

Kurama Tengu and
Kurama Tengu Kyofu Jidai
(The Frightful Era of Kuramu Tengu)



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In the past, screenings of silent films in Japan were extremely lively events that featured various sounds. Katsudo benshi, or motion picture narrators, delivered passionate and eloquent narrations. Live music accompanied their performance. Period films in particular featured a new performance format that combined music played on Western and Japanese instruments, a collaboration impossible in a normal concert. The music of trumpets and violins blended with the sounds of *shamisen* and Japanese drums. In the climax scene, when our hero, the righteous samurai Kurama Tengu, rushed in on his horse to fight the Shinsengumi, the audience erupted in applause. Between sets, children selling rice crackers and other delicacies crisscrossed the theater shouting “rice crackers! caramels!” at the top of their lungs. In the *Kurama Tengu* series, the plot revolves around the adventures of the brave samurai Kurama Tengu and his loyal friend, the boy Sugisaku, and so crowds of enthusiastic children loudly applauded the feats of their heroes.

The main character in the series, Kurama Tengu, is a fierce loyalist who belongs to the movement that fights to unite Japan and bring power back to the Emperor, but the story of his battle against the Shogunate is not about ideology. Rather, the films highlight his noble character, his dedication to a righteous cause, and his gentle attitude to children. That is why, of all the stars of the period drama genre, Kanjuro Arashi, an actor who was projected a powerful image of strength and gentleness, elegance and loyalty, was the best choice for the role of Kurama Tengu. There were many other stars who aspired to this role, but eventually it became synonymous with Kanjuro Arashi, and remained in Japan’s film history as his most successful role.

Kurama Tengu’s arch rival is Isami Kondo, the leader of the Shinsengumi. The Shinsengumi was a special police force established by the Shogunate with the objective of suppressing the loyalists who fought to topple the Shogun’s government and reinstall the Emperor as the head of the country. So in fact, the Shinsengumi was an assassination squad. Nevertheless, even today the Shinsengumi samurai are revered as heroes who fought on the side of the doomed Shogunate. The Shinsengumi leader Isami Kondo remains in history as an epic and tragic figure. Reizaburo Yamamoto, who plays Isami Kondo in the two films, creates not a villain, but a manly and openhearted character, and is an excellent match to Kanjuro Arashi.

Kurama Tengu and *Kurama Tengu Kyofu Jidai* (The Frightful Era of Kurama Tengu) were both created in 1928 by Arashi Kanjuro Productions. Jiro Osaragi wrote the original story. His novels about the adventures of Kurama Tengu have enjoyed a steady readership through the years, something unusual for the popular novel genre, which tends to be swayed by trends.