

Program Notes:

Tora-san 1

“My first bath was at Taishaku-ten Temple; my surname is Kuruma, first name Torajiro.”

The Taishaku-ten Temple was originally founded as a Nichiren-sect Buddhist temple in 1629. It is currently a popular tourist destination and hosts a famous New Year's Eve ceremony (which can be seen in Tora-san 3).

The term he uses here, “ubuyu,” signifies a baby's first bath. In Japan, this is a religious event that represents purification and accepting a new born into the family as well as society, by bathing the child in an underwater fountain of holy water.

“People call me 'Tora the Drifter'.”

The word he uses to describe himself, “fu-ten”, is a slang term that can be translated as “vagabond,” “wanderer,” or “drifter”.

“Sign: 'Kano-e saru Shibamata Taishaku[-ten]’”

The term “kano-e” or “koshin” is a designation of a day from the ancient Japanese calendar (sexegenary cycle) in which Taishaku-ten was celebrated. Koshin is a folk faith in Japan with Taoist origins, also influenced by Shinto, Buddhism, and local beliefs. The “Koshin-ko” is held on the Koshin days that occur every 60 days in accordance with the sexegenary cycle calendar. Believers of Koshin attempt to live a life without bad deeds, and those who have a reason to fear that they have not done such will attempt to stay awake during these Koshin nights, known as “Koshin-Machi.”

“Gozen-sama!”

Gozen-sama is the name of the character, but the word “gozen” actually refers to a high-ranking monk, in particular, the head monk of Taishaku-ten.

“Oh heck no. Sakura is a key puncher, you know.”

In 1969, there was a great demand for keypunch operators and verifiers, usually women, who worked full-time on keypunch machines, often in large departments with dozens or hundreds of other operators.

Keypunches were devices used for manually entering data onto punched cards by precisely punching holes at specific locations. Early keypunches were manual devices, but were later mechanized to resemble a small desk with a typewriter-like keyboard. After being punched, these cards were sent to a verifier to double-check that the cards were punched correctly. Keypunches reached their peak in the 1970's but were quickly made obsolete by interactive display terminals.

“Currency Note: ¥100,000 = \$277.77 in 1969.”

Since the Japanese yen lost value after World War II, the exchange rate between the Japanese Yen and the US Dollar was fixed at ¥360 = \$1 in 1949, as part of the Bretton Woods System. In 1971, after the US dropped the gold standard, a 10% surcharge was imposed on imports, which eventually led to floating exchange rates in 1973.

In 1969, the average annual Japanese income was about ¥150,000. If the current rate is applied, which is ~¥100 = \$1, it was \$1500/year. However, due to the fixed rate of ¥360 = \$1, it was more like \$416.66/year. Imports from Japan were much cheaper at the time for U.S. consumers, and because commodities were so inexpensive, “made in Japan” tags appeared everywhere. These days, commodity prices are either similar to the U.S. or slightly more expensive in Japan, and the average income level is similar as well.

“Well you see... today, Sakura-chan's going to an O-miai.”

In ancient Japan, the common marriage system was known as “Muko-iri”, and a man would marry into a bride's

family to live with them and offer his labor for a certain length of time. With the rise of warriors and the feudal system around the 14th century, things began to change, as “Yome-iri” was adopted. Women were married into men’s families instead, and marriages were often used as a means of peacekeeping between feudal lords. Freedom to choose a spouse was irrelevant in the face of family interests, and all social entanglements between young men and women were heavily regulated by the parents for the benefit of the family.

The “Yome-iri” system has changed drastically over the years but was still quite common in Japan at the time of the film, as many potential partners were introduced by close friends and family, using a formal matchmaking system called “omiai.” Even today, as many as 30% of marriages are arranged by close friends and relatives, though the omiai of today bears little resemblance to that of yesteryear. After the War, western traditions of romance and courtship began spreading throughout Japan, and people began to rely on “true love” rather than an arrangement by matchmakers or parents. The definition of love began to change, and so the omiai went through many small changes to become what it is today. Literally meaning “to look at each other”, the omiai has become more and more casual, like a blind date, where friends, family, co-workers, or employers might set up the meeting. It’s no more than an introduction, and is usually made less awkward by going out as a group.

As seen in the film, the family doesn’t force a partner on anyone. Traditionally, prospective mates have had plenty of options with the help of a trusted matchmaker, though today there are even more options such as through internet agents or matchmaking parties. The matchmaker, known in Japanese as the “Nakoudo”, is the go-between who negotiates a marriage between both families. If they’re not needed, sometimes they’re selected for ceremonial purposes, like an elderly couple close to both of the families, but they often have a more pivotal role in introducing the couple. They’re expected to know a great deal about the marrying parties, so as to be an excellent judge in deciding compatibility, based on things like educational achievements, socio-economic status, and family background. The matchmaker typically arranges and attends a meeting between the man and woman, where the parents are usually present, and then the couple decides from there. As soon as the marriage proposal has been accepted by the bride’s family, there is a ceremonial exchange of drinks with the bride’s family and the matchmaker. They will also usually speak at the wedding party and wish the couple a happy marriage. Sometimes they’re given a cash gift for their work, but it’s not always necessary, as the matchmakers are usually just family friends helping out. In some cases, the matchmaker goes beyond marriage arrangements, and they play an active role in the married couple’s life together, serving as a marriage counselor during tough times.

“Oh, yes. But it’s written in Chinese characters in the family registry.”

The family registry is the equivalent of a birth or marriage certificate in the U.S., but it has much more details, including all members of the family, dates of marriage and divorce, original addresses, and so on.

This part is difficult for an English audience to grasp, since the man is making a reference to how Sakura's first name is written in Japanese. Specifically, it is written out phonetically in Hiragana script (車さくら) instead of the usual Sino-Japanese logogram, as used in the registry (車櫻). In both cases, the left character is “Kuruma”, and “Sakura” is just written differently.

Japanese writing is a combination of “Kanji,” which was adapted from China, “Hiragana,” which is equivalent to the Japanese alphabet, and “Katakana,” which are similar to Hiragana, but used mostly to spell out foreign words.

“So it can be read as 'the woman on the second floor is on my mind'.”

Here, Tora-san is making a bad pun, using a play on words. The character for Sakura is as such: “櫻” It consists of three parts: 貝=shell, 女=woman, 木=tree. Since there are two shells, it can be pronounced “ni-kai” (two shells), but “ni-kai” is also phonetically equivalent to “second floor,” hence the bad pun.

“My mom was a Geisha.”

A geisha, geiko, or geigi is a traditional female Japanese entertainer, whose skills may include performance of various Japanese arts, such as classical music and dance, and playing instruments such as the shamisen (three stringed guitar). Though popular western belief may usually indicate that geisha are prostitutes, this is not the case. True geisha are strictly entertainers, though some prostitutes have marketed themselves as

geisha over time. For instance, during occupied Japan, prostitutes that dressed like geisha, known as “geesha girls”, solicited their services to American GIs, which may have carried the image of geisha as prostitutes back to the United States. Though true geisha definitely flirt with men and make playful innuendos, it is understood that nothing more can be expected.

“Ryo:’ An antiquated monetary unit; using it instead of yen is part of Tora’s patter.”

A ryo was the gold piece in pre-Meiji Japan, worth about sixty monme of silver or four kan of copper (depending on the exchange rate fluctuation). It was eventually replaced with a system based on the yen. 1 ryo can be considered roughly equivalent to 350,000 Yen. (Based on the gold exchange rates, reported by NHK in the late 1990's). 1 ryo bought roughly 1 koku (approx. 180 liters or 5 bushels) of rice, which is about a year's supply of rice.

“I ain’t Asano-takumi-no-kami but I feel like I’m doing hara-kiri, it’s such a bargain.”

The expression of doing hara-kiri in this instance is a figure of speech referring to “taking a monetary hit” or “paying out of one's pocket.”

Asano-takumi-no-kami refers to ASANO Takuminokami, the famous samurai whose death spurred the attack of the 47 ronin.

In 1701, the ruling shogun, TOKUGAWA Tsunayoshi, selected ASANO Takuminokami as one of two Daimyo charged with organizing an extravagant reception for Imperial Envoys who were visiting Edo. A rude and arrogant official named KIRA Kozukenosuke was responsible for instructing the Daimyo in the necessary court etiquette, but his manner of teaching was harsh and insulting, and would apparently send any self-respecting Daimyo into a murderous rage. While his powerful position in the hierarchy of the Shogunate made Kira “untouchable” enough that the other Daimyo settled for bribing him instead of killing him, Asano could not bring himself to practice such restraint. After numerous insults, the previously stoic Asano snapped, slicing at Kira's face with a sword, and earning himself an order to commit seppuku, because not only did he cause a minor wound to a high official and some slight property damage, but any form of violence was strictly forbidden within the walls of Edo castle, and even drawing a sword was a grave offense. The news of Asano's unjust seppuku reached his principal counsellor, OISHI Kuranosuke, and the rest of his men, and they were incensed to hear the corrupt official had gone unpunished. The story of how they obtained vengeance upon Kira is one of the classic tales of Japanese history, and is constantly being retold in every manner you could imagine, including enough film versions to fill a small video store.

“As for my ‘kid-brother’, Noboru... please be good to him. Goodbye.”

Referring to Noboru as a family member, more specifically a kid-brother (“shatei”) is a typical yakuza expression. The yakuza follow the traditional Japanese hierarchical structure of oyabun-kobun, where the kobun (foster child) owes their allegiance to the oyabun (foster parent; the boss, or “Godfather”). Members of yakuza gangs cut their family ties and transfer their loyalty to the gang boss. They refer to each other as family members—fathers and elder/younger brothers.

Of course, Tora-san only pretends to be Yakuza, so these kinds of expressions are more playful than anything, and representative of the brotherhood he finds with his “minions.” Sure, he might be associated with yakuza wholesalers or other criminal business associates, but he certainly doesn't belong to any Yakuza families.

“Tora-chan then ditched his foreign companions there and spent the whole day with us.”

In the scene where Tora meets with Fuyuko and her father, he holds a pink inflatable deer. This souvenir represents Nara Park's most recognizable icon, that of the well-fed “sika deer” which live in the area.

According to local folklore, deer from the area were originally considered sacred due to a visit from one of the gods of Kasuga Shrine, who was said to have been invited from Kashima, Ibaraki, and appeared on Mt. Mikasa-yama riding a white deer. From then on, the deer were considered sacred and killing them was a capital offense up until 1637.

Following WWII, the deer were stripped of their sacred status and instead designated as national treasures.

These days, deer-crackers (“shika-senbei”) can be purchased to feed the deer in the park.

“You shouldn’t be wearing sandals at your age. People will laugh at you.”

Unless you work at the beach, or a company with a very casual dress code, flip-flops would rarely be appropriate. In a broader sense, this comment is a reference to socioeconomic status, as the sandals would be more apt for a youth or someone of a lower class. By mentioning the sandals, Gozen-sama is implying that Tora-san should settle down and get a proper job.

“Umm... ¥200 worth of dango please.”

A dango is a Japanese dumpling made from rice flour (“mochiko”) and which are related to mochi. Often served with green tea, dango are eaten year-round, but usually vary according to season. Three to five dango are usually served on a skewer, and sweet red bean paste (“anko”) dango is the most popular flavor in Japan.

The typical kind of dango sold at Tora-ya is called “Kusa-dango,” which are green dango in a wooden box, made of yomogi grass and anko. In this film, Hiroshi probably bought skewers of dango, but they are also sold in smaller quantities.

“‘Sakura-san,’ did you say? Aren’t you being a little familiar?”

In most social circumstances in Japan, it’s taboo to use someone’s first name unless a friendship or intimacy exists. The most polite way to refer to her would be Kuruma-san. However, in this case, the next-door-neighbor workers addressing her as “Sakura-san” would be totally appropriate, as they would have known her for quite a while. Tora-san is out-of-line here, either picking on these guys or letting his inferiority complex get the best of him.

“Oh yeah. The toilet here... is it the western kind? With the lifting lid?”

Traditional Japanese toilets are designed without a lifting lid, and are situated on the ground so squatting above them is necessary. While these traditional toilets may be more hygienic, they certainly require more leg strength for extended use.

“...when I wake up and see...I see you put away the bedding...”

When sleeping in a room with a tatami floor, a permanent bed is not used. Instead, bedding is always spread out at night and put away in the morning.

“Kawajin (Restaurant)”

The restaurant in the film, Kawajin, is actually a famous old freshwater-fish restaurant and banquet hall in Shibamata that goes by the same name.

“Oh yeah... the temple asked me... to repair their bath-room.”

Since toilets and showers are in separate quarters in traditional Japanese homes, the term “bath-room” here refers to the bath and shower room.

“Have you lost a little weight?”

Though there are now more overweight people across the world than undernourished people (1 billion vs. 800 million), malnutrition and hunger have traditionally been a worldwide problem, and beauty standards obviously differ in nations of excess. The transition towards an obese world has transformed the ideal body image into one of near-impossible thinness in Western cultures, but in most period films like this one, losing weight is almost always associated with poor nutrition and health, such as a lack of protein, iron, vitamins, and other minerals.

“Yes, quite a bit.”

Tora responds by literally saying “ikkanme.” The term “kanme” is 3.75 kg (8.25 lbs), but he’s using it as an idiomatic expression.

“Go ahead and laugh at my old-fashioned folksy song.”

The word here for “old-fashioned folksy song” is “naniwa-bushi” (a.k.a. “Rokyoku”), which is a type of antiquated song from the Edo era with a narrative storyline, typically accompanied by a shamisen. These types of songs were very popular during the first half of the 20th century. The term “naniwa-bushi” is also a phrase that has more to do with an old-fashioned lifestyle or way of thinking, similar to Blues or Country Western music.

“Hey pillow... I mean Sakura, can you get me a pillow?”

The slip of speech here is a pun. The Japanese word for pillow is “makura,” which happens to rhyme with Sakura.

“The daughter of the Tofu merchant has a face like a brick; she’s pale and squishy.”

There is a pun here that cannot be translated, namely in the term “mizu-kusai,” which is an idiom for “stand-offish” or “reserved,” and literally means “smells like water.” This is because tofu found at merchant stands is always preserved in a big sink of water.

“It’s a discount... and the numbers are three: seven is heaven, eight is great, and nine is just fine.”

Again, these types of puns are difficult to translate since they only work in Japanese. The literal translation here is, “and the numbers are three: seven is Zenko-ji Temple of Nagano, eight is Oku-dera Temple of Yanaka, with bamboo posts and roofs made of miscanthus reeds.”

“Even if I go broke, if I can put poodles in my noodles, I’ll be happy.”

“Even if I’m in dire poverty, I won’t despise it, even better than the new buckwheat noodles of Shin-shu Province’s Shinano...”

Tora-san 2

One, two, and three... ..in Kamakura... You know, chingara-ho-ke-kyo.

This is another of Tora-san’s nutty songs. “Chingara-ho-ke-kyo” is a nonsense phrase, but “hokke-kyo” is the Japanese name for the “Lotus Sutra,” and part of an incantation that could be chanted in Kamakura (a city in Kanagawa, 31 miles SSW of Tokyo), where there are many temples. “Chingara” is a parody of their enigmatic incantations.

“We’ve lived our lives without seeing each other, just like the stars of Shen and Shang.”

“Oh what an evening is this evening, together in the light of one lamp.”

This is an excerpt from the poem “Written for Scholar Wei,” by Du Fu (a.k.a. “To ho” in Japan). In it, the Chinese constellations Shen and Shang are used as an image to symbolize good friends separated by distance, or people on bad terms. The constellations themselves roughly correspond to Orion and Scorpio, and were at one time worshipped by different peoples of China. The stars of the two constellations never appeared in the sky at the same time, hence the expression. The complete text is as follows:

“Written for Scholar Wei

Du Fu

We've lived our lives and have not seen each other,
We've been just like the stars of Shen and Shang.
Oh what an evening is this evening now,
Together in the light of this one lamp?

Young and vigorous for so short a time,
Already now we both have greying temples.
We ask of old friends, half of them now dead,
Your exclamation stirs up my own heart.
We did not know it would be twenty years,
Before we met again inside your hall.
When we parted then, you were unmarried,
Suddenly boys and girls come in a row.
Happy and content, they respect their father's friend,
Asking me from which direction I come.
And even before the question has been answered,
The boys are hurried off to fetch the wine.
In the rainy night, they cut spring chives,
And mix the fresh cooked rice with golden millet.
My host says it's been hard for us to meet,
One draught's repeated, now becomes ten cups.
After ten cups, still I am not drunk,
It's your lasting friendship which is moving.
Tomorrow we'll be sundered by the hills,
Just two in a boundless world of human affairs."

"Well, ain't that something; it's the frog's piss. It's something to look up to; the roofer's loincloth."

This is another of Tora-san's nonsense phrases; it's not exactly idiomatic.

"Those born in the year of the Rat have sexual problems in their later years."

Here, and in other instances of Tora-san's bogus astrological divinations, he's referring to the Sexegenary Cycle (a.k.a. "Stems-Branches"), which is a form of ancient calendrics that corresponds to the Chinese Zodiac. Also employed in advanced Chinese Feng-shui, it's a system based on the I-Ching hexagrams and entails combinations of ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches, each one represented as an animal ascribed to corresponding and cycling years.

"Women born in a Hino-e Horse year will bring misfortune to one's home."

Hino-e is the third of the ten celestial stems of the Sexegenary Cycle, and Hino-e-Horse corresponds to the 43rd Sexegenary entry.

"This is as surprising as a pepper in a peach tree!"

There is no English equivalent here, as it's an alliterative expression of surprise, entailing a play on the word "surprise" with respect to kinds of trees. The literal meaning is something like "Surprise, peach tree, pepper tree", but the pun is lost in translation.

Tora-san 3

Tokyo and Yunoyama Hotspring

A hot spring (or "onsen," in Japanese) is a spring that is produced by the emergence of geothermally-heated groundwater from the earth's crust. Being located in the "Pacific Ring of Fire," Japan is a volcanic region and is home to many hot springs. Visiting an onsen is a quintessential Japanese experience and onsens are popular tourist destinations.

"To where? ... Well, somewhere nice, like Atami... how about that?"

Atami is a city located in the eastern end of Shizuoka. Literally "hot ocean", Atami is famous for hot springs, which have established the city as a resort town centered on its "onsen" since the 8th century. Atami is approximately 105 km (65 miles) from Tokyo, and these days, the trip is only a 2-hour drive from Tokyo, or a 46-minute ride via bullet train from Tokyo Station. Atami is also mentioned in Tora-san 4 as a potential getaway

destination, but in this film, the limo drive to Atami would be quite costly.

“Sign: ‘Kagoshima – Tanegashima’”

One of the most southernmost locales of Japan, Tanegashima is an island located south of Kyushu Island, and is part of Kagoshima Prefecture. The island is famous as the site of the first known contact between Europe and Japan, in 1543, where it’s said that Portuguese firearms were introduced to Japan.

“I think I’ll be back in Kagoshima at the beginning of March. Then, I’ll go to Kumamoto, then Kokura and Onomichi. Then all the way to Kanto in April. Tohoku in May and Hokkaido in June. We salesmen travel with the cherry blossoms and party under the flowers.”

Here, Tora-san is describing his migration through Japan as following the cherry blossom front as it moves north through Japan. He starts with cities in southern Japan as the front begins, and follows them as he works his way North. His journey begins in the Kagoshima prefecture, and he works his way through Fukuoka prefecture to Hiroshima prefecture, then all the way over to the Kanto region (Tokyo area), and finally all the way north to the Tohoku (“northeast”) region and to Hokkaido (the northernmost island). This long migration may account for his standard attire (he’s always in good weather) but it also could be a strategy to encounter the maximum amount of business due to cherry blossom tourism.

Cherry blossoms, a.k.a. “sakura,” are an important part of Japanese life, and show up throughout Tora-san. They’re indigenous to many Asian states, and over 200 varieties can be found in Japan alone. The cultural experience of flower viewing, known as “hanami,” was borrowed from China during the Heian Period (794-1191), when the upper class would gather and celebrate under the cherry blossoms. The social phenomenon evolved as more trees were cultivated for their beauty, and by the ninth century, the sakura was the most favored species in Japan.

Each year the public (and now the Japanese Meteorological Agency) tracks the cherry blossom front (“sakura zensen”) as it travels northward with the advent of warmer weather. The blossoming begins in Okinawa in January and reaches Kyoto and Tokyo by March/April, eventually arriving in Hokkaido a few weeks later. These forecasts are taken very seriously, and Japanese turn out in huge numbers at parks, shrines, and temples for hanami festivals.

Many schools and public buildings have sakura trees outside, and since the fiscal and school year begin in April, in some areas the first day of work or school coincides with the cherry blossom season. The cherry blossoms themselves have a rich symbolism in Japan. They can represent femininity, love, good fortune, or clouds, which are an enduring metaphor for the fleeting nature of life. This idea is associated with the concept of “mono no aware,” or the transience of mortality, and is symbolized by the extreme beauty of an en masse blooming, followed by a quick death.

Tora-san 4

Nagoya

Nagoya is the third largest city in Japan, located in the middle of Honshu Island. The driving distance between Nagoya and Tokyo is around 360 km (224 miles). Taking a taxi, as Tora-san does, from Nagoya to Tokyo is very expensive, as it must be at least a four-to-five hour taxi ride, without traffic. On the bullet train, the trip takes about two hours.

“No thanks, fur spansks, the cat is covered in ash... there’s shit all around it’s ass.”

The literal translation of this famous Tora-san line is, “Perfect is hairy, cats are full of ash, monkey bottoms are full of shit.” This nonsense phrase is lost in translation, so is paraphrased as such throughout the series.

“Great! Police is fine. No thanks, fur spansks, the octopus is full of shit!”

Here, Tora-san is making a bad pun based on his nonsense sales patter, but, again, the literal meaning is lost in translation.

“Love, together with you [...] Passion, together with you.”

In this song, the first mention of the word “love” is the Japanese word “Ai”, while the second mention is “Koi”. While there are no differentiations between the two words in English, the former is used between parents and children, friends, owners, pets, etc..., while the latter is typically reserved for lovers. Hence, the word “passion”.