

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 18: The Japanese Family and Education

Viewing: film, *The Family Game*, 1984, Morita, as centerpiece for a humanities unit.

Suggested Readings:

From the Teacher's Manual, video Letters from Japan II, 1988, Asia Society, Suburban Tokyo High School Students, two selections: "High School students in Japan," by Merry White, and "They get by with a lot of help from their Kyoiku mamas," by Carol Simons.

From *A Half Step Behind*, 1991, Condon, three selections: "Education Mama" "Schools and Teachers" "Students"

From *The Material Child*, 1993, Merry White, Chapter 4: "School in the Lives of Teens"

Johnson, Marcia L. and Jeffrey R. Johnson, Daily Life in Japanese High Schools National Clearinghouse, October 1996 Digest for U.S.-Japan Studies Ellington, Lucien Japanese Education National Clearinghouse.

Another helpful resource is Transcending Stereotypes, 1991, Intercultural Press Part II: Family and Society, Introduction, Imamura, 1943-76. Part III: Educational Cultural Transmission, Introduction, Finkelstein, p. 77-136.

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college - intercultural and interdisciplinary studies

Themes:

Japan's educational system places excessive pressure on families and young students to succeed and advance academically. This turns fathers into absent workaholics, mothers into "education mamas," and students into test-passers with little time for youthful activities and personal creativity. The consequence for the society and nation is a breakdown in the traditional values of community, family, and human relationships; and further, an inhibiting of independent thought and individual creativity.

The story of *The Family Game*:

The Numatas represent the stereotypical urban, upper-middle class Japanese family of the 1980s. The father is the hard-working, salary man with little time for his family; the mother is a sweet, simple, "education mama," who takes care of their small, high-rise apartment and sees that her two teen-age sons succeed in school. One of the boys, Shinichi, is a junior in the top high school, and the other, Shigeyuki, is an intelligent but unmotivated ninth grader, near the bottom of his class. The goal is to turn him around and to get him into the same prestigious high school that his brother attends. To do this he must pass the entrance exam. One more tutor, in an apparently long line of tutors, is hired. However, in this case, the tutor's unorthodox methods of physical discipline and human warmth and concern (what the boy's father has failed to provide) turn the boy around. Shigeyuki passes the exam and gets into the top high school, putting him on the track to a top college and a lifetime position with some major Japanese company.

Teaching:

The above summary suggests a simple, educational success story. But what appears on the surface to be a realistic if, at times, comic portrait of the modern urban "education family" is subtly turned into a satire exposing a cultural crisis in:

1. The loss of traditional values-of community, family, and human relationships - to the new values of the westernized, urbanized industrial and business oriented society;
2. The breakdown of the traditional, multi-generation family and the emergence of the smaller, isolated nuclear family of two parents and one or two children;
3. The failure of the highly competitive, examination obsessed Japanese education system.

The double edge provides the teacher and class with both a fairly realistic view of the family and educational system in modern Japan and a satirical basis for critical examination of those institutions. Further, the film invites the American viewers into cross cultural comparisons and contrasts. The problem for the teacher is to prepare the students to view the film as both quasi-document and critical satire.

Although *The Family Game* can be used alone, this unit suggests a three-week interdisciplinary and intercultural study of the Japanese family, educational system, and life of the teenager. In one school, during the first week, students in English and social studies classrooms viewed and discussed videos: "Suburban Tokyo High School Students," and from the faces of Japan series chosen by individual teachers, "Young Baseball Heroes," "The New Generation," "Beyond the Classroom," "The Entertainer," and "Cram School Teacher and his Students." Also, selected readings were assigned providing background information. During the second week classes were combined each period to view and discuss one reel of *The Family Game*. On Thursday evening, the entire film was shown to parents and students wishing to see it again. In Friday's combined classes, the film and selected scenes and motifs were reviewed. During the third week students returned to their individual English and social studies classrooms to work on subject area assignments and projects growing out of the first two weeks's studies.

The Family Game, study areas and questions:

The Food Motif --the film opens with close-ups of the family members eating food. The food motif carries through the film and into a climatic scene. What does food mean and represent in the traditional family order? What does the presentation and eating of food reveal about this family? What is the significance of the long table with all eaters on one side? How do the characters define themselves individually in relation to drinking and eating of food? What does the final climactic food scene suggest about this family and the "family game" in modern Japan? How does it relate to the total film and what has happened?

"My Home" -- The film focuses on the Numata apartment in the Tokyo High Rise Building. What is the apartment like? What does it reveal about their life-style and relationships? Considering an implied contrast with the traditional Japanese family home, an individual home with several generations under the same roof in a close-knit community of similar homes and families, what changes are implied and revealed in the modern Japanese family and society? Note the scene in which the young woman visits the mother and asks if she can move her chair to the other side of the table: Why does she do this? What happens immediately following? Note also long shots of the apartment complex juxtaposed with shots of industrial Japan: What does this setting suggest about the director's view of what is happening in modern Japan?

The Education Game: "Examination Hell"--Although we see the boys engaged in other

activities such as hobbies, games, talking to friends and girls, fighting, etc., the *center* of their lives is the school (240 days in the school year in contrast with our 180), *home work*, and preparation for the *examinations* required for acceptance into the best schools at each level. There is considerable pressure on them because acceptance to the "best" high school and the "best college is a major factor in lifetime employment. Although the school and classroom scenes are few and presented to reveal the director's satirical view of Japanese secondary education, we can draw some tentative conclusions concerning the nature and problems of Japanese education.

- What does the film reveal about the size of classes, the attitudes and behavior of the students, and the nature of classroom learning?
- What do the personal interests, hobbies, and daydreaming reveal about what is lacking in Japanese education?
- Is the family's concern about the poor academic performance of Shigiyuchi justified? Is their decision to hire a tutor justified? Why hire the tutor? What is his purpose?
- What are the motives and methods of the tutor? What relationship between him and Shigiyuchi develops? What is his attitude toward his "job" and his eventual success? Is he just another player in the education game?
- What are the implications of the final dinner scene as an indication of the tutor's real character and attitude? Is he a vehicle of the director's criticism of the education game? Or is he another object of the director's satire?
- What's the film's attitude toward the mother? Is she a shallow cartoon "Kyoiku Mama" or is she a more complex character, herself a victim of the education game?

The Family--The question is whether or not this satirical portrait of a family is representative of an emerging pattern in many Japanese families. Because satire works usually with the distortion of an identifiable basic situation and character types, we can assume a possible truth at the center of the work. The purpose of the satire is to get us to recognize and laugh at a problem that affects us in our lives. The difficulty for the outsider to Japanese culture, then, is to separate the cartoon from the realistic images and then to see through both to the truth within.

- What is the role of the father in this family? What is his relationship with his sons? What is the role of the mother in this family? What is her relationship with her sons? What is the film's attitude toward these parents? Critical? Sympathetic? Mixed?
- One other family is briefly presented (Shinichi's girlfriend's). What does their apartment, activities at the dinner table, and daughter's bedroom reveal about their life style and values?
- The final two scenes - the family dinner and the final scene with the boys "sleeping?" - are ambiguous statements about the nature and condition of family life in modern Japan. Interpret each of these scenes as comments on the quality, the problems, and the prognosis of family life.

Other Motifs--roller coasters, star gazing, sexual relations, "twilight," games: literal, psychological, social, the family game, the education game, the Japan game.

Students projects and papers:

Topics for student projects and papers include: character analyses, family roles and relationships, the tutor as an outsider to the family and the "education game", and as the vehicle of the director's view point (note the images used in the "twilight" scene). Also, is the boy's getting into the prestigious high school a "victory" or a defeat? And what is the meaning of the food motif through the film and the "Last Supper Food Fight" near the end?

Extensions of these projects can lead to further reading and research into areas such as

the changing Japanese family (from the traditional extended family of three to four families under one roof to the new, smaller nuclear family of only parents and one or two children in a small apartment); the strengths and problems of the Japanese education system and "examination Hell" as the key to getting into top schools and gaining opportunities for positions with large companies and corporations or even the government; and formal education versus the individual and creativity (the Japanese system is now making institutional changes to promote more individuality and creativity).

Finally, as one of the values in studying another country and culture is a better understanding of one's own, comparative studies of the Japanese and American educational systems, particularly in the areas of school in the life of the teenagers and pressures to get into top colleges, can be assigned or encouraged.

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