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Tora-san and Kurosagi as Symbols of Changing Japanese Society

Otoko wa Tsurai yo (*It's Hard to Be a Man*), movie series directed by Yamada Yoji. Tokyo: Shochiku.
Kuromaru, and Natsuhara Takeshi, *Shin Kurosagi* (*Black Swindler* new series), Tokyo: Shogakukan.

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As I am now in Kyoto in a rather empty apartment arranged by a friend, I do not have a bookshelf. However, around my bed there is a pile of old Tora-san movies (*Otoko wa tsurai yo;* 'It is hard to be a man'), which were published in 1969–1974, and another pile of *manga* called *Shin Kurosagi* ('Black Swindler new series'), published in 2010–2012. A TV drama and a movie have also been made of *Kurosagi*. Both are long series. The 48 Tora-san movies, mostly written and all directed by Yamada Yōji, were produced in 1969–1995. The making of *Kurosagi* began in 2003 and still continues. Its creators are Kuromaru and Natsuhara Takeshi. Those are two windows on Japanese society that enable the occasional visitor to get a feel for the popular atmosphere in Japan, but from different temporal realities. The windows are similar in many ways despite the passage of time, but the societies are different. These are different artistic creations by different people, and methodologically, to compare them with each other would be like comparing potatoes with carrots. Notwithstanding, both have grown in the same social soil, both are commercial successes directed toward adult audiences, and both have something to teach us about Japan.

The protagonist is similar in both series: an orphaned, single man who never has regular employment and earns his living on the partly illegal and dangerous outskirts of ordinary society by relying on his own skills. They represent the archetype of the unbound male hero, whose life is dispensable and who for this reason is free to serve the common good. Tora-san (whose name means 'Mr. Tiger'; the role is played by Atsumi Kiyoshi) peddles miscellaneous goods on street corners, sometimes being driven away by the police. The Black Swindler's surname is Kurosaki, but his given name remains unclear. His life purpose is to destroy other swindlers with the same tools that they use against ordinary, honest people. This abnormality of Tora-san and Kurosaki creates an effective *Verfremdung* (distancing), which Berthold Brecht considered to be a key element in his theory of masterful plays. The protagonists' abnormality illuminates the state of the normal society by standing systematically in contrast with society throughout both series.

Both protagonists meet women but are denied any close relationships, even the most intimate, sexual ones. Their total freedom is balanced by this tragic element, which turns their characters into moral ones. Although the characters are rough and often impolite, they serve as a moral force by correcting and healing various ills and immoralities in society. Over the 40 decades that temporally separate the works, there seems to have been no change in the high value placed on personal morality in Japanese popular culture. However, a clear difference has emerged in terms of the intimate aspect of care. Even grown-up males need care, not only children and the elderly. In this context, care especially signifies love and emotional support, and further, food is a good symbol for love. Care for Tora-san is provided by his sister, brother-in-law, uncle, and uncle's wife. Tora-san regularly visits them once or

twice yearly, and they worry about him all year round. Although it is not an ordinary family, it nevertheless is a family, and the family is strongly advanced as the ultimate social ideal in the movies. In *Kurosagi*, the family is almost irrelevant. It exists as a memory in occasional reminiscences, but in the protagonist's present, care is provided by cafés and *kombini* (convenience stores), which secure Kurosaki's meals, which especially include anything containing large amounts of sugar. He consumes sweets as his main source of nutrition. A possible love interest is his neighbor Tsurara-chan, a female university student. She often takes care of Kurosaki's cat but never of Kurosaki himself; he prevents that by treating Tsurara-chan badly. Care provided by the cat is hardly shown, though it is implied. His main care has thus become commercial, impersonal, and chemical; the huge amounts of sugar soothe Kurosaki's loneliness. Family is no longer a necessary institution to maintain acceptable levels of personal happiness in Japan.

If the concept of the public is considered from an interpretative perspective, a conspicuous feature in Tora-san movies is the absence of the state. A shade of its existence appears in the form of the occasional policeman, but no direct state presence is ever seen. Only society exists, composed of honest, sometimes unlucky, but always hard-working people. Active, small-scale, private entrepreneurs form the economic basis of this society, where neither classes nor class conflict exists; there is ample equality, fairness, and mutual trust in this society. In *Kurosagi*, the state is constantly present in the form of laws, policies, and officials trying to administer a somewhat reluctant population. People are divided into three castes rather than classes: rich people with secure life arrangements, ordinary working people, and miserable people who have fallen out of regular employment. The castes appear hereditary; only downward movement can take place. People accept this unfairness of life, and thus, there is no caste conflict. Swindlers act in all walks of life, milking money out of all castes. Swindlers highlight the fact that fairly high levels of trust remain in Japanese society, because without it, their activity would not be as easy as it appears to be. *Kurosagi*'s society has a black lining around it, not a golden one (as in the Tora-san narrative); nevertheless, the depiction assures the reader that Japanese society is still basically healthy and functioning well.

The most significant differences between the works are reflected in their concepts of the larger public, namely, the international sphere. In the early Tora-san movies, the world was synonymous with Japan. People would travel "long distances" to Kyoto, Kyushu, or Hokkaido, and all of the people there are Japanese. Only in the first movie, two foreigners made a quick appearance. It is like the Edo period brought to the 1960s and 1970s; this is underlined by many of Tora-san's dreams, in which action takes place in an Edo setting. *Kurosagi*'s world is international; although he himself never travels to America, other people go there, and swindling techniques are also transferred from there to Japan. Kurosaki understands English and speaks fluent Chinese, as some of his activities take place in China and Taiwan. Chinese and Iranian people also live in the same building as Kurosaki and Tsurara-chan. The world has opened up in 40 years, and the world has permeated deep into Japan.

The plot of Tora-san stories is pure comedy. People act spontaneously according to their individual natures and quarrel with each other (occasionally furiously), but they face difficulties together as a group, and bad moments soon dissolve into laughter and merriment around the dinner table. It is a fair and equal world, where the levels of personal and social security are high. Development clearly takes place, as the characters display increasing levels of affluence even within a short period of 5 years between the movies; this makes the temporal perspective future-oriented and optimistic. A conspicuous aspect of *Kurosagi* is that laughter is missing, or if it appears, it is not happy laughter. In terms of narrative forms, these

manga are still classified as comedies, because the punishment of a swindler is morally justified, and the narrative invariably contains moments of cooperation between the protagonist and other people. Notwithstanding, the narratives always contain tragic elements, and the satisfaction derived from them comes from intellectual understanding rather than emotional happiness. Tragedy is a plot type that is conducive to learning, not enjoying. Japanese society is affluent, but in a sense, it has stopped moving. There is a constant drizzle of individuals falling like raindrops from the upper castes to the lowest one, but otherwise, the temporal perspective is standing still. The past—with its intimate, happy, and secure family life—has gone, never to return, while the present means holding fast to what one has already acquired and trying to avoid the ever-present possibility of falling downwards. There is no specific future promise of changes for either the better or the worse—only a continuation of the present as an eternal moment.

Changes in the real economy and society are clearly displayed in these two popular series of Japanese social narratives, and the mood has changed from an optimistic comedy to a more pessimistic and intellectual one, but the levels of ethics, ideals, and social trust are still very high in both. Both series provide good entertainment and material for late-evening research on Japanese society and its history. I recommend both.