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Japanese Family Life with Kore-eda Hirokazu

Kore-eda Hirokazu (born Tokyo, 1962) is currently the leading Japanese director in the international film world. (In Japan, the family name Kore-eda comes first, followed by the personal name.) Kore-eda began his career as a film and TV director making documentaries, some of which focused on children and families. When he began to make feature films in 1995 his documentary experience and especially his close observation of his subjects was an important part of his practice. He has become identified with the kind of Japanese family dramas which slowly became known in the West during the 1950s, such as *Tokyo Story* (1953) directed by Ozu Yasujiro.

This doesn't mean that Kore-eda's films are old-fashioned in any way. Instead it means that he presents 'ordinary people' on screen with care and understanding and directs dramas in subtle ways. He uses newspaper stories and sometimes his own

experiences to place families in sometimes extraordinary situations and then tells their stories in affecting ways. In the 2011 film *I Wish*, two pre-teen brothers are separated when their parents divorce. One brother lives with his mother and his grandparents and one with his father more than a hundred miles away. The boys (played by real-life brothers) talk to each other on their 'phones every day but when can they meet? They learn that a new high-speed train (*Shinkansen*) is going to start running between their two cities on Kyushu, the third largest of Japan's islands. A rumour goes round that if you make a wish at the precise moment when two *Shinkansen* travelling in opposite directions pass each other, your wish will come true. With the help of their grandparents and schoolfriends, the brothers travel to the precise spot. This might sound cheesy but as the American critic Roger Ebert put it, "the film captures what feels like effortless joy in their lives".

One of Kore-eda's great gifts is in casting and directing children. His next film, *Like Father, Like Son* (2013) was prompted by thoughts about his own relationship with his young daughter. The film's narrative develops from the revelation, when they are six years old, that two baby boys were accidentally given back to the wrong mothers in the maternity ward. The architect's family is wealthy, but cold and formal. The shopkeeper's family is hand-to-mouth and chaotic, but warm and loving. Should the young boys be moved to their respective 'blood families' or remain where they are? In the 1960s and 1970s, this happened more often and then babies usually were returned to the blood family. Is that still a good idea? A temporary swap takes place and this forms most of the narrative.

It's perhaps worth mentioning that when *Like Father, Like Son* was in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, Steven Spielberg was the Chair of the Jury and he was involved in acquiring the rights to remake the film for American TV. This doesn't seem to have happened as yet but it does raise an important aspect of the appreciation of Japanese films in the West. We tend to recognise the more dramatic events in stories and when Hollywood remakes a Japanese film, the remake often fails to pick up on the nuances of Japanese culture. When Japanese films are shown in the UK those that are 'most Japanese' tend to be less well-

received. Kore-eda's films perhaps more often than not avoid this fate. He is the only current Japanese director who is both very popular in Japan and around the world. Admittedly, like all subtitled films, his films are still shown mainly in art cinemas, but his last Japanese film, *Shoplifters* (2018) won the major prize at Cannes and an Oscar-nomination as well as further prizes around the world. It was also written about by newspaper columnists in the UK, suggesting that this was the film we must see. *Shoplifters* is also about a family of sorts but its members are petty criminals living illegally in the city.

A film like *Shoplifters* or *Like Father, Like Son*, works because of Kore-eda's observational skills and attention to detail. He is a true humanist in presenting characters with both good and bad traits. There are no 'cardboard cut-outs' among his characters. For many audiences, his most affecting film is ***Our Little Sister***. This film is deeply embedded in Japanese culture and this is reflected in its origins as a *manga*. In Japan, reading 'graphic novels' as they are now called in the West or 'comic strips' in newspapers is a national pastime for all ages. There are *manga* for different age groups and for different specialised groups. *Umimachi's Diary* first appeared in the magazine *Monthly Flowers*. The story has continued with an episode every one or two years from 2006 to 2018. Kore-eda's film appeared after the first six episodes were published. The story is about three young women in their twenties who live together in their grandmother's house in the seaside town of Kamakura. Their parents are divorced and their father re-married. Their mother refused to stay in the house and they see her only rarely.

When the sisters go to the funeral of their father, they meet their stepsister, a young teenager. Recognising that she is unhappy they invite her to live with them. The film then interweaves the separate stories of the four sisters. Like many Japanese stories, it moves through the seasons and shows the sisters slowly developing and changing. We chose this film partly because of the setting and in particular the Seagull café and the beach but also because it shows many aspects of everyday Japanese life, some of which are on the surface distinctively different, but underneath perhaps very similar, to life in the UK. It is a cliché about Japan but there really is a contrast between tradition and

modernity, illustrated by the sisters wearing their kimonos on occasions in their traditional house, while the youngest sister happily plays football at school.

Kamakura is a famous resort town on Sagami Bay backed by mountains but only some 54kms from Tokyo, a rail journey of just under an hour. It was the capital of Japan in the 13th century and there are many shrines as well as the attractions of its beaches. It is also famous as the last resting place of Ozu Yasujiro and the area appears in several of his films and those of other Japanese directors.

When Kore-eda wrote a 'Director's statement' he wondered whether it was the passing of time in the town that was most important – the way in which it absorbs both the past and the future:

“I realised that to focus on and work up the troubled relationships between these human characters was not the right approach for this film.

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.”

That seems a Japanese way of approaching film as art.

Roy Stafford 27 November 2021