

Historical Figures as “Kyarakutā”—The Example of Okita Sōji

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Explanatory notes: All quotations from Japanese works are based on the English translation of the author (= Fu).

1 Introduction

As history is a target of academic research and a subject taught in school education, it is usually considered to be a topic of serious discourse. However, many people also enjoy learning about history through works of literature and popular culture. For example, take the longstanding popularity of *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and its retellings. *Records of the Three Kingdoms* was originally a history book authored by Chen Shou of the Western Jin dynasty, chronicling the rival states era from the late Han dynasty through the Three Kingdoms period in Chinese history (c. C.E. 180–c. C.E. 280). Later, during the early Ming dynasty, it developed into the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and became well known not only in China but across the world. In modern Japan, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* is well known through novels, puppet plays, manga, games, and so on. Shakespeare’s history plays are another popular set of historical works. For example, Richard III is likely much more widely known as a character in Shakespeare’s history plays than an actual historical figure.¹ From the perspective of historical study, there is room for criticism regarding history plays and novels for prioritizing entertainment over factual accuracy and objectivity. However, the popularity of dramatizing historical events and figures demonstrates an interesting relationship between people and history. Arts, literature, and popular culture undeniably play a significant role in the transmission of history across generations and in building interest in and enthusiasm for history. Especially in Japan, many historical figures have been visualized as “*kyarakutā*” (The use of this word will be explained in the following paragraphs.) through links to the massive development of media, such as manga, anime, and video games, in the latter half of the 20th century.

Throughout history, there have been specific events and figures that are

¹ Ishihara Kōsai, a Japanese researcher in English literature, states “No other king of England is as infamous as Richard III. A brutal and ruthless usurper, an incarnation of the number of tactics, an ugly and irreverent murderer, an incarnation of power greed, and an ambitious genius. No one denies that this image of a rare evil king was amplified and established by Shakespeare’s King Henry the Sixth and Richard the Third. Aside from its interpretation in the literary world, in recent years, mainly among historical researchers, [...] Richard III in history has been said to have been a talented king of politics and martial arts.” (Ishihara 2000: 1)

frequently adapted in historical plays and novels. These include wars, revolutions, eras of change and turmoil, and the major actors within them. In Japan, many works of historical entertainment have been set in the Warring States period² or the Bakumatsu³ period. Among those set in the Bakumatsu period, stories centering on the group known as the “Shinsengumi” especially garner massive popularity. Like the historical figures portrayed in *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and Shakespeare’s history plays, dramatizations of the Shinsengumi have appeared in many different works of media to date.

This study attempts to clarify the definition of a historical figure *kyarakutā*, and the process by which historical figures who existed become *kyarakutā*. To this end, we explore the three elements of a *kyarakutā* as presented by comic specialist Odagiri Hiroshi—meaning, interiority, and iconography—and attempt to explain these principles (Odagiri 2010). Though literary theory⁴ discusses the fictionalization of historical figures, how they are depicted in manga has not often been discussed. This study uses Okita Sōji, one of the main members of the Shinsengumi, as an example to explore the three elements of *kyarakutā* in the major works of manga in which Okita appears and analyze what kind of *kyarakutā* Okita has been transformed into. In addition, through this example, we attempt to define a part of the process by which historical figures are fictionalized.

2-1 Who Were the Shinsengumi?

The Shinsengumi were a police force formed to suppress loyalists to the emperor in Bakumatsu-era Kyoto. From the pre-World War II era to the present day, they have been dramatized in theater, literature, film, television dramas, and other media, and countless Shinsengumi-themed content has been produced and consumed. Of the independent soldiers who made up the Shinsengumi, Okita Sōji (c.1842–1868) boasts the greatest popularity, but there are few remaining historical records of his real life. Nevertheless, the name “Okita” now inevitably conjures the image of a handsome young swordsman. This is because the persona of Okita has been gradually built up through various entertainment media, in a process that has shifted over time. A characteristic of the Shinsengumi is that, while they were historical figures who

² The Warring States period (戦国時代, *Sengoku Jidai*, “Sengoku period”) is a period in Japanese history of near-constant civil war, social upheaval, and political intrigue that lasted from 1467 to 1615.

³ Bakumatsu (幕末, “end of the bakufu”) refers to the final years of the Edo period, when the Tokugawa shogunate ended. Between 1853 and 1867, Japan ended its isolationist foreign policy known as *sakoku* and changed from a feudal Tokugawa shogunate to the modern empire of the Meiji government.

⁴ For example, see Dorrit (1992).

existed, little is known about their real lives due to a lack of data. Shinsengumi-themed works must be created by adding a great deal of fiction to a small number of historical records and biographies. Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon argues that the concept of “adaptation” includes not only the conversion of media type (e.g., from poem to film) and conversion of genre (e.g., from epic poem to novel) but also the ontological conversion of reality into fiction, from historical record and biography to fictionalized stories and plays. (Hutcheon 2013:6–7). In fact, countless adaptations based on the Shinsengumi have been created up till now.

Shimozawa Kan’s book *Shinsengumi Shimatsuki* (1928–1931), which summarizes an interview survey he conducted, is regarded as a precious source of information on the Shinsengumi. For *Shinsengumi Shimatsuki*, Shimozawa created a record by visiting locations connected to the Shinsengumi and interviewed living people who had interacted with the Shinsengumi.

The person who sparked the definitive change in the image of Okita in the Shinsengumi was Shiba Ryōtarō,⁵ a famous historical novelist. For the most part, Shiba relied on Shimozawa when dealing with records and episodes concerning the Shinsengumi. However, Shiba’s short story collection *Shinsengumi Keppūroku* (1962–1963, hereinafter, “*Keppūroku*”) would bring about the biggest turning point in the history of media creation of the Shinsengumi. Along with Shiba’s full-length novel *Moeyo Ken* (1962–1964), *Keppūroku* was adapted into a television drama, causing a huge Shinsengumi boom. This 26-episode historical drama series, broadcast by NET (Nihon Educational Television, now TV Asahi) from July 1965 to January 1966, caused a sharp increase in Shinsengumi fans, particularly women, and had a major influence on future Shinsengumi-themed media. This became the basis for the development of the Shinsengumi manga, which will be explored below.

2-2 Odagiri’s Three Elements of “*Kyarakutā*”

Alongside the popularity of the Shinsengumi television drama, manga featuring the Shinsengumi began to appear. The term “*kyarakutā*,” which has a slightly different nuance of meaning in Japanese from the English word “character,” is used to refer to the personae appearing in manga. In addition to the meaning “representation of a person” in literary texts, *kyarakutā* also refers to the concept of the iconographic

⁵ Shiba is very clear about his position, and he is troubled by the fact that many people assume that the content in his novel is true. Shiba describes his thoughts on historical novels in his essay “About Novels and History” (*Kochi Shimibun* morning edition, January 22, 1966) as follows: “I am a novelist, and as far as I am, I have the same professional pride as other professionals, but I do not carry the glory of a historian. The two are fields that are as far apart as the back and front of the earth, and the places where the spirits of both live are completely different. [...] In the case of my novels, I don’t think the novelist has the right to bend history. History is a common property of the people, and no matter what kind of novel it is, it cannot be transformed without permission.”

representation of the character specific to manga. Using manga as a starting point, the term also refers to the character in other media (derivative merchandise incorporating the *kyarakutā* iconography, anime, games, etc.). The concept and definition of “*kyarakutā*” has already been discussed in several previous papers (Itō 2005; Azuma 2009). In this study, we follow Odagiri Hiroshi’s use of “*kyarakutā*” to refer to “a person appearing in a fictional story such as a novel, manga, anime, or film” (Odagiri 2010:108), with Odagiri’s interpretation of a *kyarakutā* as a complex of three elements: meaning, interiority, and iconography.

According to Odagiri, “meaning” refers to character type, interpreted after the concept of “flat character” used by novelist E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1990:73). For example, in *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, each character has a role—Liu Bei is a gentle, skilled leader; Guan Yu is an uncouth military man obsessed with martial arts and honor; and Zhuge Liang is the wise, sagacious supporter of the group as a think tank. “Interiority” refers to the psychological depth of characters who change over the course of the story, a portrayal of a person equivalent to Forster’s concept of a “round character” (Forster 1990:73). Finally, “iconography” is equivalent to the visual image of the person, through descriptions in biographies or literature, or through visual appearance such as in film, drama, and manga (Odagiri 2010:119).

The mutual interactions among the three elements described above are the *kyarakutā*. Odagiri states that the most important characteristic of the concept of a *kyarakutā* is its flexible nature. A *kyarakutā* can be imagined and created using any of the elements as a starting point, and in some cases, a *kyarakutā* can be created even if all elements are not present. If the name and some of the compositional elements of the *kyarakutā* ensure continuity, it is possible to expand or transform the *kyarakutā* to any degree (Odagiri 2010:125). Due to this flexible nature, a *kyarakutā* has a high degree of freedom to expand across different media.

Below, we will consider the meaning, iconography, and interiority of the *kyarakutā* of Okita Sōji in manga.

2-3 Characteristics of Okita as a Character Type

As previously described, in the context of this study, “meaning” refers to information about the *kyarakutā*’s attributes or type. As Okita Sōji is known as “a talented swordsman who nonetheless died young of tuberculosis,” he can be classified as a tragic character type.

The “sympathetic tragic hero” is a character type traditionally beloved by Japanese people. This shows in the traditionally favorable and sympathetic impression of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a military commander of the Minamoto clan who was a tactical genius and achieved glory in the Gempei War (1180–1185), only to later meet a tragic death. The image of Okita Sōji as a genius swordsman, who, after making his name as a star of the Shinsengumi, met an early death from an incurable illness, has a

great deal in common with the image of Yoshitsune. Therefore, most works portraying Okita incorporate the “sympathetic tragic hero” trope.

Furthermore, tuberculosis, which is believed to be the cause of Okita’s death, has often been portrayed and studied as a theme in modern Japanese literary works. Due to this, the formation of the *Shinsengumi* story has had a close relationship with popular literature since the Meiji era. Fukuda Mahito notes that in some contexts, tuberculosis, as a cause of death of beautiful women or geniuses, has functioned as a type of metaphor of ephemeral beauty or genius in modern Japanese literature (Fukuda 1995:169).

To summarize, the personage of Okita can be taken as a symbol of “the genius who died young,” “tragic hero,” and “sympathetic character.” Next, we analyze how such meanings formed around the *kyarakutā* of Okita.

2-3-1 *Okita Sōji as a Genius*

Of Okita Sōji’s swordsmanship, Shimozawa Kan’s work states, “Though he was a youth of no more than twenty, he possessed genius mastery of swordsmanship, which was beautiful to behold.” (Shimozawa 1996:20).

Following Shimozawa Kan’s account, Shiba’s portrayal of Okita in “*Keppūroku*” states, “he was a one-in-ten-thousand genius of technique” (Shiba 2003:433), “He was unstoppable with a sword, and even at the Mibu Dōjyō, not one warrior could take him on.” (Shiba 2003:77). In this way, Shiba fleshes out Okita’s *kyarakutā* by emphasizing his skill in swordsmanship.

Portrayals of Okita’s swordsmanship can also be seen in many works of manga. In Tezuka Osamu’s *Shinsengumi* (1963, Figure 1), an early work of Shōnen manga, protagonist Fukakusa Kyūjūrō gossips to his friend about Okita’s skill. Okita is also mentioned in Shōjo manga featuring few battle scenes. For example, in Kihara Toshie’s *Ten Made Agare!* (1975), Serizawa Kamo flatters Okita with praise such as “genius” and “didn’t you trounce some lord’s swordsmanship instructor when you were barely ten years old?” to convince Okita to join his faction (Figure 2: Okita, center. Lines in dialogue balloon, Serizawa).

2-3-2 *Okita Sōji as a Tragic Figure*

Okita was born as the heir to a Shirakawa feudal lord, but his parents died while he was a child, and he was made to leave his childhood home at 9 years of age. Raised largely without the love of any blood relative, since childhood, he was single-mindedly absorbed in perfecting his swordsmanship (Shimozawa 1997:77–86). It is also said that he was pure-hearted in love, and that he tearfully related to a relative how Kondō Isami forced him to part from a doctor’s daughter (Shimozawa 1997:310). Okita Sōji contracted tuberculosis in Kyoto, then returned to Edo, where he died in May of Keiō Year 4 (1868). He was around 27 years old at the time of his death.

The story of Okita's love life was definitively determined by the chapter in Shiba's "*Keppūroku*" on "The Love of Okita Sōji." Okita Sōji coughs up blood and collapses at the Ikedaya Inn, then falls in love with the daughter of the Aizu Clan doctor who examines him. Okita knows that the Shinsengumi are not well regarded in Kyoto, so he is content to admire the doctor's daughter from afar, but Kondō and Hijikata, who hail from the same town as Okita and feel close to him, decide of their own accord to make the girl Okita's wife, which backfires and foils Okita's love.

In Kihara Toshie's *Ten Made Agare!* representative of 1970s-era Shinsengumi-themed Shōjo manga, Okita Sōji saves a girl named Koyori from being attacked. Later, the two get engaged, but when it is revealed that the heroine is the princess of an Imperial loyalist family plotting to overthrow the Shogunate, the Shinsengumi, who are allies of the Shogunate, deem her an enemy. Led into despair by the machinations of the Bakumatsu era, in the end, the two commit double love suicide.

From this, we can see that Okita Sōji is portrayed as a tragic figure who meets a tragic end—though he falls in love with women, he is generally forced to part from them due to conflict with his station in Kyoto or societal norms, or he is separated from them in the end by his early death from illness.

2-4 Iconography: Okita Sōji's Physical Appearance

The present popular image of Okita Sōji is that of a handsome, pale-skinned youth, but unlike Hijikata Toshizō and Kondō Isami, there are no remaining photographs of Okita Sōji. The remaining portrait of Okita was painted in 1929, based on Okita's elder sister Mitsu's grandchild, who she claimed "looks something like Sōji," and was not painted based on the living Okita Sōji (Tsuru 1997:43). Shimosawa Kan writes that there was reportedly a group of "five beautiful men" in the Shinsengumi (Shimosawa 1997:97–126), and because Okita was not counted among their number, it is likely that he was not exceptionally handsome. In his manga *Shinsengumi* (1996), Kurogane Hiroshi used his method for faithfully rendering photos of actual people as manga characters, which he deemed "Kurogane Historical Art," to attempt to recreate a portrait of Okita Sōji as a manga character, extrapolated from photographs of Okita's elder sister, Mitsu (Figure 3).

No one connected to the Shinsengumi testified that Okita was "especially handsome." Of mentions of his physical appearance, Shimosawa relates that (Sōji was) "Thin and highly talented. He would stiffen and raise his shoulders on the attack. His cheekbones were high, his mouth was large, and his skin was dark. However, he had some sort of indefinable winsomeness." (Shimosawa 1997:77.)

As described earlier, after Shiba Ryōtarō, the image of the Shinsengumi was drastically reformed, from that of a reactionary violent group, to that of a squad of beautiful young men. One reason for this was the television drama *Shinsengumi Keppūroku*, produced by NET in 1965. Hijikata was played by Kurizuka Asahi, while

Okita was played by Shimada Junji, who were at the time completely unknown actors. The 1970 dramatization of *Moeyo Ken* also featured Kurizuka and Shimada. The two series secured the popularity of Shimada Junji's Okita to such a degree that it could have been said that Shimada nearly became equivalent to Okita in the minds of the public. In a single bound, Okita Sōji and Hijikata Toshizō leapt from their earlier status as prominent members of the Shinsengumi to their later status as stock roles for handsome young actors. In addition, Okita Sōji gained the image of having bangs, due to Kusakari Masao's performance as Okita Sōji in the film *Okita Sōji*, which premiered in the same year as the 1974 MBS drama *Shinsengumi Shimatsuki*. In the Bakumatsu era, a boy wore bangs until his coming-of-age, after which point, he would shave his forehead to create a "moon brow" (refer to Figure 1 and Figure 3). In the era during which the Shinsengumi were active in Kyoto, Okita had already passed his coming-of-age, but after Kusakari Masao, Okita was portrayed as retaining his bangs, ignoring historical fact. This also had an influence on manga versions of Okita. In Watanabe Taeko's long-running manga series *Kaze Hikaru*, which finished its run in 2020 after 23 years, Okita is written as a main character and became very popular among young women readers. Author Watanabe said of her policy for her creative process, "though it is a Shōjo manga, I aimed to be as faithful as possible." She made a request to the editorial team that Okita "be drawn with a moon brow," but stated that she was vehemently opposed by her managing editor and was forced to give up on drawing the moon brow (Watanabe volume 2 1998:185).

2-5 Interiority: Brutality, Purity, Cheerfulness

We can see an interesting double-sidedness in the portrayal of Okita that we have seen up until now. While Okita is typically thought of as a gentle and fragile central character in tragic love stories, in scenarios where he employs his swordsmanship technique, the impression he makes abruptly changes. Though Okita was a genius swordsman, he was violent and irritable as a swordsmanship instructor and was therefore given a wide berth by his pupils (Shimozawa 1997:85). It is also assumed that he actively participated in the purge of many people both in and out of the military, though the exact number is not known.

Shiba, in the *Keppūroku* chapter *The Assassination of Serizawa Kamo*, uses the viewpoints of Kondō and Hijikata to depict the inexplicable double-sidedness of the contradiction that is Okita (Shiba 2003:93). Due to factional struggles within the Shinsengumi, Okita made the preparations to purge Serizawa Kamo on behalf of the Kondō faction, speaking sympathetically to Serizawa while simultaneously plotting the day of his assassination. Furthermore, on the site of the assassination after it has occurred, Hijikata says Serizawa's mistress who was sleeping with Serizawa, "was cut down like an insect, without uttering a cry" (Shiba 2003:98), and guesses that Okita had done it.

In Chrono Nanae's Shōnen manga *Shinsengumi Imon Peacemaker* (from 1999), Okita is often drawn with an expression of madness as he faces off his enemies (Figure 4: Ikedaya incident, confrontation between Okita and Yoshida Toshimaro of the Chōshu clan). In this work, Okita is usually very gentle, so this scene has an intense effect on readers. Though Okita is rarely portrayed as succumbing to madness in girls' manga, he is sometimes described as a "sword demon" (Maya et al. 2004:146).

We have already seen how Okita's tragic love has often been depicted in fiction. In addition, Okita is also depicted as being a late bloomer in his relationships with women. Shimozawa says, "It seems he often played with children, but not with women." (Shimozawa 1996:114). In Shiba, this becomes, "He almost never talked about women" (Shiba 2003:85), "He had little idea of how to interact with the opposite sex," etc. (Shiba 2003:442).

In manga, Mizuki Shigeru's Seinen manga *Okita Sōji* depicts Okita fleeing in bewilderment from a seduction attempt by a woman. In Shōjo manga, Satonaka Machiko's *Asagi no Kaze Okita Sōji* (1989), in a scene where Kondō and company introduce Okita to a prostitute, a flustered Kondō tries to explain the situation to the woman using the line, "Sōji is still a child."

In many works, Okita is often depicted as being lighthearted off the battlefield. In Shimozawa Kan's records, Okita is "nearly always jesting, and rarely serious," and "the bright, quick-tongued man of the corps" (Shimozawa 1996:114). Shiba's *Keppūroku* emphasizes Okita's liveliness, innocence, and childlike nature, with descriptions such as "[he] smiles like a sudden ray of sunshine," "[he] speaks like a child somewhat lacking for words," and "[he is] innocent" (Shiba 2003:439). These characteristics can also be seen in Shimazaki Yuzuru's Seinen manga *Kaze no Gotoku Hi no Gotoku* (1995–1999), and Watanabe Taeko's Shōjo manga *Kaze Hikaru*.

3 Conclusion

As this study shows, the characterization of Okita Sōji is built on many levels, based on many sources. This study discussed this characterization in Shimozawa's factual record, Shiba's historical novels, television dramatization, and portrayals in subsequent manga, based on Odagiri's three elements of *kyarakutā*. The *kyarakutā* of Okita was formed through a process of mutual interaction among the three elements of "meaning," "iconography," and "interiority." Without a doubt, Okita symbolizes "genius," "tragedy," "beauty," and "lightheartedness." However, because these clashing symbols sometimes occur within his single personage, he becomes a deep character, full of contradiction. Interestingly, an analysis of manga portrayals reveals that, while the art styles and stories of manga targeted at male readers and those targeted at female readers may differ, the fundamental elements and trajectory of the depiction of Okita remain the same. This is because, to some extent, the creators of these manga referred to earlier works and records of the *Shinsengumi* when creating

their manga, and the repetition of this process gradually propagated a common representation of the Shinsengumi in the popular imagination.

Odagiri writes that if the name and some of the compositional elements of the *kyarakutā* ensure continuity, it is possible to expand or transform the *kyarakutā* to any degree, giving the *kyarakutā* the flexibility to expand across different media (Odagiri 2010:125). In Okita's case, his meaning and interiority have become shared among readers through multiple works of fiction, and he can be seen to traverse different media as the same person, even when his iconography differs. However, this “cross-sectional” nature is slightly different from the cross-sectional nature of fictional characters discussed by Odagiri. Okita, as a historical figure, is created from a common understanding of his meaning and interiority, but the iconography representing him is diverse. On the level of each manga depicting Okita, every Okita *kyarakutā* is independent from every other one. The Okita Sōji of Chrono Nanae's *Shinsengumi Imon Peacemaker* and the Okita Sōji of Mizuki Shigeru's *Okita Sōji* are not seen as the same *kyarakutā*. However, each of these *kyarakutā* share the same Okita Sōji name and background. The Okita character, whether portrayed in the same media format or in a different medium, gives his audience the chance to experience a historically-themed story from many perspectives.

Though it would have been impossible to discuss every aspect of the formation of the Okita *kyarakutā* in this study, we hope to have demonstrated the joy in the fictional *kyarakutā* depiction of historical figures for which few accurate records remain. The depiction of historical figures in media other than manga, as well as the effect of *kyarakutā* creation of historical figures in secondary media, such as fan art, should be a topic of further consideration.

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Figures



Figure 1. Tezuka Osamu. *Shinsengumi*. 1963



Figure 2. Kihara Toshie. *Ten Made Agare!*, 1975.



Figure 3. Kurogane Hiroshi. *Shinsengumi*. 1996.



Figure 4. Chrono Nanae. *Shinsengumi Imon Peace Maker*, 2001.



Figure 5. Watanabe Taeko. *Kaze Hikaru*. 1998.