# MORE THAN JUST TOFU: EXAMINING KOREEDA HIROKAZU'S *STILL WALKING* IN RELATION TO THE JAPANESE "FAMILY DRAMA" GENRE

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Hirokazu Koreeda's film *Still Walking* begins with Toshiko Yokoyama (Kirin Kirin) and Chinami Kataoka (You) in the kitchen preparing vegetables for the family feast. Mother and daughter exchange cooking tips over the sound of carrots being grated, radishes being chopped, and sesame oil sizzling in the pan. The opening scene provides a portrait of the Yokoyama family that resembles ordinary family life in Japan. Natural light filters throughout the space of the set, creating a comforting, naturalistic vision of a typical family moment. The sound of chatter intermingling with that of cooking evokes a strong sense of nostalgia and sentimentality. This beguilingly typical scene of a lighthearted family affair, however, belies a darker undertone, which reveals itself following a conversation between the patriarch of the Yokoyama family, Kyohei Yokoyama (Yoshio Harada), and a neighbor (Haruko Kato) about aging. The elderly lady laments to her former family doctor that she can no longer eat anything but "cold noodles," perhaps indicating that her "time could be any day now."

Food, which starts out as a symbol of familiarity, rapidly becomes a metaphor for death. *Still Walking* tells the story of the Yokoyama family coming together to commemorate the death of the eldest son, Junpei, who died 15 years ago while attempting to save the life of another boy. In the opening scene, the contrast between cooked food and stale "cold noodles" represents the difference between the vitality of youth and the enervation of old age. For the elderly neighbor, food is now a barometer of age, and an omen of impending death. From its opening scene, *Still Walking* vacillates between portraits of idealized family life and moments that touch on broad themes such as aging, the inevitability of death, and memory.

It is because the film is so multifaceted that critics struggled to find a category to encapsulate it. Upon its release to universal acclaim, many hailed *Still Walking* as an homage to the acclaimed Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, who was known for his Shōshimin (family drama) films. Yet Koreeda has been quick to distance himself from Ozu in multiple interviews, preferring instead to associate his style with the "worldview" of another legendary filmmaker, Mikio Naruse, whose characters are "more openly anguished" (Lim). Dennis Lim, a film critic who has written commentaries on Koreeda's films, acknowledged as much, saying that Koreeda's characters are "pricklier and less reconciled" compared to Ozu's.

Indeed, *Still Walking* retains many of the conventions of the Shōshimin genre, albeit with significant variations. The focus of *Still Walking*, as many critics have pointed out,

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is unequivocally on the Japanese family. Through the setting of an intimate family gathering, Koreeda exposes underlying tensions among family members, revealing insecurities rooted in Japanese society and culture. Like Ozu's, Koreeda's style is contemplative and minimalist. Nonetheless, to say that this similarity in style defines *Still Walking* as a Shōshimin film is to misunderstand the genre. Ozu's Shōshimin films from the 1920s to the 1950s were interested in capturing portraits of members of the Japanese white-collar middle class as they endured the rapid environmental and social changes that accompanied this period of modernization (Joo 259). Contrastingly, Koreeda's film seems to be more concerned with the emotional struggles of people as they respond to the challenges of life and to the pain provoked by death.

**Making Tofu: Shōshimin in the style of Ozu**

Ozu once famously declared: "I only know how to make tofu. . . . I can make fried tofu, boiled tofu, and stuffed tofu. Cutlets and other fancy stuff, that's for other directors" (Schilling, "Re-examining Yasujiro Ozu on Film"). The late master's exaltation of the bland food reflects his preference for minimalist filmmaking—a style very much associated with Koreeda today. Ozu was famous for his introspective, contemplative, and humanistic style of filming. *Tokyo Story*, a film about an elderly Japanese couple travelling from a small town in southwest Japan to visit their children in Tokyo, is arguably the crowning jewel amongst the pantheon of Shōshimin films by Ozu. In the film, scenes unfold with effortless grace, transitioning from "pillow shots" of natural landscape to conversations between the characters. These pillow shots capture a still image of scenery, or an empty room, and are sustained for a period of four to five seconds. Apart from creating a "sense of calm and serenity," these shots create moments of pause, so that the audience can reflect in quietude upon the array of feelings exposed on screen (Schneider).

Ozu's films extensively explore the relationship between an environment and its people. The American film critic Paul Schrader contends that "the greatest conflict in . . . Ozu's films is not political, psychological, or domestic, but is, for want of a better term, 'environmental'" (35). Specifically, the Japanese concept of "zen," balance in the environment, was disrupted by rapid development during the 1950s. *Tokyo Story* shows how economic forces had intruded into the family sphere. A gulf emerges between the children, who are too busy with work in Tokyo to entertain their parents, and the elderly couple, who struggle to come to grips with these developments in society. In this sense, Ozu's work is more sociological than philosophical. His film is mainly concerned with the Japanese concept of "traditional oneness" at stake in a rapidly changing world (Schrader 35).

And yet, it would not be fair to dismiss Ozu's films as insular and completely unrelatable to a broader audience. In the words of the film critic Mark Schilling, Ozu's "genius was to transform everyday things into eternal truths, in ways immediately recognizable as utterly his own" ("Re-examining Yasujiro Ozu on Film"). Schilling has

rightly credited Ozu for being concerned with "eternal truths" since many of Ozu's themes, such as economic displacement and the emergence of an intergenerational gulf, are ideas that transcend historical and geographical contexts. Nonetheless, Ozu's films are ultimately about Japan specifically. These eternal truths are embedded within Japanese philosophy and the Japanese worldview. In the words of Schrader, "it is very difficult for a western audience to appreciate the *aware* of Ozu's themes and the *wabi* of his techniques" (34). *Aware* and *wabi* are both concepts from the Japanese worldview that refer to an acceptance of impermanence (Schrader 34). Ozu's characters respond to sweeping changes in a unique manner of restrained acceptance that would not be intuitively apparent to an audience not educated about Japanese culture.

**Is *Still Walking* an homage to Ozu?**

Despite Koreeda's reluctance to associate *Still Walking* with Ozu's Shōshimin, there are elements of his film that appeal more to a local audience then an international one. In one particular scene, the adults in the Yokoyama family reminisce about the past over a meal in the family home while the children play outside in the yard. Toshiko, the matriarch, mentions Junpei's widow, Yukie-San, and wonders how she is doing. Toshiko laments that if only Yukie-San had had children with Junpei, then perhaps she could have been invited to join the family. Now that Yukie-San has remarried, she can no longer visit. Following a moment of pause, Toshiko then goes on to remark: "Perhaps it's better that they did not have children. A widowed single mom is harder to marry off." Another pause ensues.

Koreeda employs no frills, nor makes any attempt to dramatize the dialogue surrounding the topic of re-marrying upon death, an act considered "immoral" in a Japanese context (Fuess 70). His characters demonstrate incredible restraint, which may not be distinguishable upon first glance. Yukari Yokoyama (Natsukawa Yui), the wife of the second son, Ryota Yokoyama (Hiroshi Abe), is silent and expressionless throughout the entirety of the conversation despite being a married widow herself. Here, the film critic A. O. Scott's commendation of Ozu for being a "master at evoking the feelings that his characters are conditioned not to express" explains this particular scene (Johnson). Yukari's composure provokes a strong sense of pathos for her predicament. She is the innocent bystander who unwittingly has to grapple with the collateral damage of her in-laws' insensitivity. The pauses accentuate the tension in the scene. They highlight a subtle conflict between the parents, who harbor a more conservative view on remarriage, and their daughter-in-law, who is eager to assimilate into the family, yet is rebuffed by their candor. The juxtaposition between the callousness of Toshiko's words and Yukari's composure also serves to criticize traditional Japanese attitudes towards remarriage. To Toshiko, it is perhaps "natural" to associate the worth of a woman with her eligibility, even to the extent of dismissing children as a burden if they hinder this endeavor. Through a seemingly unremarkable family conversation, Koreeda, like Ozu, is able to draw out complexities in the

relationship between Yukari and her in-laws and to expound on issues at the core of Japanese traditions.

Beyond the issue of remarriage, *Still Walking* implicitly criticizes the Japanese conception of family as a whole, referred to as "家" or *ie*. For the Japanese family, "Blood ties are not as important as the belonging to the household itself, this is the '*ie*'" (Caro-Oca and López-Rodrígu). By remarrying into another household, Yukie-San had her membership in the Yakoyama family revoked. Her absence from the scene suggests that she could no longer be invited back to the Yakoyama home for an event as private as the commemoration of the family's eldest born, even though she is the widow of Junpei. The characters' silent acceptance of Yukie-San's expulsion is perhaps reflective of a wider, more endemic problem of adhering too much to traditions at the expense of empathy. There is no consideration for how Yukie-San may feel about not being invited to a family gathering commemorating her own deceased husband.

Throughout the remainder of the film, the customs of the *ie* continue to yoke the characters to the past, preventing them from moving on. According to the film critics Caro-Oca and López-Rodrígu,

> the *ie* consists in a patriarchal conception of the family based on principles such as the hierarchy of the older, the continuity, the maintenance of the property, and the division of labor in terms of gender. The patriarch is the head of the *ie* and his role would be inherited by the firstborn male child. Within this system, the situation of the children was marked by their status as successor or not.

Ryota is thrust by an approximately 500-year-old Japanese tradition into the hot seat of "the successor" upon the death of his older brother (Sakata). His decision to pursue art instead of medicine becomes a major source of conflict with his father, Kyohei, who struggles in vain to find a suitable successor. Here, Koreeda is criticizing the rigidity of customary systems for their overemphasis on the collective family unit at the cost of valuing individual worth. In a society where family roles are strictly predefined by tradition, there is no space to accommodate deviations from the established norms.

Given the cultural specificity of many of Koreeda's claims in his film, it is no surprise that its universal appeal came as a surprise for the director (Schilling). Yet, it is precisely the "accidental" universal appeal of the film that has propelled its status beyond the genre of Shōshimin.

## In the Style of Koreeda

One of the most poignant scenes begins with a conversation between Toshiko and Ryota, mother and son, as they reminisce over a famous, now-retired Sumo wrestler known in his prime for grimacing in an exaggeratedly comical manner during a fight. What begins as nostalgic musing quickly turns into a passive-aggressive confrontation.

Ryota, following a short moment of pause, suggests to his mother that she should stop inviting Yoshio to join the Yokoyama family yearly in mourning because he "feels bad" for him. Yoshio is the boy who was saved by Ryota's elder brother, Junpei, before he drowned. Now obese and out of a job, Yoshio is mocked behind his back by the majority of the Yokoyama family for not living a life worthy of Junpei. Toshiko reveals, almost candidly, that she invites Yoshio to pay tribute to Junpei year-on-year precisely because it is painful for him to be constantly confronted with his guilt over being the survivor of a tragedy. Even though she acknowledges that Yoshio did not intend for Junpei to die saving him, "it makes no difference to a parent" and "not having someone to hate makes it all the worse" for her. The heightened juxtaposition between Ryota's expression of sympathy and disgust, as well as Toshiko's pained look of guilt and hatred, raises the moral dilemma at the heart of *Still Walking*. To what extent can we blame a grieving mother for harboring a deep-seated, almost vitriolic hatred towards an innocent victim?

Every twitch, gaze, and silent pause accentuates the tension in the scene, provoking immense discomfort in the audience. Certainly, we can sympathize with Toshiko's plight. No mother should have to mourn the death of her child. There is also something frighteningly true about her claim that hate somehow aids the grieving process. Perhaps having somebody to blame alleviates, to some degree, the guilt that all survivors of tragedy harbor. Still, we also recognize that Toshiko's cruelty in projecting her pain on the innocent Yoshio is deplorable. *Still Walking*'s worldwide appeal is a function of the relatability of these characters. Koreeda's characters are an unadulterated reflection of us viewers when stripped to a vulnerable core. They reveal that we are more complex than the binary categories of good or evil, selfless or selfish. Like these characters, and the Sumo wrestler of Ryota's childhood, we too are perpetually wrestling against our human nature, almost to a fault.

What is it about *Still Walking* that makes it so poignant, so accessible, so universal? Koreeda seems to have applied the same Ozu-inspired formula: "to "transform everyday things into eternal truths" (Schilling, "Re-examining Yasujiro Ozu on Film"). Yet, unlike Ozu's films, which had more of a culturally specific payoff, Koreeda's film resonates with an international crowd. The American critic Carson Lund insists that Koreeda's film "speaks volumes about human existence while being, with its generous doses of wry, modern humor, universally relatable" (Lund). Even the title of Lund's film review, "Kendall Square's Finest Hour Was Still Walking," credits this Japanese film for being a triumph for Bostonian cinema. The reason for its appeal lies in both Koreeda's distinctive technique and his motivation for making the film.

Although both Ozu and Koreeda apply a similarly contemplative style to their films, they have achieved it through different means. Ozu was well known for using pillow shots to provoke quiet reflection. Koreeda's style is encapsulated by the oxymoronic title of the film. It eschews stasis, opting for a more organic style of

filming that allows his characters to freely interact with the landscape. They are the bridge through which we access the rural village in Yokohama.

The places featured in the film are laden with sentimentality and provoke a powerful nostalgia in both the characters and the audience. Professor Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, an academic at Carleton University in Canada, uses the term "memory props" to refer to objects, places, and conversations that evoke nostalgia and create a "memory architecture." Toshiko and Ryota affectionately reminisce about a now-retired sumo wrestler. Images of childhood food—corn tempura, radishes, sushi—all trigger a longing for the past. A non-Japanese viewer who may never have encountered corn tempura would undoubtably still appreciate being reminded of the comfort of consuming childhood snacks. Even for an international audience, these memory props resonate with a universal yearning for the proverbial "good ol' days."

Even so, Koreeda's purpose was not simply to capture a snapshot of family life in Japan. Koreeda revealed in an interview with *Time Out* that he made *Still Walking* to pay homage to his late mother (Jenkins). The characters in *Still Walking*, particularly Tokshiko, were modeled after Koreeda's own kin. His characters are not archetypes of existing stereotypical personalities in a Japanese family. Rather, they represent an intimately realistic portrayal of Koreeda's own family life. In a subsequent interview with Schilling, Koreeda reflected that there was perhaps no way of distinguishing between a "domestic film" and a film for an "international audience." His model of "mother" "was everywhere." Ironically, in choosing to narrow the focus of the film to the psychological dimension through his characters, Koreeda has allowed for his film to appeal to a broader crowd. What began as a personal tribute became an international sensation because all mothers, regardless of the sociocultural context, share certain commonalities. We are still able to relate to Toshiko's romanticization of her son's memory, her painful grief over his death, and her inability to let go of a deeply entrenched hate, even if we cannot understand the implications of Junpei's death for the *ie*. There is something powerful about how, despite cultural-historical differences, all humans share certain primal, instinctive, and emotional needs. These we can identify in the characters on screen, who are partly Japanese, but wholly human.

**More Than Just Tofu**

> *I don't like films that have a social message, either fictional films or documentaries. It's all right if a film reflects something the maker has thought about and agonized about. But a message film doesn't come from that sort of place. The filmmaker thinks he has the answer. But the world doesn't work that way.*
>
> —*Hirokazu Koreeda*

The broader question evoked by Koreeda's *Still Walking* is best encapsulated by the man himself. Who decides if a film resonates: the director or the audience? It is clear

that Koreeda never intended for his films to have, broadly speaking, a universal message. Yet, in creating such an intimate portrait of family life, he has constructed a vision of a family that reflects our own. *Still Walking* reveals a relationship between the director and his audience, one that is both slightly antagonistic and mutually dependent. The director can delimit his film's scope, making it as personal, or sociological, or universal as he wants to, but it is the audience's intuitive response to the film that completes it.

While Ozu's films do, to some extent, touch on themes that can appeal to an audience outside Japan, the essential difference is that Ozu was primarily interested in telling stories from a Japanese perspective. Any universal relatability is at best incidental, given that Ozu intentionally retained layers that explicitly excluded an audience not privy to all the eccentricities and peculiarities of Japanese culture. Koreeda certainly operates on a similar paradigm, alluding, at times, to culturally specific claims. His film is probably a variation of the Shōshimin, but is better classified on its own terms, as a "message film," one that at its core is about the quintessential human experience. When Lim refers to Koreeda's characters as "pricklier and less reconciled" (Lim) than Ozu's, he highlights Ozu's primary fascination with capturing the emotional struggle of people in face of tragedy (Schilling). Koreeda evokes culturally specific ideas only as a means to express his message authentically and compellingly. His version of Shōshimin, as a result, resonates with a global audience in an intimate manner despite its cultural specificity.

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