

Shifting Gender Roles in Postwar Japan: The On-Screen Life of Actress

Hara Setsuko

By Kelly Hansen

Hara Setsuko (born Aida Masae, 1920) is one of Japan's most admired actresses from its golden age of cinema. During her twenty-eight-year career, spanning the mid-1930s to early 1960s, she appeared in over one hundred feature films. Best known for her portrayals of ordinary, middle-class women, Hara's performances were anything but ordinary. With large, expressive eyes and striking features, her unforgettable depictions of women from all stages of life, including daughters, wives, mothers and widows, came to embody idealized notions of Japanese femininity on the big screen for a generation. The biographical narrative that grew up around her on-screen persona was reinforced by the fact that she frequently played similar but unrelated characters, often with the same name and with many repeat cast members. Although she is regularly described as the quintessential self-sacrificing Japanese woman, a large part of her appeal was due to her ability to convincingly express the conflicted emotions of societal pressures impinging on individual desires and independence. These tensions frequently reflect the *giri* (social responsibility, social duty) versus *ninjō* (personal feelings, individual desires) conflict, a prominent theme in many Japanese narrative traditions from premodern times up to the present day, but also underscore the complex status of women during this transformative time in Japan's history.

This article examines the tensions between gender expectations and individual desires in the on-screen persona of Setsuko Hara as reflected in two of her best-known postwar films by director Ozu Yasujirō (1903-1963): *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) and *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, 1953).

Hara's work can serve as an ideal framework for a discussion on gender issues in postwar Japan because many of the characters she portrayed so clearly highlight the contradictory aspects of the traditional and modern in the lives of ordinary women of the time.¹ The first section below provides a socio-historical framework from which to view, analyze, and discuss some of these issues. Following this, each film is discussed in detail, including a plot summary emphasizing the relevant gender issues and suggestions for classroom use.

Women in the Modern Period: A Brief Overview

Japan's modern period is generally traced back to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The early decades of the Meiji period (1868–1912) were characterized by rapid Westernization, including social and economic reforms designed to bring Japan into the modern world. However, this did not result in significant changes in the legal status of women. On the contrary, the Meiji Civil Code of 1891 reinforced the traditional Confucian role of women in the home, placing them under the legal jurisdiction of the *ie*, the oldest male in the family household, to which they belonged, which through the course of a lifetime typically meant submission first to one's father, then husband, and finally, for widows, to the eldest son. Education for girls was promoted from the late nineteenth century onward, but only insofar as it helped prepare them to become "good wives and wise mothers," an ideological construct used to describe the model role of women in society. This adage, which increasingly emphasized the notion of women willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of the family, would intensify during the war years.

The postwar Constitution of 1947, drafted under the authority of Occupation forces, guaranteed women a number of new rights, including the right to receive an equal education, own property, choose their own spouse, and even divorce. Because of these new rights, the influence of Western culture during the postwar period is often seen as the transformational factor in the liberation of women in modern Japan. However, the early decades of the twentieth century are replete with challenges to the traditional image of the self-sacrificing wife and mother. The term "modern woman," associated with feminist Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) and her journal *Seitō* (Blue Stocking, 1911–1916), challenged Japan's patriarchal social structure and advocated the notion of an educated, independent woman.² The *moga* (modern girl), a phenomenon that emerged in the 1920s, referred to young, single working



Setsuko Hara. Source: *Pacific War Photos* at <http://tinyurl.com/oz6jml3>.

women who followed modern Western flapper fashions such as short skirts and bobbed hair. Because of their financial independence and indulgence in the pleasures of fashion and city life, moga were perceived as selfish, frivolous, and even promiscuous. Unlike the women's suffrage movement, which also intensified in the 1920s, the moga were not associated with any particular social or political agenda, but their very presence on city streets highlighted the increasing sociopolitical challenges to the "good wife, wise mother" adage during the interwar years.³ Feminist movements of the early twentieth century would fade as military aggression intensified in the 1930s, but they highlight the status of Japanese women in the modern period as a complex set of factors drawing on both indigenous movements and Western influence. I now examine how Hara's films highlight some of these issues.

Late Spring: Reluctant Bride and Eternal Virgin

In early postwar films, Hara is most frequently associated with her portrayals of young, single women reluctant to make the transition to marriage, an image that earned her the nickname of *eien no shōjo* (the eternal virgin). One of her best-known performances in this vein is *Late Spring* (1949), in which she plays Somiya Noriko, the twenty-seven-year-old unmarried daughter of widower Somiya Shūkichi (Ryū Chishū).⁴ Most of Noriko's friends are already married, and her Aunt Masa (Sugimura Haruko) is determined to find her a suitable match. Forced labor and poor nutrition during the war years affected Noriko's health and prevented her from marrying sooner; the lack of a mother figure in her life (which is not explained in the film) also lends her an air of sadness and vulnerability. Her desire to remain with her father, a man with no wife or male heir, highlights the ideal Confucian virtues of a traditional filial daughter, but her lack of interest in marriage puzzles those around her.



Poster for *Late Spring*. Source: Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/ovsuh3c>.

Noriko's old-fashioned outlook on life is contrasted with that of her best friend, Aya. Rather than accepting a traditional arranged marriage, Aya made her own choice and married for love. She embraces Western culture, dressing in sophisticated modern clothes, living in a Western-style house, and expressing discomfort when she has to sit on *tatami* flooring. Now that her marriage has gone sour, she supports herself as a stenographer. Aya's lifestyle suggests that an unmarried or divorced woman living independently is a realistic possibility in the post-war period. Another marriage mentioned in the film is that of Professor Onodera, a widowed colleague of Shūkichi's who recently remarried. The conservative Noriko doesn't approve of remarriage for an older man and tells him so directly, but she is soon forced to reconsider this stance. In a *nō* performance she attends with her father, Noriko becomes aware that her father might seriously be considering remarriage himself. In this painfully long scene, completely devoid of dialogue, the camera slowly follows Noriko's gaze as she observes a series of glances and nods exchanged between her father and Mrs. Miwa, a widow who is being proposed as a match for him. The *nō* chanting intensifies and the play reaches its climactic conclusion as she looks from one to the other before finally dropping her head in despair, struggling to maintain a sense of composure. When Shūkichi later confirms that he has decided to remarry, Noriko realizes that by remaining single, she may simply be in the way.

If a full screening of this film is not possible, Noriko's dilemma, which reaches its climax following the *nō* play (1:00:47–1:11:15), can serve as an effective starting point for a classroom discussion of the role of marriage in women's lives at this time. Under increasing pressure to accept her aunt's match, Noriko decides to consult her friend Aya. Surprisingly, however, when she broaches the idea of getting a job and supporting herself, Aya insists that this is only a last resort for women with no husbands to support them. Noriko has been offered a good match and would be better off getting married. Students of history and anthropology might want to begin by considering this contrast between the new legal rights available to women at the time and the ongoing influence of persisting patriarchal societal values. Aya's choices, while bold and independent, have left her with limited options. The possibility of a divorcée remarrying may be remote, and although she has the skills to support herself, it will mean a lifetime of menial clerical work. It is also worth questioning whether the fragile Noriko, with no work experience, really has any practical options for securing her future other than marriage. Another issue under debate in

this film is the contrast between the traditional arranged marriage being proposed for Noriko, in which couples may marry after a few meetings, and the more modern possibility of a love match, as exemplified by Aya's situation. Does choosing one's own partner increase the chances of a happy marriage? Or could an arrangement based not on love or mutual attraction, but rather on similar social and economic backgrounds, be a better recipe for a successful union?

Eventually, Noriko is prodded into meeting the prospective groom. The meeting is not shown on-screen but seems to go well, as Noriko appears more cheerful and accepting about her upcoming marriage. But on a final trip to Kyoto that Noriko and her father take just before the wedding, she makes one last appeal to be allowed to remain at home. This touching moment between father and daughter (1:31:00–1:36:45) is another scene worthy of careful viewing and discussion. Students should be aware that critics have interpreted this scene in different ways. Some argue that Shūkichi's speech is cliché, simply reiterating the patriarchal line on *giri* (social responsibility) that had governed the course of women's lives for generations. However, one of the characteristics of Ozu's scripts is the succinct and even mechanical lines that characters frequently utter in emotionally charged scenes. In this case, the intense emotions are emphasized through an unusual use of close-ups, allowing the camera to highlight the smaller details of the characters' expressions and demeanor toward each other.

Students might also consider the specific arguments Shūkichi uses to convince Noriko that marriage is the best path for her and how much relevance these arguments have in present-day society. Does Shūkichi seem to be pushing Noriko into marriage because of societal expectations of the time? Or is he trying to do what is best for Noriko given the options available to her? As for Noriko, does she appear to understand and accept her father's arguments, or has she merely become resigned to a situation she cannot change?



Hara Setsuko as Noriko and Ryū Chishū as Shūkichi in *Late Spring*. Source: Pinterest at <http://tinyurl.com/o94u4cu>.

A full screening of the film also reveals that Shūkichi is not completely honest with his daughter. Following the wedding ceremony (which is not shown), he confesses to Aya that he has no intention of remarrying, but told the lie in order to persuade Noriko to accept the match. Do his means justify the end? Or should he have been honest with his daughter?

Class discussion might also focus on the significance of the fact that Noriko's husband never appears on-screen. Almost no details about his life are provided, aside from frequent references to his looking vaguely like the actor Gary Cooper. What might this suggest about the criteria for a successful marriage?

Finally, Shūkichi's own sacrifice should be noted. He is not simply arranging a husband for his daughter, but is legally passing her on to another family. Following marriage, a woman's name is removed from her father's *koseki* (family register) and transferred to that of her husband's. In other words, she severs all ties with her birth family and becomes a legal member of her husband's family. Because of this, it is not possible for a woman to retain her maiden name after marriage, even today.⁵ The film closes with a final scene of the Shūkichi, back home after the ceremony, utterly alone, peeling an apple. As the peel drops to the floor, he simultaneously drops his head in reflection. Although he has ensured Noriko's financial future, he has done so at the detriment of his own comfort and happiness.

The on-screen persona of Hara as a reluctant bride would later be reinforced by the actress's own life choices. In 1963, still at the height of her popularity, she abruptly announced her retirement. Rather than offering the usual polite pretense such as ill health or family troubles, Hara merely stated that she had never particularly enjoyed acting and had only done so to support her family. Her decision, which stood in contrast to many of the idealized, self-sacrificing roles of women associated with her on-screen, sparked considerable criticism. Did she not have a duty to her many admiring fans? Hara never responded to the criticisms and also never married, instead choosing a reclusive lifestyle in her hometown of Kamakura (the setting for *Late Spring*) and regularly refusing all requests for interviews or information.

Tokyo Story: From Daughter to Daughter-In-Law

The notion of marriage as a bond linking the new wife not simply to her husband but to his family is further explored in *Tokyo Story*.⁶ The plot revolves around an elderly couple, Hirayama Shūkichi (again played by Ryū Chishū) and his wife, Tomi, who make a trip from their home in Onomichi near Hiroshima to visit their adult children, now living in Tokyo. Often considered Ozu's masterpiece, this film is well worth a full screening. An English script of this film has also been published and is an excellent source for teachers wishing to focus on the text in more detail.⁷ In my own literature and film



Poster for *Tokyo Story*. Source: Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/ncdq9wu>.

classes, I have found that having students take parts and read selected scenes out loud helps bring the story into the classroom and generate class discussion.

For classes without time to devote to a full screening, a study of the contrasting attitudes of the couple's oldest daughter, Shige (played by Sugimura, Noriko's aunt in *Late Spring*), and widowed daughter-in-law, Noriko, played by Hara, offer a striking contrast of two women responding to social demands and practical responsibilities at different stages of life.⁸ The first clip to show this contrast occurs relatively early in the film (31:18–47:02). The audience is introduced to Shige, a middle-aged wife and mother running a hairdressing business out of her home.⁹ She shows little deference to her parents and views their visit primarily as an inconvenience in her busy life. She continues with her daily schedule, leaving her parents to idle away their time in the living quarters upstairs. When her husband comes home with special cakes for them, she chides him for spending so much money, insisting that cheap crackers would be good enough, and then proceeds to eat the cakes herself. Shige eventually calls Noriko to ask if she can take time off from her office job to spend a day with her in-laws, to which the latter willingly agrees. Noriko's youthful appearance and cheerful attitude, the epitome of the filial daughter-in-law, are a stark contrast to Shige's demeanor. Following the tour, Noriko delights the couple by taking them back to her small, one-room apartment, where they observe a photo of their late son displayed in the room and interpret this as a sign of her ongoing loyalty to the Hirayama family.

The contrast between Shige and Noriko is even more pronounced during a second set of scenes at the family home in Onomichi following Tomi's sudden collapse and death (1:58:35–2:01:30). At a final family dinner after the funeral, Shige bluntly asks her youngest sister, Kyoko, to find a few special items of her mother's that she would like to have and then matter-of-factly proceeds to book her return ticket to Tokyo. Meanwhile, Noriko agrees to stay on in Onomichi a few more days, once again suggesting that she is more devoted to her in-laws than their own daughter. Following the departure of Shige and her brothers, Kyoko, single and still living in the family home, complains to Noriko about the selfishness of her older siblings (2:03:00–2:05:40). Surprisingly, Noriko defends Shige, explaining that as a wife and mother with her own concerns, she has naturally grown apart from her parents. Kyoko comments that "life is disappointing," suggesting that, much like the Noriko of *Late Spring*, for a woman to grow up and take on new responsibilities may not be so much about choice as about resignation and acceptance.

Shortly after this, as Noriko is preparing to return to Tokyo, Shūkichi again praises her filial piety, but expresses concern that she is allowing her attachment to her deceased husband to hold her back (2:07:00–2:12:10). Noriko breaks down, confessing that she does not feel the loyalty that everyone in the family attributes to her, sometimes not even thinking of her husband for days. In these final scenes, the audience comes to realize that the characters of Shige and Noriko are much more complex than they originally appear. Noriko is clearly more likeable, but to what extent have Shige's considerable responsibilities as wife, mother, and shop owner contributed to giving her the appearance of an unfilial daughter? Although Noriko seems more devoted, the time spent with her in-laws might be relatively small inconveniences in her daily lifestyle as a single working woman without regular family responsibilities. Examining the parallels between the struggles faced by Shige and Noriko with women of today may be another fruitful means of understanding these characters.

The Legacy of Hara Setsuko

Hara Setsuko has not appeared on-screen for over half a century, yet many of the conflicts her characters faced are still relevant today. Despite the expansion of women's rights following the war, societal pressure to sacrifice independence and career for family following marriage remains strong. Even in the twenty-first century, over half of young career women in Japan today still quit working after the birth of their first child.¹⁰ In 2013, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō called on businesses to increase opportunities for women, arguing that female participation in the workforce is crucial to Japan's economic recovery. Practically speaking, however, Abe's policies are difficult to achieve. Not only are basic services such as day care inadequate, but the long overtime hours expected of full-time salaried employees make it difficult if not impossible for a working mother to juggle motherhood and a career. By examining the tensions between gender expectations and individual desires in on-screen personas of Hara Setsuko, students can consider both the possibilities and limitations available to women in postwar Japan, as well as the legacy of these traditional societal pressures in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. Hara's career is closely tied to Ozu. Although she worked under many other directors, her best-known films were done with Ozu. Those interested in learning more about Ozu's style will find no lack of critical studies in English. Two of the best-known works are Donald Richie, *Ozu: His Life and Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) and David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1988). Unfortunately, there are no monograph-length works on Hara in English, and few articles. However, she is frequently referenced in the above-mentioned works on Ozu.
2. For more on Hiratsuka Raichō, see *In the Beginning Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, Teruko Craig, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). For more on the *Seitō* journal, see Jan Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Women and Fiction from Seitō, 1911–1916* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2007).
3. In 1921, women were granted the right to attend political meetings, but would not receive the right to vote until 1946. For an in-depth study of Japanese women in the 1920s, see Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003). For more on the role of Japanese women in the 1950s, particularly housewives, see Jan Bardsley, *Women and Democracy in Cold War Japan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).
4. *Late Spring (Banshun)*, directed by Ozu Yasujirō (1949; New York City: Criterion Collection, 2013), DVD.
5. There are also cases where the son-in-law is transferred to the wife's family register and takes her surname. Historically, this has been common in families where there is no son to carry on the family line; the son-in-law then becomes the legal heir of his wife's parents. See "Constitutionality of Rules of Surnames, Remarriage Under Review," *The Japan Times*, last modified February 19, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/nslo9q6>.
6. *Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)*, directed by Ozu Yasujirō (1953; New York City: Criterion Collection, 2013), DVD.
7. See *Ozu's Tokyo Story*, David Desser, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
8. Hara played Noriko in three films—*Late Spring*, *Tokyo Story*, and *Early Summer (Bakushū, 1951)*—which naturally invites the audience to draw links. Critics often discuss these films together, referring to them as the Noriko trilogy. However, the three Norikos are all distinct, unrelated characters.
9. It should be noted that hairdressing has traditionally been a job done by women. Given the fact that she works out of her home, Shige's status is different from the modern, Westernized image associated with young female office workers like Noriko.
10. For a recent discussion of working women in Japan today, see "Holding Back Half the Nation," *The Economist*, last modified March 29, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/ommefw8>.

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