

# Family Life with Kore-eda Hirokazu

## Introduction

Kore-eda Hirokazu (born Tokyo, 1962) is currently the leading Japanese director in the international film world. His last few films have seen his popularity rise in Japan and his films have been increasingly welcomed at major film festivals. In 2018, his latest film *Shoplifters* won the Palme d'Or, the top prize at Cannes Film Festival. Like some of his earlier films, it opened at No 1 at the Japanese box office in June 2018 and made around \$38 million worldwide.

Originally a documentarist working in television, Kore-eda moved into fiction features with *Maborosi* in 1995 and has since made a further 12 cinema features as director and often writer and film editor as well. He has also produced films. Although he has made forays into several different genres, Kore-eda's films often feature families and perhaps six or seven are primarily 'family melodramas'. These are the films that are the focus for today.

## Genre in Japanese cinema

Japan has a long film history and for several years in the 1930s and 1950s it could claim to be the biggest film industry in the world. In those two periods the Japanese film industry operated a **studio system** similar in many ways to Hollywood (but only now becoming recognised as such). Under that system, production was organised in terms of two broad categories, the period film and the contemporary film. The period film or **jidai-geki** has often based on traditional Japanese theatre (*kabuki* and sometimes the earlier *noh*) and often featured 'swordfight' films, but also a range of other familiar genres such as the melodramas of Mizoguchi Kenji and horror/ghost stories etc.

Contemporary films or **gendai-geki** also cover a range of genres such as comedies and forms of melodrama, including what Western scholars have dubbed the *shomin-geki* – 'realist films' about the working-classes. The Japanese term is actually **shōshimin-eiga** referring to 'lower middle-class' people and this distinction is important, especially when the directors associated with the genre are the two masters Ozu Yasujiro and Naruse Mikio who worked at more or less the same time over a period of 30 years from the 1930s to the 1960s, Ozu at Shochiku and Naruse at Toho (two of the three major Japanese studios between 1930 and the 1960s). It is the styles and narrative ideas of these directors and

their application in stories about 'ordinary' Japanese families coping with the move from tradition to modernity in contemporary Japan that appears to be Kore-eda's inspiration.

Kore-eda has also been linked to directors from Taiwan such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and, more controversially, Tsai Ming-liang. These directors are part of the 'Taiwanese New Cinema' which first appeared in the 1980s, making a link between the 1950s Japanese masters and Kore-eda. Taiwanese film has maintained some links to Japanese film culture, even though the Japanese colonial occupation of Formosa/Taiwan ended in 1945. We'll look at a short extract from Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003). Kore-eda has also cited Ken Loach as an influence.

## **Late Spring** (Japan 1949)

One of Ozu Yasujiro's most famous films, *Late Spring* is selected because it is set in the region of Kamakura under an hour's train ride from Tokyo on the coast. It was one of Ozu's favourite parts of Japan and his grave is close to Kita-Kamakura station. In the films of Ozu we often see stations and characters often travel by train – just as they do in Kore-eda's films. *Our Little Sister* is also set in Kamakura and the smaller Kita-Kamakura station appears in it.

*Late Spring* features Hara Setsuko, one of the most famous actors in Japanese cinema history. She died in 2015 aged 95. In the film Hara plays the daughter of a widower who at 27 is in her 'late Spring' and should, by the standards of Japanese culture at the time, be thinking of marriage. However, she is also thinking about her father's future and what will happen to him.

## **Sound of the Mountain** (Japan 1954)

This film too is set in Kamakura and again stars Hara Setsuko as a 'filial daughter-in-law'. Her husband is a womaniser who stays in Tokyo after work (at his father's company). The extract depicts the early evening when the father returns home by train and meets his daughter-in-law walking home. Later we see the triangular relationship between parents and daughter-in-law. Kore-eda appears influenced by both Naruse and Ozu but it is Naruse who shows the darker side of his characters.

### **Café Lumière** (Taiwan-Japan 2003)

Commissioned by Shochiku for Ozu Yasujiro's birth centenary, this film is a form of *hommage* in which a young woman who is researching a Taiwanese musician from the 1930s returns to Japan to visit her parents and then to hang out with her friend a bookseller. The film features many train rides and coffee shop visits (in Ozu's time these would have been bars). In the extract we will see a scene which seems to be commenting on another famous scene in Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. In that scene Hara Setsuko again is the widowed daughter-in-law of the old couple who have come up from Osaka to see their eldest son and the warmest reception they receive is from their daughter-in-law.

In Hou's film, the young researcher Inoue Yoko is visited by her parents and Hou films their meeting very carefully in what is a direct Ozu *hommage*. Yoko's bookseller friend is played by Asano Tadanobu, an actor who has also appeared for Kore-eda in three films.

### **Kore-eda's fiction films**

1995 *Maborosi*  
1998 *Afterlife* (a film about purgatory or limbo where the dead are asked for a memory)  
2001 *Distance* (a film about a suicide cult)  
2004 *Nobody Knows*  
2006 *Hana* (a *jidai-geki*)  
2008 *Still Walking*  
2009 *Air Doll*  
2011 *I Wish*  
2013 *Like Father, Like Son*  
2015 *Our Little Sister*  
2016 *After the Storm*  
2017 *The Third Murder* (a film about a murder investigation and the way the legal system in Japan works – also has a reference to families)  
2018 *Shoplifters*

### **Nobody Knows** (Japan 2004)

An early film dealing with children and based on a news story (the 'Sugamo child-abandonment incident' in 1988), *Nobody Knows* deals with a family of five young children left by their mother to fend for themselves in their Tokyo flat with very little money. Kore-eda's account is 'less grim' than the real events but it is an example of the way in which this documentarist is influenced by real stories.

### **Still Walking** (Japan 2008)

This is the film that put Kore-eda firmly on the international scene. His films have all tended to feature in festivals and awards competitions but after his early films with their mostly dark themes, this is more firmly about family, though there has still been a tragedy in the past which haunts the present. The parents here are a retired local doctor and his wife and every year they hold a family celebration to remember their eldest son who was drowned in an accident. They are joined by their youngest son, who has married a young widow with a small child, and their daughter who brings her husband and children. This is a celebration edged with tension, especially for the son played by Abe Hiroshi. He and the marvellous Kiki Kirin as the mother have appeared for Kore-eda in several films and the same characters re-appear in 2016's *After the Storm*.

It was this film which started the arguments about whether Naruse or Ozu is the main influence in a film that was widely seen as placing Kore-eda on a level with the 1950s masters.

### **Air Doll** (Japan 2009)

The subject matter here – a lonely man sleeps each night with an inflatable sex doll – might have alienated some of Kore-eda's newly committed fans of *Still Walking*. But in its own way this film is still a relationship drama in which the doll comes alive in the form of the South Korean star Bae Doo-na during the day when her 'owner' is at work. Venturing out, she gets a job in a video store and falls in love with a shop assistant. The story ends tragically but along the way Kore-eda explores many aspects of social behaviour and human feeling. Kore-eda's script is adapted from a *manga* story (just like *Our Little Sister*). It's a good illustration of the links between *manga* (graphic novels), film and *anime* (animated films). *Manga* are widely read by all sections of Japanese society and are especially useful in enabling younger readers to explore complex ideas about emotions, identities and relationships.

### **I Wish** (Japan 2011)

This unusual story began as a kind of commission in which it was suggested to Kore-eda that he might want to make a film featuring the new Shinkansen (bullet train) railway line between Kagoshima and Fukuoka on the island of Kyushu. Kagoshima is right at the southern tip of Japan and Kore-eda's great-grandfather came from the area. Because he is interested in children and railways Kore-eda was keen to pursue the project.

The narrative involves two young brothers separated after their parents' divorce. One lives with his mother and grandparents in Kagoshima and the other with his father in Fukuoka, 160 miles away by Shinkansen. They believe that if they can get together and make a wish at the point where two *shinkansen* cross midway between the cities, they could re-unite their parents.

### ***Like Father, Like Son*** (Japan 2013)

This film certainly widened Kore-eda's fan base proving to be his biggest hit to date in Japan and gaining new fans overseas. Symbolically perhaps, Steven Spielberg expressed interest in remaking the film in Hollywood. Thankfully that hasn't happened yet.

The film is in some ways a pointer towards *Shoplifters*. Two baby boys are mistakenly given to the wrong mothers in the maternity ward but the mistake is not discovered until six years later when DNA tests disrupt the lives of two different families. One is middle-class and one working-class (with Lily Franky as the father, as in *Shoplifters*). The families decide on a trial period in which the boys are returned to their 'birth' families. But it doesn't go well and one set of parents clearly has a better understanding of children than the other. Kore-eda was praised yet again for his direction of the child actors but in many ways it is the middle-class father played by Fukuyama Masaharu (a well-known pop singer) who is the protagonist. The idea for the story came from Kore-eda himself, thinking about his own 5 year-old daughter and how she looks like her father. Fukuyama re-appears in Kore-eda's 2017 film *The Third Murder*.

### ***Our Little Sister*** (Japan 2015)

Three sisters in their twenties live together in the house left to them by their grandmother. When their father who had remarried dies they invite their younger half-sister to join them. The film is adapted from a magazine *manga* story that actually ran from 2007 to 2018 in *Flowers*, a monthly women's magazine. The manga was *Umimachi Diary* – 'Seaside Town Diary'. The seaside town is in Kamakura and the setting is very important. Kore-eda has said:

What interests me is not only the beauty of the scenery of Kamakura – or of the four sisters – but also the accepting attitude of this seaside town itself, absorbing and embracing everything. It is the beauty that arises from the realisation – not sorrowful but open-hearted – that we are just grains of sand forming a part of the whole, and that the town, and the time there, continue even when we are gone.

It was from this perspective that I directed *Our Little Sister*.

There is not a great deal of 'plot' in the film. Instead it is about relationships, the basis of modern melodrama. It is also about the passing of the seasons – a very Japanese idea and fundamental in many aspect of the arts in Japan.

The 'little sister' is played by Hirose Suzu who also appears in *The Third Murder*. Kirin Kiki and Lily Franky are also in *Our Little Sister*, demonstrating Kore-eda's interest in a rolling roster of favoured actors. Kirin Kiki is also in *Shoplifters* – her last film as she died in September 2018.

### **References**

There is little published about Kore-eda in book form in the UK but there are many, many reviews, articles and interviews you can find online.

Mongrel Media at <http://www.mongrelmedia.com> have Press Notes for *Our Little Sister* and *Like Father, Like Son* (go to 'Film Index' to find the films).

Roy Stafford, 17/11/18