

## ESSAYS

## Tora-san, A Japanese Hero

by Masako Nakagawa

**O***toko wa Tsurai yo* (It's Hard Being a Man) has the distinction of being the longest running film series in the history of international film. It is a series that became possible only through the meeting of two men: Yamada Yōji, the noted director, and Atsumi Kiyoshi, the actor. This essay is dedicated to Atsumi Kiyoshi, an exceptionally talented performer with unparalleled integrity, who passed away on August 4, 1996.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I explore the keys to the popularity of the Tora-san films and suggest pedagogical applications.

In *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*, Atsumi played the principal character Tora-san, a persuasive talker and itinerant merchant (*tekiya*) who

sold inexpensive merchandise at festivals. This occupation would seem to place him in the category of a criminal-type person, such as *yakuza*, the Japanese Mafia, but Tora-san always appeared as a likable man who never resorted to physical violence.

The plotline of each film was similar: Tora-san, during his travels, develops the urge to “go straight,” to settle down. He returns to his hometown, falls in love, is disappointed by a pretty, unattainable girl, then hits the road once more. Despite this lack of variation in plot and the usage of identical characters in every movie, the series enjoyed an enormous success. It is estimated that one of every two Japanese has attended a Tora-san film, but considering reruns in other media such as television and video tapes, it is probable that every Japanese has seen a Tora-san film. The movie's appeal transcends social and economic class. There are 122 Tora-san fan clubs in Japan, with branches in Hong Kong, Brazil, Los Angeles, and Vienna.



Atsumi Kiyoshi and Asaoka Ruriko in the last film of the series, *Tora-san to the Rescue*.

Photo courtesy of Shochiku Co., Ltd.

Although Tora-san has become a national symbol, he does not in any way represent the “everyman” of Japan. Instead, he is everything the average Japanese is not. Tora-san is a drifter who lives outside the norms of society, with neither a fixed abode nor a respectable, stable job. Unmarried and lazy, he is a failure in Japanese society.<sup>2</sup> Yet to the Japanese people, failure is not a sign

of inability. Ivan Morris's *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* provides us with such well-known legendary and historical figures as Yamato Takeru (fourth century), Sugawara no Michizane (ninth to tenth century), and Minamoto no Yoshitsune (twelfth century) whose careers represent an antithesis of the ethos of accomplishment and worldly success.<sup>3</sup> Numerous literary works have been based on these tragic heroes. The Tora-san story appeals to Japanese audiences for the same reason as do the historical tales, a reason emanating from the socio-historical structures of Japanese society.

Japan's emphasis on conformity was nurtured during its long history of geographic and self-imposed isolations and its strong pattern of group organization. “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” (*Deru kugi wa utareru*) illustrates the national principle of conformity.

As the economy grew in the seventies and eighties, most of the Japanese people found themselves confined to the hectic daily routine of prosperous society. For men, the schedule included long commuting times, long working hours, and self-sacrificing working practices. Women, as wives at home, shouldered the sole responsibility of rearing the children, and at the same time were confined to uncomfortably small and incredibly expensive living quarters. On the literary scene, the genre of business novels conveying “inside” technical information on companies emerged in the late fifties, and reached their heyday in the seventies.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, everyone in Japan seemed to organize his or her life in accordance with the nation's top priority: economic success. Everyone, that is, except Tora-san, who is a symbol of free spirit. In each film, our hero suffers from a broken heart and then moves on, obviously not destined to settle down. Neither well-educated nor ambitious nor patient enough to be pinned down into stable employment, Tora-san is actually living the average dream of freedom in Japan.

Tora-san's hometown, Katsushika Shibamata in downtown Tokyo, is an old-style neighborhood east of the Sumida River, where family is important and neighbors help each other.<sup>5</sup> A fast disappearing area, the neighborhood is warmer and more approachable than other sections of Tokyo.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese feel nostalgia for this type of neighborhood, as its relaxed atmosphere is

very different from the hurried business life. The prototype of the old neighborhood is often depicted in Rakugo storytelling and in Shomingeki, the commoner's theater.<sup>7</sup> The theatrical genre of Rakugo dates back to the sixteenth century, to a time when the common people were poor and could afford to pay only a small price to listen to jokes and humor. In this traditional one-man talk show, the storyteller imitates various personalities using a number of voice qualities and head-body contortions. In fact, Tora-san is a good Rakugo storyteller himself.

The family of Tora-san in Katsushika consists of his uncle, aunt, half-sister, and her husband and son. Tora-san's uncle, aunt, and sister work in the snack shop they own, while his brother-in-law works in the printing company next to his uncle's house. His father is deceased, and his mother, a former geisha, abandoned him when he was young. The family is close and does not pressure Tora-san to change his lifestyle. No one preaches to him about filial piety. Many Japanese probably wish they had as much breathing room in their own households as Tora-san does in his.

In a society that frowns upon open displays of emotions, Tora-san laughs and cries to his heart's content. Japanese audiences would not be able to express their own feelings as does Tora-san because societal norms and decorum dictate otherwise. Wishing that they, too, could forget society's conventions, Japanese viewers champion Tora-san's emotions, however volatile. The audience fully understands that Tora-san is a lonesome man who will sacrifice mundane happiness in order to be free. As the hero returns from a trip, becomes enamored of a pretty girl, suffers the pangs of lost love, then leaves home again, the film becomes a reminder of how safe and lucky the average Japanese is in his or her stable relationships.<sup>8</sup>

Because the films are replete with these dreams and sentiments and the experience of the old neighborhoods, the audience laughs and cries, enjoying a total catharsis. After the cinema is over, they feel refreshed and go about their lives as though they had gone through a therapeutic session. Thus, Tora-san accomplishes exactly what good literature has done for centuries in book form, except here it is done faster and more efficiently by means of a different media—moving picture and sound.

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The Japanese not only adored Tora-san as a cultural hero who remains unchanged in the face of a changing society, but found a specific cultural identity through the film series. Beginning with the eighth film, all the Tora-san movies were released twice a year to coincide with the two most important Japanese holidays: New Year's in January, and the Buddhist festival of the dead, *O-Bon*, in August.<sup>9</sup> In *Matsuri: Festivals of a Japanese Town*, Michael Ashkenazi states that in Japan a "festival is (and can be used as) a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integrating individuals into a society or group, and maintaining them as members through shared, recurrent, positively reinforcing performance."<sup>10</sup>

Considering Ashkenazi's definition, beloved Tora-san films have functioned in effect as a national festival,<sup>11</sup> and that is why Tora-san, Japan's "Charlie Chaplin," will continue to live in the series of forty-eight movies he left behind.

For teachers, the Tora-san films have numerous pedagogical usages. Japanese language teachers can show segments from the films in intermediate or advanced classes. Three or four segments, each about five minutes in length, can be selected for exercises in clarity of pronunciation and as examples of relatively common vocabulary. Teachers can use the films, in conjunction with vocabulary handouts, to teach students everyday Japanese expressions.

Because the films cover various socio-cultural issues, and many scenes are entertaining and easy to understand with little knowledge of the language, they can be used to illustrate and initiate topics of discussions on subjects other than language. In *Torajirō Haru no Yume* (Torajirō, A Spring Dream, twenty-fourth in the series, 1979) Tora-san's family takes in an American salesman (Tora-san's western counterpart) as a lodger,

and in *Torajirō Kokoro no Tabi* (Torajirō, A Traveler of Heart, forty-first in the series, 1989) the setting is in Vienna. Scenes from these films can be of interest in cross-cultural study courses, or to those students who are interested in Japanese views of foreigners. The segments related to Tora-san's lost love may be used in courses in Women's Studies and Japanese literature.

Selected films from *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* have already been shown in the U.S., Russia, China, and European countries, where they have been favorably received. Video tapes with English subtitles are not yet available. To obtain the original version on video format, contact:

Shochiku Home Videos  
Shoshciku kabushiki gaisha bideo jugyobu  
Tsukiji 1-13-5  
Chūō-ku, Tokyo 104 Japan  
Phone: 03 5550 1611 ■

## NOTES

1. Atsumi Kiyoshi: Born Tadokoro Yasuo on March 10, 1928. His father was a newspaper reporter. A sickly child, Atsumi would spend hours listening to comic monologues on the radio. His schoolteachers recognized his talent for comedy, and would often ask him to recite stories in class. The character of Tora-san developed around the memories of the *tekiya* the actor encountered as a young man when he worked in the black market following World War II. After dropping out of Chūō University, he became a stand-up comedian and actor. He is survived by his wife and two children.
2. Ivan Buruma, *Behind the Mask* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 208.
3. Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975).
4. Tamae Prindle, "Romance in Money: The Phenomenon of Japanese Business Novels," *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 25:2 (November 1991): 196.
5. Ito Tadao, *Nihon eiga-shi* 3 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1995): 140.
6. See Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake, 1867-1923* (New York: Knopf, 1983).
7. Kimura Shōzaburō, *Introduction to Japan* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1984): 305.
8. Buruma, *Behind the Mask*, 218.
9. The Bon festival is usually held for three days from August 13. During this festival, each household presents offerings to the family Buddhist altar to pray for the peaceful rest of the souls of their ancestors.
10. Michael Ashkenazi, *Matsuri: Festivals of a Japanese Town*, 157.
11. Yamada Yōji, *Eiga o tsukuru* (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten, 1986): 117.

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## Teaching the Pacific War through Films

by Arthur Barbeau

The present generation is a visual generation. Our students have not known a time without television and the VCR. Thus, the use of films is an ideal way to present the Pacific phase of World War II. Good films can be dramatic in demonstrating the reality of that war to present day students.

Even bad films can be useful in other ways. Those dealing with the Pacific often contain the grossest stereotypes. Many of these films, though, can help a teacher deal with the production and presentation of propaganda. While the racial stereotypes presented in the worst films are sometimes offensive to people today, it is important to remember that they were part of the psyche of the period.

Occasionally, I teach a course entitled "Images and Realities: the Films of World War II." Dealing with the whole sweep of the war, the course includes sections on the European/North African theater and the Home Front. While this course is designed for college undergraduates, the segments on the Pacific War, and parts of the documentary and foreign film sections, could be used at any level from middle school through college to teach about the war in Asia.

Here, I'll discuss several films. These brief synopses will allow teachers to choose films to suit their particular needs. While some of the teachable features of the different films will be highlighted, individuals will see other purposes appropriate for any film.

There are a few important points to remember at the start. First, there was a time lag between the concept of an idea for a film and the release of that film for theaters. In a quickly made film, the gap might have been half a year; for more elaborate productions, it approached two years. Thus, some films on the initial stages of the war did not appear until the war was almost finished.

Second, most of the early films were hack jobs, filled with propaganda. Many of the "combat" scenes were heroic, but rather unrealistic. This situation improved as the war continued and Americans had seen miles of newsreels, but viewers were tiring

of the war by then and wanted escapist films rather than more combat.

Third, the war in the Pacific was a racial war. During the conflict, the basic inhumanity of the Japanese was hardly ever questioned. There was a considerable difference in treatment of the Japanese and Germans as enemies in American films. In Europe, we warred against the Nazis; in the Pacific, extermination was the goal. While films made after the war might present a more balanced picture, they are not necessarily better films.

Finally, Hollywood went to war. The production companies in California churned out an almost inexhaustible supply of pictures. Many actors and filmmakers were also part of the government war effort. Some of the top directors worked making documentaries. By agreement, most of these were never shown in theaters while the war was in progress. A number of them are excellent.

In this essay, I'll look at a few of the films which are available from a list of perhaps one hundred. These include what this writer feels are some of the best, and undoubtedly the worst. The good ones give students a feeling for what the conflict of their grandparents was like. Even the worst films have use. They were seen by large audiences; they were the "reality" of the day. In analyzing these, a teacher has an opportunity to discuss such issues as propaganda and racism.

The best American film on the Pacific War, *They Were Expendable* (135 min.) appeared in the last year of the conflict. The film focuses on the officers and men of American PT boats in the Philippines at the beginning of the war. Its cast of characters included some of the top names in Hollywood of those years.

Under John Ford's skillful direction, time is taken to develop the characters and the story line. These are Americans fighting a losing battle in hopes of delaying the enemy. The abrupt shift from peacetime to war is adequately depicted. There is frustration at losing as well as the heroics that one expects in such a film. The attack of these tiny boats against a Japanese cruiser may be among the most spectacular combat scenes ever filmed. Though it is available in a colorized version, purists may prefer *They Were Expendable* in the original black-and-white.

As a relatively long film, there is time to develop the characters as the combat scene