

# Visions for Japanese Society: An Examination of Japanese Postwar Occupation Period Film

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Kaitlin Smith<sup>1</sup>, Michael Gibbs<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student Contributor, University of Denver

<sup>2</sup>Advisor, Department of History, University of Denver

## Abstract

By following the films of directors Akira Kurosawa (黒澤明), Yasujiro Ozu (小津安二郎), Masaki Kobayashi (小林正樹), and Shohei Imamura (今村昌平) around occupation period Japan, unified visions for Japanese society are formed as it transitions from wartime into the postwar era. Each of these films conveys a sense of rapid change in society, external pressures and foreign influence, a daily struggle, and immediate postwar suffering. Not only can these films be seen across a wide variety of styles, but they also each approach these issues with immediacy and show tentative outlooks for how Japan functioned and felt for most people in the postwar period. This difference in style can be contributed to the director's diverse backgrounds and what they were influenced by in the time that began making films, which further complicate our understanding of Japanese society as it transitioned into the postwar era.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Film is a medium that allows the audience to connect to situations and ideas differently than written text. Specifically, concerning this paper, film has a way of highlighting aspects to better our understanding of the occupation period. It gives us a different perspective on the material than in a book or newspaper. Akira Kurosawa (黒澤明), Yasujiro Ozu (小津安二郎), Masaki Kobayashi (小林正樹), and Shohei Imamura (今村昌平) are key directors during the occupation period and are crucial in more deeply interacting with various interpretations of the time. They highlight ideals, attitudes, and actions encompassed within their films which makes them crucial as sources of knowledge. While each of these directors has distinctive styles and artistic focuses within their films, the filmmakers present a unified vision for Japanese society as it transitions from wartime into the postwar era. Each conveys a sense of rapid change in the society, external pressures and foreign influence, and a daily struggle and postwar suffering, though they are depicted a little differently by each director. They are united by these common themes that are conveyed but are divided by what the directors chose to focus on in their films. Their difference in perspective presented in their films may be affected by their difference in background as people, and the period they grew up and began making films.

## 2 BACKGROUND

This paper focuses on films surrounding the occupation period of Japan, also known as the Allied Occupation of Japan (連合国占領下の日本). This period starts at the conclusion of WWII in 1945 and goes up until the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which returned Japan's sovereignty in 1952. The occupation effort was supposed to be international but was largely run by U.S. forces under General Douglas MacArthur. These forces, led by General MacArthur, were known as the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP). SCAP was responsible for overseeing the new constitution's promulgation in 1947, increased land reforms, changing the education system, breaking up the zaibatsu (business conglomerates), and changing the emperor's position to largely a ceremonial status. Historians have found it useful to divide the occupation period into three parts: the initial phase to punish and reform Japan after the war, the "Reverse Course" which shifted the focus to suppressing dissent and created efforts towards building up the Japanese economy, and the signing of a formal peace treaty and the creation of an enduring military alliance (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty) with the United States<sup>1</sup>. It is this period of intense change that these films were created and reflecting upon.

Focusing on films from Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, Masaki Kobayashi, and Shohei Imamura gives a large glimpse at the narratives being furthered within

Japanese film at this time. The three Kurosawa films that I focus on in this paper are *Drunken Angel* (1948)<sup>2</sup>, *Stray Dog* (1949)<sup>3</sup>, and *Seven Samurai* (1954)<sup>4</sup>. *Drunken Angel* was the first released of all the films I am examining in this paper. *Drunken Angel* follows the story of a doctor, named Sanada, who treats a member of the local yakuza, named Matsunaga, after he was shot by a member of a rival gang. Sanada diagnoses Matsunaga with tuberculosis during this encounter and throughout the film they become friends. The climax of this film comes when Matsunaga fights with a former friend, who was also a member of the yakuza, and is stabbed and killed. This film ends with Sanada upset that Matsunaga wasted his life when he was beginning to turn it around. *Stray Dog* takes place amidst a hot summer in Tokyo when Murakami, a new detective, has his pistol stolen. Murakami goes undercover to try and find it on the illicit arms market but none of his leads come up with anything. Meanwhile, his gun is being used to kill people throughout the city and the person perpetrating the crimes is identified as a man named Yusa. Murakami eventually catches him, retrieves his gun, and arrests him. This film ends with Satō, Murakami's boss, telling him that he will become less attached to cases as he goes forward into the future. Finally, *Seven Samurai* is Kurosawa's most notable jidaigeki (時代劇), period film, that is further categorized as a Sengoku-jidai (戦国時代), as it was set during the Sengoku or "warring states" period of Japanese history. This film follows the story of a farming village that hired seven rōnin (浪人), "masterless samurai," to combat the groups of bandits that steal their crops after harvest season. One of the most impactful parts of this movie is the dialogue at the end when one of the remaining rōnin says (when translated to English), "In the end, we lost this battle too. The victory belongs to the peasants, not to us" as the surviving samurai look at the funeral sites of the other rōnin who were hired<sup>4</sup>. The first two of these films were released during the occupation period whereas the last one was released shortly after the occupation period ended.

I focus on four Ozu films in this paper: *Late Spring* (1949)<sup>5</sup>, *Tokyo Story* (1953)<sup>6</sup>, *Equinox Flower* (1958)<sup>7</sup>, and *Good Morning* (1959)<sup>8</sup>. *Late Spring* follows the story of a widowed father and his only daughter. The father's sister believes it is time for his daughter to marry and the father sets up a meeting for an arranged marriage for his daughter. She ends up agreeing to the marriage and the end of the movie shows the father's overwhelming loneliness. *Tokyo Story* follows an older retired couple visiting their children and their families in Tokyo. The children, except for their daughter-in-law, did not make time for their parents and instead decided to send them to an onsen (温泉), or hot springs, in Atami. Shortly after they return to Tokyo, the older couple decides to return home as to not be a burden, and on their way back

the mother falls sick. She passes away which "forces" the family to come to Onomichi and the funeral. After the funeral, only the daughter-in-law remains but soon after leaves the father figure alone. *Equinox Flower* follows the story of a father who works as a businessman and is giving advice to his friend's daughter. Little did he know that the advice he was giving to his friend's daughter also applied to his daughter, but he took a much different stance. His wife and daughter set up a trick to get the father in agreeing to his daughter's marriage. He refuses to go to the wedding but then goes to visit the couple after they wed in Hiroshima. Finally, in *Good Morning*, two young boys decide to protest by not talking until their parents and grandparents purchase a TV set. This film looks at the world through the eyes of the two children and makes a poke at postwar consumerism in Japan. Both Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu are known as innovators within Japanese film and are perceived to be part of the cannon for film within the country.

The Kobayashi film that I focus on is *The Human Condition* (1959)<sup>9</sup>. I look at Part I of the trilogy which is often titled *No Greater Love* and is based on the first two volumes of the much larger six-volume novel by Junpei Gomikawa. The overall trilogy follows the character of Kaji, a pacifist who goes between the roles of a labor camp supervisor, an Imperial Army soldier, and then eventually a Soviet prisoner of war. Throughout this journey, Kaji questions his morals and tests the strength of his resolve to stay true to his values. The first part begins with Kaji's marriage to his love Michiko. They move to a mining operation assignment in Manchuria to receive an exemption for military service and begin to make changes for the Chinese prisoners that he oversees. Kaji implements humane practices to improve both labor conditions and productivity, which results in clashes with the bureaucracy and those with power in the camp, such as the foremen and the Kenpeitai, imperial military police. Several prisoners in the camp are killed because of attempts to escape. Ultimately his efforts to grant autonomy to the POWs are undermined by scheming officials, resulting in the electrocution of several prisoners and the beheading of others accused of attempted escape. When Kaji tries to fight against this, he is tortured by the people who he went against with power in the camp and is then drafted into the army when previously promised otherwise.

Finally, the Imamura film that I examine below is *Vengeance is Mine* (1979)<sup>10</sup>, which is also the latest film released of the ones I have chosen to discuss. This film follows Iwao Enokizu, a charismatic serial killer who is seeing his life through a series of flashback sequences throughout the movie. The screenplay was adapted from a novel based upon the Japanese serial killer Akira Nishiguchi and the story follows a fictionalized version of what may have happened. Many different narratives

are interplaying to show how this individual, born into a very Catholic family became someone who is killing without remorse. He tricks and befriends people for his gain and kills them after they are no longer useful to him. He is eventually turned in to the police by a prostitute and the narrative jumps back to the present. This film ends with the result of Enokizu being executed and cremated. The last scene shows Enokizu's father and wife traveling to the peak of a mountain to spread his ashes, however, when his father throws Enokizu's bones, they remain hanging in the air. This film was not released during the occupation period but responds to it in very interesting ways, including blatant violence, as it was able to pass the occupation censors in ways that a few of the others were unable to.

### 3 SHARED DEPICTIONS ACROSS FILMS

Kurosawa, Ozu, Kobayashi, and Imamura present a somewhat unified vision for Japanese society as it transitions from wartime into the postwar era. Each film is united by how rapid change in Japanese society is conveyed during this period. One of these rapid changes are the SCAP policies imposed and the increase of civil and human rights. In *Drunken Angel*, the doctor gives a lecture on his increased civil rights and in *Stray Dog*, the woman that Murakami follows at the beginning says that he is "violating her civil rights" in a very mocking and condescending way. And while these new policies were used as a point of humor in a few of the films, it is inarguable that there was tension and drama that accompanied society changing around people going about their daily lives. A sense of modernity, or cultural modernism, was also developed due to society changing so rapidly. An example of this is in Ozu's *Good Morning* when the young boys always go over to the neighbor's house to watch TV or how washing machines become increasingly more prominent within the community pictured. These fast changes played a large role in how rapid the change in society was conveyed. Another way this is demonstrated is through the undermining of authority. This is seen in *Late Spring* in reference to the younger daughter who tells her father that they can find their own love and that it is their right to do so. Another example is the need to trick the father in *Equinox Flower* for his blessing, despite his daughter and her partner's ability to marry without his consent or approval. These rapid changes led to nostalgia, for all ages were reminiscent of the society they were a part of and support of the direction it was headed.

Another way that these films provide a united vision is through how external pressures and foreign influence are conveyed. In *Drunken Angel*, there is a strong American Influence as the gangsters themselves are meant to represent Americans and the Occupation Forces, even so far as using makeup and western clothes for the

yakuza to appear that way. More outward influences are the cabaret, the American style of music playing within it, and the use of roman letters to mark it. This film indirectly and directly critiques the government's policies and their relationship with SCAP and occupation forces. In Kurosawa's film *Seven Samurai*, American influence is criticized in the character and actions of the bandits who take from the common people whenever they want; the peasants say they "can kill defeated samurai but not bandits," further drawing out that analogy that they can destroy the system of social structure but cannot avoid foreign influence and pressure from the United States. External pressures and foreign influence are also conveyed through the use of English in the films. This can be seen in nearly all of them, from the young boy studying English in *Tokyo Story* to the prostitute using American slang in *Stray Dog*, to Murakami to Enokizu's use of English and that he was an interpreter for occupation forces. All of these elements are seen to present a united vision of how external pressures and foreign influence are conveyed in the transition between wartime and postwar periods.

One of the final ways that these filmmakers are united in how they convey their vision is the depiction of daily struggle and postwar suffering. Both Ozu's *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story* end with great loneliness portrayed by the fathers of each story while watching the water and tides. Many of these films also show some sort of compromise, during the transition and occupation, whether that be generational differences causing conflict which must be overcome or rather, given in to, changing social status, or changing ideals; the hiding of emotions conveys this daily struggle. In Ozu's film, the style of females covering their faces and angling them down is very distinct, reinforcing this idea but also portraying a closing barrier between people at this time as the war itself was so emotional for many people.

Quite a few of the films deal with trust, or lack thereof, in some fashion. This is in part to show the complexity of the time and what people were having to manage, as well as the injustices that people would have to overcome. Part of these injustices that led to daily suffering were food shortages and disease. This can be viewed in *Drunken Angel* as the doctor goes around treating those who suffer from war illnesses, such as tuberculosis, then going to the black market to buy more alcohol for himself. Food shortages can be seen in *The Human Condition* as Kaji's wife is using rations for food and flour whereas others steal it. These aspects play greatly into the struggle that everyday individuals had to experience.

Exploitation and racial hostility also fall within this category of postwar suffering and struggle that people would be confronted with daily. I use the term exploitation in reference to not only the labor camps seen in *The Human Condition* but the exploitation of certain Japanese

ideals taken by SCAP and the occupation forces, which were representing new ideals but being presented as prior beliefs. For example, in *Equinox Flower*, the father says to “do as you wish, you don’t have to listen” to his daughter in response to her wanting to get married. This interaction is in response to an occupation policy taking away the power of the family unit from the patriarch and making gender relations more equitable. Even though this is in response to a changed policy, the father tries to play it off as something that he would have already believed for everyone other than his children as shown through his support of his daughter’s friend’s fake relationship that he believed to be real.

One of the aspects of failed reintegration, a daily struggle shared with many people, is when Murakami wandered around in his military uniform after being told to look helpless and desperate enough to need a gun. This also plays into “humanism” used in *The Human Condition* and forced perceptions or beliefs on society. By not addressing certain issues or aspects related to the war, denial and failure filled this void and worsened the “culture of defeat” and *kyodatsu*, or post-war malaise, experienced by the larger society.

The final way that filmmakers have a united vision of postwar suffering is the struggle of war justification versus criticism of the war. Large groups of people looked to justify their actions after the war to give the fighting a purpose however, an even larger group of people denounced many of the facets and institutions that contributed to the war, such as the military and imperialism. It was a popular rebellion against the status quo during the war and an embrace of the occupation forces who looked towards demilitarization as the main objective. It is in this sentiment, these ambiguities, and multiple attitudes that are present in the films that the directors unite their depiction of daily struggle and postwar suffering in Japan.

#### 4 SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF DIVISIONS

A division in the unified vision of the transition between wartime and the postwar period is what the directors chose to focus on in their films. Kurosawa and Imamura are very similar in that they did not shy away from showing the “underbelly of Japanese society” and the parts of life which would have been widely hidden or out of focus for certain audiences. By making it a focal point of their films, the focus towards lower classes and social outcasts is given attention. This would not have been highlighted as much in Ozu films as his focal point or character was, often, of a higher class viewing how they were dealing with the transition of power; whereas, Kurosawa and Imamura provide very human, messy, or unsettling characters and scenes set within the postwar society.

Another division is seen between Kobayashi and Imamura as they focus heavily on morality or moral confusion, ethical dilemmas, and implications lasting long after that given scene or moment in time. Kobayashi places a lot of pressure on morality and ethics of violence within *The Human Condition* as Kaji navigates his relationship and the role he plays in the actions taken towards the prisoners of war and prostitutes as well as the military and his superiors in Manchuria and Japan. Kobayashi presses the idea that nothing is simply “black and white” or clear-cut when some people are fighting or protesting the system in place and others are either complacent or encourage it. Imamura highlights the larger implications of these situations more. The final scene of *Vengeance is Mine* struck me as one full of implications. Enokizu’s bones freezing when his father and wife threw them off the mountain painted the picture that his father and wife would never be truly free of Enokizu or the actions that he had taken in his lifetime. His bones froze and stayed in their minds to remind them that they played a part in what he became, and that burden would remain with them. In this case, Imamura gives implications not only for the crimes committed by Enokizu during his lifetime but also with the people around him.

Kurosawa and Kobayashi also have a unique deviation as they both show that regular people are capable of committing crimes and violence in bad situations. One of the greatest examples of this is in *Stray Dog* in the second to last scene where Murakami and Yusa become indistinguishable, and the audience realizes that Murakami could have very easily been in the same place as Yusa found himself, as they were both former soldiers. It is also within *Stray Dog* that Murakami strongly holds the belief that there is “no such thing as a bad man, just bad situations” which also furthers the idea that no one was safe from experiencing violence<sup>3</sup>. Detective Sato at the end of the film also states that there are many more guys like Yusa, implying that this story is bound to repeat itself during the occupation. In Kobayashi’s *The Human Condition*, this capability is seen when viewing the character of Chen throughout the first two parts of the film. Initially, Chen is loyal to Kaji and the ideals that he was trying to impose within the labor camp in Manchuria but becomes swayed by a prostitute. As a result, he becomes part of the plot to release prisoners from the camp and kills himself by throwing himself against the electric fence as the plan fell apart. This is a character who was coerced into picking a side and forced to act against the Japanese, no matter his relationship with Kaji. His actions were supported by the supervisors of the labor camp, but the moment they were not, Chen was implicated as an enemy and paid the consequences because of this lost trust.

Ozu provides a slightly different outlook from the shared vision too as he focuses on generational divisions, Japanese domestic life, dissolution of the tradi-

tional Japanese family, and domestic disputes. These are not nearly as common in the films of the other directors though interesting family dynamics could also be examined in Imamura's *Vengeance is Mine*. By focusing on the family unit, Ozu provides a different perspective than Kurosawa and Kobayashi specifically and focuses on a class dynamic that was undergoing large changes as occupation policy was set in place. To sum up, each of these filmmakers shows a slight divide from the unified vision of the transition between wartime and the postwar period based on their choice of where to let the audience's focus lay.

The perspectives of the filmmakers are fundamentally the same which is fascinating to view with how each film was influenced by censorship from the occupation. That being said, there are some differences in their perspectives, but they convey a very similar mood and feeling. Each director had a slightly different relationship to western cinema and Hollywood conventions. Kurosawa was strongly influenced by western cinema not only in the conventions he used but also in the stories to which he gave light. Ozu, on the opposite side of the spectrum, did not conform to Hollywood conventions and standards, but instead, created his own to better get his story across. Each director with their films had to abide by the censorship imposed within SCAP policy, but each would push the limits of what they could show or add things that they could get away with, in their way. This can be viewed in Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* with the inclusion of the cabaret, roman letters, American music, and clothing and makeup that the actors wore. The inclusion of prostitutes and black-market liquor would have also not been strongly liked by the SCAP, forcing changes upon these films, but they were not made to be changed. Ozu's *Late Spring* also used roman letters in the form of the Coca-Cola sign which could also be seen in *Equinox Flower* at the bar where the father and his employee go to see his friend's daughter. *Vengeance is Mine* came at a period where occupation censorship was becoming more lenient and so Imamura gets away with more explicit references towards foreign influence in Japan and his opinion on it. This is examined in Enokizu's time with the occupation and Imamura shows occupation vehicles with American flags and uniforms accosting people in the fields and seducing and leading away a woman. English phrases are also used in this film, but short phrases would escape censorship here and there such as the American slang the prostitute uses in *Stray Dog* or the children speaking to each other or doing homework in Ozu's *Good Morning*.

For both Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* and *Stray Dog*, final scenes that did not match the film's tone were added, seemingly forced by the censorship policy. The stark difference between the last two scenes hints at an alternate ending that is much darker than the final

scene of both of these films. By including the hospital scene in *Stray Dog* and the walk with the young woman in *Drunken Angel*, the mood and tone of the film switch in favor of the censors who would have been screening the film for a more positive outlook. Despite these censorship changes, the level of unity and themes across the films is fascinating. It not only makes us wonder how these themes would have been changed if there was no censorship of film but also if these "slips" and references in the censorship were allowed to be shown – what was barred from the public audience and what films and stories were not released because of it.

## 5 ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR'S BACKGROUND

The directors' difference in background and the time that they grew up in may account for their difference in perspective presented in their films. Ozu was part of the great power generation and he served in the army. He was born, joined the film studio, and started directing all before WWII began. He was participating in Japanese society before the occupation so he could make these contrasts between life before and after the war. This background is much different from the other film directors. Kurosawa, on the other hand, got his job in the Great Depression and was never drafted into the military. Kurosawa was greatly influenced by western cinema whereas Ozu did not conform to Hollywood conventions. Kurosawa's films were also unique as he did not have the same military experience as Ozu and focused on different classes than Ozu did throughout their films. This being said, Kurosawa started directing in 1943, shortly after the war began in the pacific theatre but was at a studio before WWII broke out.

Kobayashi was part of the wartime generation. He was born during WWI and then joined a studio in 1941 at the beginning of WWII. In comparison to the other three directors, Kobayashi was almost immediately drafted after graduating from university and he was a prisoner of war in Okinawa for Occupation forces towards the end of the war. He did not begin directing films until 1952 and these experiences and sentiments of the war and the military are experienced within his film, *The Human Condition*. Lastly, Imamura is part of the post-war/occupation generation. He did not even join a studio, let alone start directing until the American occupation was already in effect. He was only a teenager when the war began and was influenced as he grew up by the occupation forces and foreign influence seen in Japan after the war. Imamura also drew inspiration from Kurosawa's films which are comparable when you look at certain elements such as rebelling against the status quo to right some injustice or the unsettling and "real" human nature conveyed in both directors' films. Each of these various backgrounds as well as the generation that they were raised impact their

perspective and how they go about conveying this in their films.

## 6 CONCLUSION

While Ozu, Kurosawa, Kobayashi, and Imamura each have distinctive styles and focuses within their films, they present a unified vision for Japanese society as it transitions from wartime into the postwar era. Each director conveys a sense of rapid change in the society, external pressures and foreign influence, and a daily struggle and postwar suffering, though they are each depicted a little differently in each film. They are united by these common themes that are conveyed but are divided by what the directors choose to focus on. Largely, this difference in perspective presented in their films is because of their difference in background as people and the various times that they grew up and began making films in. By examining Japanese post-WWII occupation period film, many visions for Japanese society are presented. And though many of them are unified in key themes experienced by Japanese people, each film and each director bring another aspect to the larger picture when viewing how Japan functioned and felt for most people in the postwar period. Each of these visions, when corroborating with and against other interpretations, provides a deeper and more complex understanding of Japanese society as it transitioned from wartime into the postwar era.

## 7 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

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