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5
Change in the Image of Mother in Japanese Cinema and Television

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UNTIL THE mid-1950s, one of the popular genres in Japanese cinema was the *surechigai* melodrama. This genre is called *surechigai* (literally, "to pass by each other") because the following kind of incident occurs: Two lovers who are not allowed to marry meet and then separate. In order to stretch the story, there are many scenes in which the two separated lovers coincidentally appear near each other but, not realizing the other's presence, pass each other by. These kinds of emotional scenes keep the audience in suspense and help make the melodrama a commercial success (thus allowing for a sequel). In these kinds of movies, the main reason that the two lovers cannot marry is that they come from different societal classes and their families oppose their marriage. The biggest commercial success in Japanese film history was a *surechigai* melodrama entitled *Aizen Katsura,* which appeared in 1938. After Japan's defeat in World War II, however, it became difficult to produce movies that used this kind of plot. One reason was that, after the defeat and the subsequent occupation, Japanese people stopped considering status differences a reason for not allowing a marriage to occur. This was one indication of progress in the democratization of Japanese society. From 1945 to 1952, the American occupation forces transformed Japan from a militaristic society to a democratic one. Naturally, this changed Japanese patterns of behavior and therefore it also changed the way characters in Japanese films reacted to events. One example of this was the fact that love between persons from different social classes no longer could be considered a subject for tragedy.

During the 1930s a new genre, the salaryman movie, became popular. This kind of movie is about rather pitiful white-collar office

workers who behave in extremely ingratiating ways toward their bosses.

In the 1950s, however, a new kind of salaryman drama, in which employees were shown as being able to control their good-natured employers, began to evolve. A comedy genre called "irresponsible series" appeared in which low-level employees ignore their supervisors and act in any manner they please.

Despite these new tendencies, many sentimental love stories were produced during the first seven or eight years after World War II. In 1953, however, there was a hit movie entitled *Kimi no Nawa* in which two lovers could not be united, not because of status differences, but because the woman was already married to another man. After *Kimi no Nawa,* sentimental love stories rapidly disappeared.

During the 1960s, the audience for Japanese film suddenly decreased. For that reason, Japanese film companies began to put more emphasis on eroticism and violence, thus driving away much of their female audience. Women turned instead to foreign films and television, and many Japanese actresses moved over to television.

The home drama, a television genre that depicts family life, became popular. Home drama as a genre actually developed first in the cinema. The 1950s was the golden age for cinematic home dramas, and television had only a minor influence on Japanese life.

Many great Japanese films were created by such directors as Yasujiro Ozu, Keisuke Kinoshita, and Mikio Naruse. The finest works of Ozu have a story line in which the family worries about the daughter's marriage. These stories begin with the marriage proposal and end with the marriage itself. Many other movies also end with the daughter's marriage. Compared with the movies, many television home dramas deal with the long years of a woman's life after her marriage.

Consequently, these television home dramas feature a middle-aged housewife as the heroine. The mother, who is the center of the drama, is of an age to have the supporting actor and actress as her children. In the 1970s, leading actresses aged forty to sixty became popular on television. Like the young melodrama film stars of that period, these older television actresses were shown as charming women in fancy clothing who enjoyed a carefree life-style. The houses these women lived in tended to be lively, with many rooms for the large family and for neighbors and relatives who visited frequently. The housewife-heroine assumed the role of managing this lively family. She was so busy that she had no time to be bored. Her impressive strength of character

could be seen in her ability to ensure a caring and harmonious environment around her. Home dramas dealing with self-employed families were particularly frequent in the 1970s; in these dramas, the heroine is able to show her ability to supervise others skillfully.

From the end of the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, this kind of popular middle-aged heroine appeared in the "mother drama," such as the ones which featured Aiko Mimasu. About thirty such mother dramas featuring this actress were produced during this period. Some examples of these films based on the theme of motherly love are: *Haha* (1948), *Haha Sannin* (1949), and *Haha Kōbai* (1949). One could also mention films starring Yuko Mochizuki that appeared from 1950 to 1960 and could be called realistic mother dramas. Some examples of Mochizuki's films are: *Nihon no Higeki* (1953), *Ofukuro* (1955), and *Niguruma no Uta* (1959).

Both Yuko Mochizuki and Aiko Mimasu were popular actresses who showed the misery of middle-aged mothers. Although it may be rude to say so, neither of these actresses was a great beauty, and both of them lacked charm. They left an impression of women who had struggled. Their appeal was in their tragic visage, which showed that they had been sacrificing all of their lives in order to rear their children. If the children forget about their mothers' struggles and instead do whatever they please, the mothers show an intense feeling of resentment and discouragement. Actually, these melodramatic mother dramas draw sympathy from the typical Japanese mothers in the audience who share the same feelings, and they make Japanese young people appreciate their own mothers' struggles.

The basis of morality for the Japanese is filial piety. Although this hasn't changed since the Edo period, "moral teaching" lessons *(shushin)* were discontinued in the public schools after World War II. Because of this, Japanese parents still regret that their children have lost the feeling of filial piety. Some people think that what enforces Japanese feelings of filial piety is not the *shushin* but the complaining Japanese mother. Japanese mothers often remind their children how much they've suffered for them. Children who hear those kinds of statements grow up feeling guilty towards their mothers, and they fear causing their mothers sadness. The image of a complaining mother became a typical one, an image of almost mythic proportions, through its frequent use in stories, plays, and films. Even if their own mother is not a complaining type, Japanese children have this image of a complaining mother set in their mind, and they tend to empathize more

with the suffering type. Yuko Mochizuki and Aiko Mimasu portrayed this kind of suffering, resentful mother.

Until 1960, it was necessary for a middle-aged movie actress to give this impression of having suffered. Home drama movies generally ended with the daughter's marriage, and the main attraction of the mother drama was the suffering, complaining mother. Therefore, the basic assumption in Japanese movies of that time was that a woman could be attractive until she was married, but after marriage, she had no choice but to pursue a life of incessant suffering.

In this sense, in the latter part of the 1960s, the portrayal of beautiful and happy middle-aged women in television home dramas was a truly revolutionary phenomenon in the history of Japanese popular culture. This new kind of story emphasized the idea that women could enjoy their life after marriage. While mothers in movies lived only for their children, mothers in television began to assert the fact that there were other sources of happiness in their lives. Hit television shows of self-employed families, like *Arigato* (1972) and *Terauchi Kantaro Ikka* (1974) featured housewives who occupied such interesting positions in the family that they had no time to complain.

Sorezore no Aki (1975) is the story of a family undergoing a period of so many problems that it seemed as if the family would be torn apart. It could be held together only by the strength and caring of the housewife. In earlier films, Japanese housewives were shown as sacrificing themselves for their families; in the more modern examples, such as *Sorezore no Aki*, the housewife was required to display leadership.

Another example of a story in which the family is about to split up is *Kishibe no Album*. One of the reasons for the family's situation was the mother's extramarital love affair. The fact that this television housewife had an affair rather than complaining about rearing children meant that she could no longer carry out her leadership role in the family.

In 1976, a television drama entitled *Kumo no Jutan* appeared. This story was noteworthy in that it created a new type of woman. *Kumo no Jutan* was the true story of the first female Japanese pilot. The heroine, played by Yoko Asaji, won the trust and help of others, not by suffering and struggling, but by her lively and positive nature. With these attributes, she was able to overcome various difficulties. This kind of positive image of a woman had not appeared in movies but rather was the inspiration of television.

Viewers' surveys revealed that a surprisingly large number of people watched the television program *Fufu* (1978), which dealt with the old theme of the conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. This theme had appeared previously in family tragedies like *Kimi no Nawa* (1953) and in stories of traditional merchant families like the ones in *Onna no Issho* (1953), directed by Kanehito Shindo, and *Bonchi* (1960), directed by Kon Ichikawa. All of these films had the theme of the bride's ability or inability to endure her mother-in-law's bad temper. All mothers-in-law at that time were shown as having this bad image. Japanese mothers-in-law at that time still tended to be tyrannical toward their daughters-in-law. The only kinds of films that would be popular were those that fit the convention of the younger actress taking the role of the suffering wife and the older actress taking the role of the irrational, ill-tempered mother-in-law.

If a young actress and a middle-aged actress were featured together, and if one had to be given a villain's role, that role invariably fell to the middle-aged actress. In television home drama this convention fell apart because the middle-aged women were often more popular than the younger actresses. In the home drama *Fufu,* the mother-in-law, played by Hisano Yamaoka (age fifty-two) was more of a star than the bride, played by Mikiko Otonashi (age twenty-nine). There was, therefore, no convention for making Hisano Yamaoka more of a villain in the story. The mother-in-law in the story was so strong-tempered that the wife could not endure it, but the mother-in-law was not just blindly following a convention of nagging the daughter-in-law for no reason. Indeed, she had her own reasons for doing so, and she said freely what she wanted to say. This kind of behavior on the part of the mother-in-law had a cathartic effect on the audience. The appeal of this home drama was that Hisano Yamaoka was able to maintain a charming and attractive presence while playing the role of the nagging mother-in-law. Even though the mother-in-law was quite strong-tempered, the viewer felt sympathy with her because the character was so persuasive. (Of course, the fact that Ms. Yamaoka was a star was not the reason the character was so persuasive.)

In Japanese tradition, it was assumed that the oldest son would take care of the elderly parents, but after World War II, the Japanese family system fell apart, along with this assumption. In addition, the population became more dispersed, and the housing situation worsened. There were more and more Japanese households in which it was unclear who would care for elderly parents. It was up to each individ-

ual wife to decide whether she would care for her mother-in-law. This gave relatively more strength to the wife, and the mother-in-law began to be more obsequious to her as wives began to consider mothers-in-law a burden. Because of this change in conditions, Hisano Yamaoka's nonobsequious assertiveness drew sympathy from the audience.

In 1983, the hit of the year was a television drama entitled *Oshin,* in which the mother-in-law was a more empathetic character than the wife. The story, based on a script by Sugako Hashide, is about the life of a woman who was born during the Meiji period (1866–1912) in a poor village in the Tohoku (northern) region. From a young age, she could not go to school, and she suffered many hardships. Finally, she became the owner of a store. This story was a revival of the theme of the suffering mother.

Oshin was so popular because it aroused a feeling of nostalgia even among members of the younger generation who had not experienced such mother dramas. Nevertheless, *Oshin* was, in some ways, completely different from the older mother dramas. Although Oshin endured the typical kinds of conservative pressures, she also opened the way for new possibilities in life, as had the female characters in *Kumo no Jutan.* Contemporary audiences did not feel the sense of guilt toward this mother heroine that they had felt toward the older mother dramas. Oshin struggled, but she never gave up her pursuit of happiness. Aiko Mimasu, in the older mother dramas, had a miserable, resentful appearance as a result of her suffering. Nobuko Otowa, who played the older Oshin, impressed the young people in the audience with her ability to achieve dignity, social status, and fortune as the result of her suffering. The younger generation may feel envious toward Oshin because they themselves are part of such an organized social system that they do not know how to endure suffering.

Because of the dramatic differences in these two eras, Japanese parents cannot explain their younger days to their own children. The grandchild cannot imagine the grandparents' childhood memories, and the grandparents cannot use their lives as a lesson for their grandchildren. The result is that the grandparents are ignored and silenced. One reason for *Oshin*'s popularity is that the heroine of the drama may have been able to communicate what contemporary grandparents could not.

Critical reviews of *Oshin* were not favorable, especially among the critics who value high artistic quality in television dramas. However, *Oshin* was a popular success not only in Japan but also in other Asian

countries. This was probably the first time that a drama that was not based on heroic tales of samurai or male karate experts but instead focused on the life of a Japanese woman had reached this level of popularity in Asian countries.

Unfortunately, in the Japanese cinema of the past ten years, no comparable heroines have been created.