

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 11: The Makioka Sisters

Reading: *The Makioka Sisters*, 1943-48 novel, Tanizaki

Film: *The Makioka Sisters*, 1985, Ichikawa

Supplemental reading: Plath, David. *Long Engagements: Maturity in Modern Japan* (Stanford University Press, 1980)

Suggested grades: mature 10th-12th, serious students of literature, college

Themes:

As in Jane Austen's novels, the theme is marriage and the manners and morals of a traditional, wealthy, merchant family; it is also, through its full-life portraits of four sisters, an elegy to the passing of traditional, prewar Japanese feminine sensibility.

The story:

The length of the novel (over 500 pages) and of the film (140 minutes) render the entire works appropriate only for students and classes seriously involved in the study of modern Japanese literature. Yet selected parts of the novel and film can be used with world literature classes to convey images and some understanding of traditional life style in prewar Japanese society.

In 1939 Osaka, four beautiful sisters, whose parents died about ten years before, struggle to maintain the family wealth and position. The two older sisters are married while the two younger, ages 30 and 25, remain, to the increasing concern of the older sisters, unmarried. It is their responsibility to see their younger sisters married to husbands of appropriate wealth and position.

But family pride and, perhaps, the sisters' reluctance to see the beautiful and shy Yukiko, the 30-year-old, leave the family cause them to reject all suitors. Now at this age Yukiko is no longer pursued by marriage prospects. Further, by tradition, the youngest sister cannot marry until Yukiko is married. The family must compromise their standards and consider older men, or widowers with children, or unattractive or uninteresting prospective grooms. The problem is that Yukiko is a rare jewel of traditional Japanese feminine grace and beauty. They do not want her in a relationship that does not fully appreciate these qualities.

The story is really about these four sisters, a detailed study of their personalities, their daily lives, and their relationships with each other. The author's loving attention to details brings them to life, and the film with beautiful color and composition allows us to enter into their lives almost as members of the family.

Teaching:

Whether the entire novel and film or only parts of both are to be studied, an effective approach is to show with little explanation the first 10-12 minutes of the film (the first scene through the film credits). Following discussion as to what the students saw and

what confused them, the opening should be shown again. However, in the second showing and in all further studies of the novel and/or film, the class should be divided into four groups, each assigned to study one sister, noting everything about her. The goal here is the development of character analyses and, later, dialogues as the students share and relate their findings. This approach helps the students to identify with one character and to pay close attention to the novel's and film's rich use of details and symbols.

Class discussion should bring out that the four sisters have, at once, distinctive yet representative personalities. Tsuruko, the oldest, is the head of the family, wielding a firm authority over the other sisters. Sachiko, the second, is maternal and more flexible with the younger sisters. Yukiko, the third, is, as her name suggests, like a delicate, pure new snow. Taeko, the youngest, is willful and sophisticated beyond her years. Whereas the three older sisters are bound to a traditional world, Taeko is in this prewar world already Westernized and determined to run her own business and life. For the author the Makioka family and these four women represent a microcosm of the changes occurring in modern Japanese society.

To learn what happens to the sisters (without reading the novel or viewing the entire film) it is possible to show the last 15 minutes of the film. It is 1941, after five years of war with China and just prior to the beginning of the war with the United States. As the family breaks up, each sister going her separate way, one wonders if they and their families will survive the war and the devastating air raids on Tokyo and Osaka. All we know is that each sister is, in her own way, both strong and fragile. The final image in the film is of Sachiko's husband, alone in a bar drinking and crying, as outside the delicate snow falls. This is the director, Ichikawa's tribute to Tanizaki himself, sorrowfully reflecting back on the passing of an era and a way of life.

For assigned readings in the novel, the list of "Principal Characters" and in Book I Chapters 1-4 and 19, the Kyoto cherry blossom scene used in the opening of the film, are possible selections. David Plath's *Long Engagements: Maturity in Modern Japan* although an anthropological study, has a chapter analyzing the relationships of the Makioka sisters.

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