

**An Analysis of the Post War Societal Expectations of Japan
in Ozu Yasujiro's Film *An Autumn Afternoon***

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1. Introduction

An Autumn Afternoon is a 1962 film directed by Ozu Yasujiro. By studying the movie, we seek to answer this question: What can we learn about Japanese culture from *An Autumn Afternoon*? This film shows the cultural expectations for family responsibility, marriage, and life in a post war Japanese society. We observe the film through Hirayama, a World War II veteran that lives with his daughter and youngest son. Through drinking with his friends and acquaintances, we learn alongside Hirayama the actions and consequences of the societal norms in Japan. The film director, Ozu, is a member of the "Survivors", as dubbed by Goossen (1997, pp. xvii-xix). Through his films, he reflects on both post war society as well as how Western influence changes Japanese culture.

2. Examining family responsibility, marriage, and life in Japanese Culture through *An Autumn Afternoon*

2.1 Family Responsibility in Japanese Society

Throughout the movie, we see how much importance is put in familial responsibilities. After a class reunion with a teacher fondly known as "The Gourd", a couple ex-students bring the inebriated teacher back to his home. Here we first meet his daughter, a middle aged woman still looking after her father in his old age. We learn that The Gourd's wife passed away a long

time ago, and his daughter took on the responsibility of taking care of the family and the household. Even though she shows bitterness at the life she has to maintain, The Gourd's daughter does not forsake her family.

This position is shown to be parallel to Hirayama's own family life. Since Hirayama's wife also passed away many years ago, his daughter Michiko has taken up the household duties and takes care of both her father and her younger brother. She tends everything from cooking meals, to serving tea, to cleaning after her family. Michiko has it so ingrained in her from society that she is responsible for taking care of her family, that the thought of leaving the household never even crosses her mind. Even when marriage is brought up by her father and his friend, she simply brushes it off for her own responsibilities.

The two of them show how duty to the family plays a big role in Japanese society. Regardless of their own personal interests, both daughters put family responsibilities above all else. It is obvious from the very start that The Gourd's daughter regrets everything about her life. While Michiko seems like she is content living and working at home, it is later revealed that she wanted to marry her brother Koichi's colleague and regrets being too late for him. The film presents "the interrelated themes of aging, loneliness, loss, nostalgia, and familial responsibility" (Andrew 2015). The Survivors believed that "Paternalism was dead... and a new literature which would fit the post-war era was waiting to be constructed" (Goossen 1997, pp. xviii). Ozu rejects the idea of a life like The Gourd's daughter, forever tied down to her father. Instead, he promotes the new idea that daughters should be allowed autonomy and to follow their own paths.

2.2 Marriage in Japanese Society

The film opens with Hirayama learning of a young coworker's marriage, followed by a proposition for his daughter by his good friend Kawai. We learn that Michiko is a 24 year old

woman, and that women at that age are expected to be married and living with their husbands. Marriage is shown to be an important state for women at the time. The Gourd's daughter did not get married at the right age, so she was forever stuck living at home taking care of her father. Even if her father passed away, she would no longer be at a suitable age for marriage. Witnessing this is what pushes Hirayama to propose marriage to Michiko.

This again promotes the rejection of "paternalism" (Goossen 1997, pp. xviii). Instead of expecting Michiko to take care of him for the rest of his life, Hirayama sacrifices his own happiness to allow her to adhere to the societal norms of marriage.

2.3 Life in Japanese Society

In post-war Japan, it is easy to see the difference in lifestyle between the older generation and the younger generation. Hirayama spends all of his time at bars and restaurants drinking and eating with his friends. Everything always seems calm and monotonous. When he encounters a fellow veteran, they reminisce about their times together in the Navy, and Hirayama smiles at the old war song that gets played. Hirayama and his friends represent the old style of life in Japanese society. He enjoys a lavish yet repetitive lifestyle where all his needs are taken care of by Michiko.

In contrast, Koichi represents the new Western, post-war lifestyle in Japan. Unlike his father, he doesn't have nearly as much money to spend on menial things; however, he values a lot of the material goods that come from the west. For example, Koichi would rather spend a lot of money on golf clubs than a new refrigerator. Likewise, his wife demands a nice leather pouch to match his new purchases. They represent the western post-war idea of materialism. Another way they differ is that unlike Hirayama's household, the woman is not the only one performing the chores. Koichi and his wife both prepare meals together, and clean the house together.

The post-war survivors were people who “were driven by the sense of urgency often found in people who have had a brush with death... they wanted to get moving, and fast” (Goossen 1997, pp. xviii). Koichi and his wife represent the fast paced nature of the new Japanese society, while Hirayama and his friends represent the slower more monotonous lifestyle from the past.

3. Conclusion

In this essay, we sought to answer the question: What can we learn about Japanese culture from *An Autumn Afternoon*? This film showed us how Japanese society viewed family responsibility, marriage, and life in a post war era. Through the duties of The Gourd’s daughter and Michiko to their families, the insistence that Michiko get married at 24, and the antithesis of lifestyles between father and son, we are shown how Japanese society reflects the “Survivors” culture of the time (Goossen 1997, pp. xvii-xix).

Works

Ozu Yasujiro, *An Autumn Afternoon*. Shochiku, 1962.

Bibliography

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