peach trees? The hillside figures dance, and he is given the chance to see once again the peach orchard in all of its springtime radiance. Each human figure is briefly replaced by a wonderful flowering peach tree, but they fade and finally disappear altogether. Only the phantom girl remains. He runs to her only to see her transformed into a diminutive, yet growing peach tree.

SOME VERSIONS INCLUDE A CAPTIVE PRINCESS, OTHERS ADD A CRAB AND A CHESTNUT TO THE TRAP.7

APPLICATION—

THIS EPISODE IS THE RICHEST IN FOLKLORE TEACHING SOURCES, BECAUSE IN ADDITION TO MOMOTARÔ, THE VIEWER IS TREATED IN THE OPENING SCENE TO THE ANCIENT CUSTOM OF HINA-MATSUMI (ALSO CALLED JOSHI NO SEKKA) (GIRLS’ FESTIVAL), THE 3RD OF MARCH. TRADITIONALLY, GIRLS GATHER IN ONE ANOTHER’S HOMES TO VISIT AND DISPLAY THE HINA DOLLS. IT WAS ONE DAY WHEN GIRLS COULD FEEL IMPORTANT AND CELEBRATE THEIR HAPPINESS. THERE IS PRAYER FOR THE GIRLS’ HEALTH AND HAPPINESS. MOST HOMES ERECTED THE HINA-DOLLS ON A FOUR-TIERED STAGE DECORATED WITH PEACH BLOSSOMS AND HISHI-MOCHI (THREE-COLORED, DIAMOND-SHAPED RICE CAKES). HISHI-MOCHI CUT INTO SMALL PIECES IS ROASTED AND CALLED HINA-ARARE. HINA-MOCHI IS ARRANGED FROM BOTTOM TO TOP IN ITS THREE COLORS—WHITE (SNOW), GREEN (VEGETATION), AND PINK (FLOWERS). THEREFORE, THERE IS A REPRESENTATION OF THE CHANGES IN THE SEASONS FROM WINTER TO SPRING.

THE ORIGIN OF THE FESTIVAL IS FOUND IN AN ANCIENT CHINESE PRACTICE IN WHICH THE MISFORTUNE IN THE HUMAN BODY WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE DOLL, AND THE DOLL WAS THEN WASHED IN A RIVER OR EVEN SET ADrift, THUS CLEANSING THE PERSON. THE PRACTICE SPREAD TO JAPAN DURING THE EDO PERIOD (1600–1868) AND WAS ASSOCIATED WITH GIRLS PLAYING WITH DOLLS.8 TEACHERS INTERESTED IN EXTENDED APPLICATION CAN QUICKLY ADAPT THE HINA-MATSUMI MATERIAL TO CLASSROOM USE EVEN TO THE POINT OF COSTUME MAKING.

IF ONE LOOKS CLOSELY, IT CAN BE MADE OUT THAT ONE OF THE DOLLS IS MISSING FROM ITS TIER, LEADING TO THE SPECULATION THAT KUROSAWA HAS BLENDED THE TWO FOLKTALES TO HIS DRAMATIC PURPOSE. THE TEACHER MAY ALSO LEAD STUDENTS TO AKUTAGAWA RYUNOSUKE’S THE DOLLS,9 COMPLETED IN 1923. THE STORY IS SET SOME TIME AFTER THE MEIJI EMPEROR WAS RETURNED TO POWER AND BEGINS HIS REVOLUTIONARY TURN TOWARD THE WEST. WITH THE COLLAPSE OF FEUDALISM, MANY OF JAPAN’S FINEST FAMILIES WERE IMPOVERISHED. TRADITIONAL OBJECTS SUCH AS HINA DOLLS WERE NOT CONSISTENT WITH THE NEW OUTLOOK, AND SO IN THIS STORY THE FAMILY HEIRLOOMS ARE SOLD OUTRIGHT. AKUTAGAWA FINDS EXPRESSION FOR HIS UNHAPPINESS WITH THE WESTERN IDEAS AROUND HIM, AND RETURNS THE GIRL OF THE STORY BACK TO THE PAST.10

“SNOW-WOMAN” (YUKI ONNA), EPISODE THREE

NARRATIVE—

SEVERAL CLIMBERS ARE CAUGHT IN A FRIGHTENING SNOWSTORM HIGH ON A MOUNTAINSIDE, REMOTE FROM THEIR CAMP. TIRED AND COLLAPSING, THEY ARE URGED ON BY THEIR LEADER, YET FINALLY HE, TOO, FALLS INTO THE DRIFTS. IN THE MIDST OF MORE WIND AND SNOW, A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN APPEARS. COVERING THE LEADER WITH HER SHAWL, SHE SPEAKS ENCOURAGINGLY TO HIM. HOWEVER, AS HE SLEEPS ON, SHE CHANGES GRADUALLY INTO AN UGLY GHOST-LIKE BEING, ALL WHILE TRYING TO GUIDE HIM TO A DEATH WORLD. INWARDLY INTENT ON SURVIVING, HE REVIVES, AND SHE VANISHES IN A FLURRY OF DRIVEN FLAKES. AWAKENING THE OTHERS WITH SHOUTS AND LOUD CLANKING OF EQUIPMENT, THEY FLounder A FEW STEPS TO FIND THEIR WIND-WHIPPED TENTS WELCOMING THEM TO SAFETY.

TRADITION—

THERE ARE SEVERAL VERSIONS OF THIS TALE, THE LEAST EMBELLISHED DESCRIBING A YOUNG MAN WHO MEETS A SNOW-WOMAN ONE NIGHT DURING A SNOWSTORM IN THE MOUNTAINS. SOON SHE COMES TO HIS VILLAGE AND MARRIES HIM, UNRECOGNIZED. IN ONE ADDITION, SHE IS FORCED TO TAKE A BATH AND MELTS AWAY. IN OTHER VERSIONS, EITHER HER HEALTH DETERIORATES AS THE WEATHER GETS WARM, OR SHE LEAVES HER CLOTHES AND SIMPLY DISAPPEARS, OR WAITING TEN YEARS OF EARTHY TENURE, WALKS OUT INTO ANOTHER SNOWSTORM. IN ANY EVENT, IT IS A PRETTY SAD ENDING.

THE NICEST RETELLING OF THIS TALE IS LAFCAHIO HEAM’S IN HIS WRITINGS FROM JAPAN.
APPLICATION—
This adaptation fails to engage most students, simply because not much transpires beyond the shouting and floundering about in the drifts. There may be some disagreement about the dialogue or the snowwoman’s intent, and reference to the written text can yield some rewarding points. If the journal collection Asian Folklore Studies is available, students may with some interest find a number of variations on the tale which can further any argument.

The appearance of Yuki Onna is dramatic and replicates quite exactly the color illustration accompanying a version of the tale in Davis’s Myths and Legends.

“Village of the Water Wheels,”
EPISODE EIGHT
This final episode is not grounded in any particular folktale, but rather represents Kurosawa’s closure of the film and a personal statement.

NARRATIVE—
The young man carries him further, asking about the lack of lighting. The old man responds, “It is supposed to be dark at night, isn’t it? We don’t need to light up the darkness and make it like a sunny day. We are trying to do whatever we can to live with nature. But nowadays people tend to forget that they, too, are a part of nature; they think they can make things better. . . . The most important things for mankind are fresh air and clean water.”

As the funeral procession nears, the old man tells him that the funeral is for the first woman that he ever loved, but it didn’t last long, and he married someone else. The old man joins the dancers while the narrator watches them exit, leaving himself, the trees, the rocks, the flowers, the stream, and music to themselves.

The film is circular, ending just as it began. Music attends the gods and their nature—man is a singular witness at best. Students find this intellectually satisfying and can respond with remarkable insight, not only to the film as art, but to Kurosawa’s part in bringing us a paean to nature and an appreciation of what has been.11

Curtain
The teacher who brings a “foreign” film into the classroom takes on added problems, especially should the film include subtitles as does Kurosawa’s Dreams. Large high school or college classes of thirty-five or forty students looking at a distant, miniature TV monitor quickly lose the sense of drama and inclusion necessary to a careful following of any film—the spoken words fade away behind the sound of the car alarm in the adjacent parking lot, the white printed subtitles distance themselves beside the inevitable student monitor with a pass to the counselor (nurse, security, textbook clerk). A video projector mounted on a cart and available throughout a department works wonders in raising student appreciation of film. Its large movie screen projection and attendant front-placed sound are certainly worth the expenditure.

Naturally enough, audiences find portions of Dreams visually and emotionally attractive. A reading of this brief piece and a review of the works referenced below will be an initial stride into the unexpected theatre of Japanese folklore.
end of the twelfth century and a second story of his which Kurosawa adapted for his own Rashomon, winner of the 1951 Venice Film Festival.

11. Teachers interested in the Episode titled “Crows” will find only a slight linkage to Japanese folklore. Royall Tyler in his excellent collection Japanese Tales relates the story of a crow as a magic messenger, but to affix this to Kurosawa’s episode may be tenuous. (See in Tyler story number 59, “The Crows”)

Kurosawa’s “Crows” opens with the young narrator looking at van Gogh’s painting titled Drawbridge at Arles with a group of washerwomen. See #208 in A Detailed Catalogue. The painting is canvas, 21x25 inches, and is seen just so in Kurosawa. It was commonly identified as Arles (See letter 469, dated about 17 March, 1888, by Rubulke). Van Gogh also made a watercolor (F 1480) after the first version, on which the name of the bridge is misspelled ‘Pont de l’Anglais,’ in the same way as in the letters. The true name of the bridge was ‘Pont de Langlois,’ after the bridge keeper. The painting was exhibited in Tokyo and Kyoto in 1958. Vincent once wrote to Theo, “The Japanese draw quickly, very quickly, like a lightning flash, because their nerves are finer, their feelings simpler” (No. 500). The implication is that Vincent was drawing in a spirit of simple, enlightened Japanese form.

The narrator steps into the painting (Obayashi has a lengthy discussion on the technique) and walks through a village scene (see plate Uitert No. 95, “Street in Auvers,” painted May 1890) down to a wheat field (see plate Uitert No. 91, “Wheatfield Seen from the Window of Vincent’s Room at the Hospital of Saint-Paul” or A Detailed Catalogue, plate No. 257) where he meets van Gogh painting. There is a conversation in English. Crows fly around calling loudly. But van Gogh abruptly sends the narrator away, saying that he is too busy to talk. The narrator leaves and returns to the museum, looking again at the painting where it all began.

REFERENCES

Books

Asian Folklore Studies. Peter Knecht, ed. Nanzan University, Nagoza, Published April and October. Distributed in the United States by Paragon Book Gallery, Ltd., 14 East 38th Street, New York, NY 10016.

Davies, F. H. Myths and Legends of Japan. Boston: David F. Dickerson & Co., 1932. Text is a compendium from Hear (Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan and The Japan Letters of Lafcadio Hearn) and Basil Hall Chamberlain (Things Japanese). Contains many of the source folktales and an excellent glossary.


There is an intriguing discussion of the Peach Boy tale and its rendering prior to and during the Pacific War. See pages 250–257. Two films, Momotaro of the Sky and Momotarō—Divine Troops of the Ocean, are in the Japanese film collection in the Library of Congress.


The original Dutch text is not suggested. There is no such book.

ARTICLES