

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Men who tread on the Tiger's Tail 1945

Akira Kurosawa

### OVERVIEW

It is important to realize from what an historically layered position Kurosawa addresses us. For one thing, he is living a World War in which his country is totally absorbed. Into this setting he is establishing his own creative fingerprint, having already reached out into the creative world as a painter, and at the time of the present film having launched on a cinematic career. At the same time, as he is exceptionally aware, he is deeply conscious of the rich historical past on which his thinking rests. Not only is Japan itself a corner of rich and expressive heritage, but it is a country deeply conscious of its relation to its past. The compaction of the world; growing population; our recent advances in the art of killing; all these have contributed to a new sense of the fragility of the human condition.

*Auteur* The presence of the narrator in the novel, the poet in the poetic epic, or the painter in his brush strokes is always implicit. Even Sterne or Seurat or Guillaume de Machaut strikes his most nearly trademark strokes or notes while he is still invisibly hidden within that gesture. The same applies to a great cinematographer, like Kurosawa. True, he adopts trademark gestures by which he can be identified--his wipes, his time-jumps, his manipulation of the weather, for mood setting--but he is hidden beneath them. It is as though, and especially as he matures in his craft, Kurosawa has internalized himself within the materials of filming.

*Film* One cannot too often be reminded of the deftness of Kurosawa in his handling of the finesse of the empirical world. We see his expressiveness in the introductory list of characters and events to anticipate in the forthcoming film. The stark mystique of Japanese characters segues into a high octane of visual mystique parting the way through sun dappled leaves and tramping boots. Horses' hooves add warriors' greaves are the kinds of light trap that bring out of Kurosawa the most conspicuous quickness to explore the mysteries of sunlight.

*Historical background* The present film drama was based on a kabuki drama which was in turn based on a Noh drama--deep roots into the highly stylized Japanese literary past. It concerns a well-known twelfth century incident in which Yoshitsune and a small cohort of samurai filtered across the border into enemy territory disguised as monks. The film was initially banned by the Supreme Command of the Allied Forces, probably on the grounds of its mediaeval setting and atmosphere. (Many aspects of the Japanese military past were long suspect to the Allies, and the result of this particular suspicion left Kurosawa under a long lasting bureaucratic cloud).

### PLOT

Clan warfare lay at the base of the conflict which generates this tale. The Heike clan fought against the Minamoto clan. Yoshitsune Minamoto defeated his enemy in a bloody ocean battle--after which all of the enemy committed suicide. When the triumphant Yoshitsune arrives in Kyoto, he is met by his brother, the local Shogun, who is suspicious of him, and prepares to arrest him. An arrest warrant is issued and Yoshitsune, with a half dozen samurai flees. The group, led by Benkei, heads for the country of the one faithful ally of Yoshitsune, Hidehira Fugiwara. Near the border, however, and after having crossed the forest disguised as monks, the men's porter discovers their true identity, and warns the monks that the guards at the upcoming border will surely arrest them. At the border Yoshitsune disguises himself as a porter, and together Benkei and Yoshitsune convince the border guards to let the 'monks' pass, on the grounds that they are on a pilgrimage to collect alms for the repair of the Todai Temple in Nara.

## CHARACTERS

*Yohitsune*, the victor of the bloody naval battle in which the Heike clan was exterminated. Having been threatened with arrest by his brother, the Shogun of Kyoto, he heads for the mountains, and the country of his friend Hidehira Fugiwara, He is accompanied by six loyal samurai.

*Benkei*, the leader of the samurai who accompany Yoshitsune, in flight from arrest.

*Kenichi Enomoto*, porter to Yohitsune's troupe. A stand-up comedian at heart, dressed in Noh costume, accompanied by the flute musics of Noh culture--the oldest stratum of Japanese culture. Kenichi Enomoto plays the clown, plays the fool, fools those waiting to arrest his group at the border. He is the perfect exemplar of the Shakesperian like plasticity of Kurosawa's humor. His self-mocking humor 'undercuts the pomposity of the feudal rituals with which this script abounds' in the words of the Kurosawa scholar Stephen Prince. It is in fact appropriate to note, in this comment on both character construction and Kurosawa's style, that the director wrote the script for this film in one night, succumbing to the stringencies of the Toho Studios--founded 1977-- which at war's end found itself forced to improvise, shorten, and rethink many of its earlier filming practices.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kenichi Enomoto, as we explained above, was a major fixture of Japanese entertainment culture in the last century. He excelled in stand up, which is all about making fun of yourself, and thus became an embedded mockery of the too sober 'monks' who were serving as his travel companions. This of course, is not an exhaustive definition of Kenichi's role, for he is an essential narrative factor, in the achievement of the monks, in making their way across the border into friendly territory.

## THEMES

**Victory** The present truncated film, which does not resolve into an organic whole, but remains that for which it was originally known, an incident, opens on a naval victory, and concludes in the elation of crossing a border into freedom. (Thus the film truly does resolve around an incident, as do several of Kurosawa's later scripts, from *No Regrets for our Youth* to *Throne of Blood* or *Kagemisha*, each of which is reworking an historical incident.) Historical incidents, unlike fictional passages, provide stable grounding stages onto which informative scaffolding can be built. Fictional passages, like the inventions-observations which underlie *Scandal* or *Drunken Angels*, are more likely to generate ongoing replicas of themselves than to ground new constructions.

**Flight** Flight is the universal reaction to threats, and it is evident that Yohitsune is primed to flee Kyoto as soon as he suspects his brother's hostility to him. This fear and flight reaction is so primal as almost to defeat description. The present script is virtually nothing except a fugue on the fear-flight duo. In the end, having finally crossed the border to freedom, the small band exhales into jubilation. It is as though the proper rhythm of the universe is restored

**Borders** The ultimate existential coordinates, fear and flight, inevitably involve a border crossing, from this into the other, from here into there. It is as though, in this early film, Kurosawa was writing a spiritual geography of a deeply human rhythm. Kurosawa is, as we know, exceptionally sensitive to the rhythms of nature, a set of patterns inside which the fear-flight-borders syndrome naturally unfolds itself.

**Ruses** The major border facing the band of 'monks' is that which they must cross into the country of Hidehira Fugiwara, the only accessible ally of Yohitsune. In order to accomplish this crucial feat they must resort to trickery and fast talk; the kind of gobbledy gook that Kenichi the clownish self-mocker is invoked to employ. The need for trickery and ingenuity puts the ultimate stamp of *incident* on the present tale; *incident*, the on-time happening; the unique puzzle which it requires ingenuity to solve.

**Elation** The thrill of 'making it through' is the culmination of the miniature existential drama Kurosawa has created for us. This universal human emotion has embellished many unforgettable passages of world literature--from Xenophon's *Anabasis*, through Keats' 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,' to the moods of Sunday morning in Goethe's *Faust*.

## SCENES

In 1185 the Heike clan fights against the Minamoto clan. The fight registers in history as an 'incident.' Kurosawa feeds his eyes with the tale.

A bloody naval battle bursts out between the enemy clans. Yoshitsune and his men are victorious, leaving the enemy forces to commit suicide.

Yoshitsune arrives, victorious, in Kyoto where his brother is the Shogun, but finds that his brother is suspicious of him and plans to arrest him.

Yohitsune decides to flee to the country of his closest ally, Hidehira Fujiwara. He sets off on a mountain trek, with a band of six samurai, led by the leader's friend, Benkei.

The group cross the forest disguised as monks, until their porter, Kenichi, discovers the true identity of Yohitsune and the 'monks,' and warns them of arrest on the border ahead.

Yohitsune. Disguises himself as a porter--this time not as a monk--And at the border crossing it falls to the tricky comedian, Benkei, to convince the border guards, and their fierce master, that the men of the troupe are indeed 'monks,' on a mission to collect donations for the repair of the Todai Temple in Nara.

Once on the far side of the barrier, Yohitsune and his band are gleeful, welcome their freedom and their new lives, and exult at just being here.

This listing of scenes can only go so far, in characterizing the film. Reimagine the whole premise of the script. It is based on a kabuki play which is in turn based on a Noh drama; two levels of historical stylization. The garments of the monks are traditional, traditional (and from time to time very contemporary) flute music is woven into the texture of the narrative, and at all times Kurosawa is manipulating the film's flow with his original cinematographic stylizings. The film that results is of daring disregard for conventional narrative practice. Is this film a kind of operetta?