

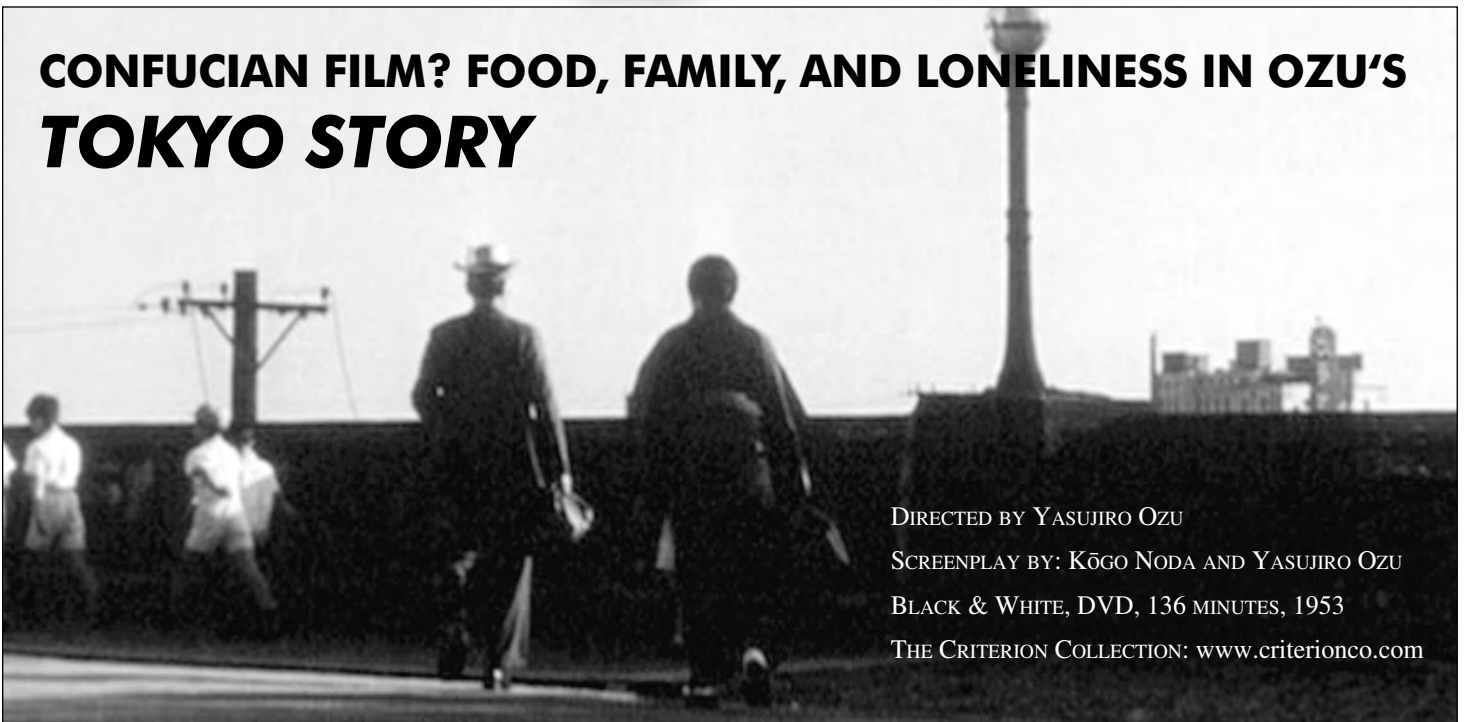
CONFUCIAN FILM? FOOD, FAMILY, AND LONELINESS IN OZU'S *TOKYO STORY*

DIRECTED BY YASUJIRO OZU

SCREENPLAY BY: KŌGO NODA AND YASUJIRO OZU

BLACK & WHITE, DVD, 136 MINUTES, 1953

THE CRITERION COLLECTION: www.criterionco.com



The Hirayamas walking in Tokyo. ©2003 The Criterion Collection

In classic Hollywood films, food is mostly left out or coded as ethnic, as in Italian gangster films. In postwar Chinese and Japanese film, food often moves the plot, explores relationships, reveals character, or expresses moral and ethical values.¹ Why? Let's test an idea: how people conceptualize their lives is shaped by inherited stories. The Confucian family story was structured around the father/son relationship, while the American middle class family of Hollywood fame was built around the romance between Mom and Pop. Americans marry to start a family, Confucians to continue one. The Confucian family extends backward and forward in time; Hollywood romantic relations exist in the renewable but contingent present. Confucian ritual is the participation of ancestors in family life, but the way American films tell it, ritual (sometimes even politeness) stifles the expression of the real self. In the Confucian imaginary, individualism means being lonely and powerless; on the American silver screen, individualism means being free and empowered. Family in the one story means fulfillment; in the other, happiness is being liberated. Therefore, because it represents family, food appears in different roles on the two screens.

The challenge in using film in an Asian studies course is to look beyond the plot and see the deeper story. By tracing one theme in a film, students come to appreciate the director's craft, make specific analysis of the theme, and relate it to the social and historical situation. The themes of food and family are important in many other films, as well as "children," "time" (such as watches and clocks), "architecture" (houses, rooms, furniture), or "machinery."²

To test our hypothesis, let's look at *Tokyo Story* (1954), written and directed by Ozu Yasujiro (1910–1963). I hope this way of looking at ideas in a film can be a model for others to trace themes such as Japanese aesthetics; Buddhism; time; the interaction of

technology and family; and, above all, how we all deal with change, death, and humanity. The film, which appeared just after the American Occupation ended, shows us a Japan recovering from the trauma of war but before the economic "miracle." Food was more than symbolic at this time, for people had recently starved in the streets. Family and tradition were also salient issues for audiences who remembered government manipulation of "Japanese tradition" and "family values."³ But neither idea is simple or unchanging. As the sociologist Merry White points out, Meiji reformers used law and social pressure to propagate new family structures, but their model was the patriarchal samurai elite rather than the more egalitarian farm or bourgeois family. Americans of the 1940s assumed that this Meiji model was traditional and blamed its "feudal values" for militarism and Pearl Harbor. Occupation laws reformed and reinvented the modern family. Since they also assumed that democracy was based on individualism and romantic love, at one point Occupation censors decreed that each new Japanese film must include a romantic kiss!⁴

The plot condenses into a few quiet days the classic lifeline of a multigenerational Confucian family.⁵ The film opens with the arrival in Tokyo of the Hirayamas, a couple in their sixties, to visit their children and grandchildren. Kōichi, their eldest son, is a neighborhood doctor whose wife runs the house and minds the children, who are petulant and self-centered. Shige, their daughter, runs a beauty salon. Food quickly appears onscreen when Kōichi and Shige debate the welcoming dinner. Suki-yaki? No—too expensive. Next day, Kōichi plans an outing to a department store restaurant for lunch, but his wife has to tell him which set meal the boys prefer.⁶

Shige, as a beauty salon proprietor, is "New Woman," a social type that challenged the Meiji patriarchal ideal.⁷ At breakfast, when



CAPITALISM IN ASIA

edited by
**David
Ludden**

The eleven articles in this collection, edited by David Ludden, were originally published in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (JAS). They are among the countless articles and book reviews on features of capitalism in Asia published in the JAS over the last sixty years. The essays selected for this volume are supplemented by the editor's introduction, which describes differing concepts of capitalism and globalization and their relationship to studies of Asia. A selected bibliography ("Additional Readings in the *Journal of Asian Studies*") is also included, providing students and scholars a guide for further research.

These articles represent scholarship in the humanities and social sciences (geography, sociology, anthropology, political science, and history), and they illustrate intellectual changes that occurred from the 1950s through the 1990s. Demonstrating the broad geographical and intellectual scope of the JAS, these essays deal with economic themes related to selected countries in South, Southeast, East, and Northeast Asia.

ISBN 924304-45-6

List Price: \$28.00 (AAS Member Price: \$22.50)

Association for Asian Studies
1021 East Huron Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48104 USA
bookorder@aasianst.org
www.aasianst.org

RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ABOUT ASIA



Shige eats one of the expensive cakes. ©2003 The Criterion Collection

her affable husband comments that the beans (*mame*) are delicious, Shige takes the plate away: "stop eating all the beans up!" When her parents arrive to stay the night, her husband generously brings their favorite cakes (*okashi*). Shige says they are "too expensive," that "crackers (*sembei*) would have been good enough," and eats them herself (straight from the box). Food shows Ozu's suspicion of the New Woman.

The most sympathetic of the younger generation is Noriko, widow of the Hirayama son killed in the war. She is an Office Girl, also a new social type; ironically, she is more filial than Kōichi or Shige. Noriko takes a day off to show the parents around Tokyo, then invites them to her cramped apartment for dinner. She goes next door to borrow sake, then, to underscore this sincere generosity, when she goes back to borrow the cups, the neighbor offers her appetizers as well. But since it is Shige's turn to host the beauty salon association meeting at her place, the parents must go elsewhere for the night. Noriko does not have room for both parents, so Father finds old friends and goes to a bar. The men drink and complain that children are a disappointment; meanwhile, as they fall asleep,



Noriko takes the Hiramayas on a tour of Tokyo, and invites them to her apartment for dinner. ©2003 The Criterion Collection



"None can serve his parents
beyond the grave."

Keizo discusses his mother's illness with a co-worker. ©2003 The Criterion Collection

Mother urges Noriko to ignore traditional expectations of a widow and remarry, lest she be "lonely" (*sabeshii*). The two scenes balance: the men conclude that family is disappointing, the women that without it they are lonely.

The Hirayamas leave Tokyo from the train station, dominated by crowds and mechanical schedule boards, for their quiet hometown. On the journey, Mother briefly falls ill and is looked after by another son who remarks "you cannot serve your parents beyond the grave." But once home, Mother peacefully dies. The family gathers to mourn and have a final dinner around a low restaurant table. Shige tearfully reminisces, but quickly recovers to claim her mother's favorite kimono. Rice is served by still another daughter, who later weeps at the selfishness of her siblings. Afterwards, Father gives Noriko his wife's watch and says "*arigatoo*." The word means more than "thank you"—it is a verbal ritual to acknowledge a social obligation performed well. As Noriko rides the train back to Tokyo alone, a neighbor leans into Father's living room window and says to the widower: "*Osabeshii!*"—almost untranslatable, but literally "Your loneliness!" Food weaves through the film: the calculated welcoming dinner in



The family gathers to mourn and have a final dinner.

©2003 The Criterion Collection



Thank you.

Father thanks Noriko for her kindness. ©2003 The Criterion Collection

Tokyo; Shige's breakfast table; Noriko's generous dinner; Father drinking in a bar; the elegiac post-funeral table. Ozu uses food to show that sincere ritual fends off meaninglessness and parries (but cannot defeat) loneliness, and, unsentimentally, that family is both the malady and the medicine. ■

NOTES

1. This is roughly born out by the studies in Anne Bower, ed., *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For the moral use of food in a Chinese film see, Charles W. Hayford, "Xie Jin's Hibiscus Town: Revolution, Love, and Beancurd," in Chris Berry, ed., *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (London: British Institute of Film Studies; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 120–127.
2. Gilles Poitras' *The Teachers Companion to the Anime Companion* is a small guide on the Web for educators. It has suggestions on cultural aspects for discussion in teaching anime, which apply equally well to other types of film. Please see <http://www.koyagi.com/teachers.html>.
3. Chapter Three, "Kyōdatsu: Exhaustion and Despair," in John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton; New Press, 1999): 88–120.
4. "Family under Construction: One Hundred Years at Home," in Merry I. White, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 42–62; Anne E. Imamura, "The Japanese Family Faces Twenty-First Century Challenges," *Education About Asia* 8, Number 2 (Fall 2003): 30–33.
5. Yasujirō Ozu with Noda Kogo, "Tokyo Story," translated by Donald Richie and Eric Klesdadt, in Howard Hibbett, ed., *Contemporary Japanese Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1953): 187–237.
6. Ann Allison, "Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch Box as Ideological State Apparatus," in *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 81–104, reprinted in Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 296–314.
7. Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 2–3.

CHARLES W. HAYFORD is an Independent Scholar and Visiting Scholar, Department of History, Northwestern University. Recently he has taught Asian History, United States-East Asian Relations, and Chinese and Japanese Film at Lake Forest College, Harvard Summer School, Northwestern University, and National Consortium on Teaching About Asia. He is Editor of the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. His article "What's So Bad About the Good Earth?" appeared in *Education About Asia* (December 1998).