

**Representations and Reflections:
Japanese Youths as Constructors of their own Realities in the Filmic Medium.**

**Doan Morgan Vassaf
MA Candidate in childhood studies at Rutgers University**

Conceptions of Childhood

It is only recently that childhood and youth culture have been seen as multifaceted and crucial to an integrated understanding of anthropology. However, the term ‘childhood’ can be a tenuous concept, as social categorizations differ widely. Although young people do create their own semi-individualised sub-cultures, particularly around specific cultural products, from an ideological and indeed legal standpoint they are marginalized. Even though they can be seen as being ‘protected’, adults have power over them, as while they may be able to articulate their views, they cannot legally act towards realizing them. In Japan, Tomiko Yoder comments that youths have no way of defending themselves against the more powerful social groupings of adults, who impose their behavioural norms. Yet what happens when those dominant adult groups disappear?

This paper focuses on representations of the social and interpersonal development of Japanese children constructing their own reality without the assistance of adults, in two contemporary films: *A Gentle Breeze in the Village* and *Nobody Knows*. The main questions to be addressed are: Can childhood as a concept exist without the presence of adults? What do these portrayals of transition tell us about Japanese conceptions of childhood and youth? What cultural ideologies of children as independent agents are codified within these films?

Through children film can question conventional master-narratives or cultural norms. Three such master narratives are prominent in the films. The first is ‘social change’ and a critique of modernity. The second ‘The group versus the individual’ is

an underlying social tension within Japanese society, as it feeds into broader issues of individualism versus individuality. *Kosei* (individuality, the ability to develop personal character) is idealized; *Kojinshugi* (individualism) has a negative connotation implying selfishness.

The third, ‘*uchi* versus *soto*’, is a critical underlying paradigm, regulating everything from family dynamics, to schooling, to work-places. It embodies “self and society”; literally it is the relationship between inside and outside in terms of the group identity. *Uchi* denotes the people and customs of a group and within one’s *uchi* can be smaller groupings. Conversely, *soto* means ‘outside, external or public’ and is in a state of flux, as when one’s *uchi* grows, one’s classification of what is *soto* invariably shrinks. This is apparent in the transition between childhood and adulthood, as one transitions from one’s *uchi* (immediate family and childhood friends) to *soto* (the outside, world).

Heather Montgomery said that independence is not a goal of Japanese child-rearing. To some extent this is right, as independence as the West understands it is not a positive feature within Japanese society, however, interdependence and individuality are. In the two films, self reliance through interdependence is the main catalyst of the narrative.

Typically in Japan childhood is seen as a safe environment, in which children as young as two-and-a-half are allowed to explore the world in groups and from primary school on walk or commute by train together. This approach allows children to build their *uchi* groupings, as well as their interdependence. Familial relations such as *oniisan* (elder brother) and *oneesan* (elder sister) are incorporated into the child’s vocabulary in order to build their conceptions of interpersonal relations.

Takeo Doi put forward the notion of the bond that permeates Japanese society, which he classified as *Amae*. Although simplistic, this notion cannot be dismissed. In essence, *Amae* is 'passive love', or seeking indulgence. In a sense it is a way of controlling children, leading to a sense of belonging that far outlasts the age of youth. The concept of freedom is centred around the freedom to depend on others.

The 'traditional' family structure rests on the principle of *ie*, which Joy Hendry proposes loosely represents the feudal definition of 'house', the defining characteristic of which is filial piety and duty to one's elders. Although the *ie* system was legally disbanded in 1947, Hendry argues that its underlying principles pervade the nuclear families, although this tradition and that of multi-generational families is in decline in urban areas. Merry White's more extreme view of family structure defines the minimal modern family as mother and child.

An emphasis on 'duty' and a certain rigidity of 'freedom' is evident within the normative Japanese upbringing. As children transition to youth, they are pressured to achieve the right grades to get into the next stratum. Both films take place within this developmental period of the child's life, where in normal circumstances they would begin to separate from their (biological) families and spend more time interacting with their peer groups and friends.

Senpai/kohai pervades Japanese society, from preschools through the education system to the work-force. Within this system the elder takes the younger under their wing, and teaches them what is needed to survive within their particular world. This system is traceable to the custom of village youth organizations (*Wakamono Nakama*), in which the older youths in the village were responsible for organizing the activities of the younger generation. These peer groups take on a rudimentary family dynamic, since no matter the ability of the individual, children

move up through the education system in the groups they started in, mirroring the *ie* system.

Learning to be part of the 'group' is a vital aspect of early Japanese education. From preschool on, the youth's sense of self is built around their place within the group system. Parents take no part in socialising students, instead that is left to the school. This mentality of the individual's desires being secondary to the group runs throughout schooling and the work place.

Lois Peak comments that the peer group is "the unsympathetic force to which the child must submit" and "to escape or rebel is to sever the social contact with those who provide daily companionship and the warmth of social life". Although she classifies peer relations as unsympathetic, within the films analysed one can see the opposite.

In creating their own worlds, youth modify their elders' conceptions of social norms, fusing it with their own ideologies. In a way they use privacy and friendships as ways of defending against social pressure. In creating new opportunities for themselves, youths as constructors of their own realities constitutes the paradigm that is played out in the films. The child's point of view, however, is presented through a medium that is created by adults. It could be argued that when children are taken out of the 'adult community' they lose their identity as 'children', thus creating their own self reliance. In essence they have to become agents of their own destiny.

Filmic Analysis

Film negotiates meaning, it bridging gaps (e.g. rural/urban or across different societies). For the anthropologist, films can be used as viewing glasses into particular worlds representing differing cultures, albeit mediated through the filmmaker's vision. It should be noted that representations within film are based as much on the

viewers' perceptions of the medium itself as on what the 'authors' have encoded in the films.

Children's perceptions of the changing world have been the subject of Japanese films since the 1930's. *Shomin-Geki*, (effectively a slice of family life film) saw its heyday with Ozu's films in the 30's-50's, the earliest being *I Was Born But...* (1932). Such films tell narratives from children's perspectives in order to utilise them as reinforcements of cultural tropes that are important to the daily minutiae of society.

The two contemporary films chosen for analysis *A Gentle Breeze* and *Nobody Knows* espouse particular notions of childhood and youth that are specific to Japan: children caring for other children; children allowed to roam alone; and familial hierarchical structure. Within the films it is peer relations that help transition the *soto* of being outside to the *uchi* of being inside the group. Both films are set within a semi-fictionalised world, yet they espouse their authors' views on society.

A Gentle Breeze In the Village

The director of *A Gentle Breeze In the Village*, Noburhiro Yamishita, has carved a niche for himself portraying lackadaisical youth trying to find their place in modern Japanese society. The premise of the film is how an outsider from Tokyo integrates himself into the interdependent group life of the village through peer relations, or in other words from *soto* into *uchi*.

The first line, said by Soyo (the protagonist), is: "Our primary and middle schools share a building. We are like a family". This is crucial to understanding the film, as the children are related not biologically, but through social dynamics. As Paul Spencer notes, formal systems of age stratification can bear a strong resemblance to those of 'traditional' kinship models.

Within this social family, the children are given almost complete autonomy by the adult community, even the youngest being allowed to wander in groups outside the village at night and the oldest around Tokyo, the effect of which is group cohesion. This freedom is given almost as a quid pro-quo for their non-interference with adult society.

Life in the village for the children has developed into a close-knit, family-like structure, reflecting *tomodachino yoona* (like friends) relationship. This family-like structure emulates the backbone of family organization within modern Japan, a paradigm that is evident in the dialogue and plot. As there are only six children in the village, the curriculum is shared. In such cases, the children would be partially responsible for their own learning.

There is a marked difference between the Soyo we see at the beginning of the film and at the end. At first, Soyo acts like a house-mother in a boarding school as she organizes events for the village children, taking care of the younger ones. In the first scene Soyo washes a 1st grader's underwear. Such actions can be viewed as a reflection of both the minimal structure of the Japanese family as mother and child, and that of older children sometimes taking over in the socialisation process of younger children. However by the end of the film, Soyo, having left the confines of the 'traditional' village, is separated from both her biological and social family, and is firmly rooted in peer groups centred around her new school in an urban environment.

Nobody Knows

The film *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo shiranai*), was written and directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, a director who started his career making documentary films and is known for realism within his feature films. Although the film was storyboarded, he

allowed for improvisational shots with the children to lend to the documentarial aspect.

In 1987 a mother abandoned her five children in an apartment to be with her new boyfriend. This was the premise for the film. Although an extreme case, there have been precedents within the last few decades, and Muriel Jolivet notes that in Japan there is a baby helpline, used predominantly for venting frustration at young children's behaviour.

Within both the film and the true life event it is the oldest boy (Akira), aged 13, who takes control of the family (his siblings aged 5, 7 and 11) when the mother leaves. Here White's conception of the basic family structure (that of a mother and child) is overturned. Effectively, this film is documenting a real life case in which a Japanese male youth flies in the face of the 'traditional family roles'. Although it might at first seem that Akira is fulfilling only the father's 'role' within the family, in terms of the traditional Japanese family he is actually fulfilling the mother's role (paying bills, looking after the children, shopping).

This interdependent relationship correlates with Markus and Kitayama's observation that youths in Japan construct their identities around their social compatriots as part of the normative values of the culture. In the film, as the children learn to cope, their individual personalities are slowly amalgamated in a desperate need to survive. This is part of the reaction to the social malady they are in, for it is reasonable to assume that without interdependence they would fall apart. Akira specifically says to one of the few allies (herself young) that the reason they are living alone in squalor is so that they will not be split up, implying a fear of intervention by social services.

It is only when Akira shirks his responsibilities to the group, moving towards independence by making friends his own age, thereby ignoring his duties as caretaker, that the family starts to lose the group cohesiveness that had allowed them to survive. It could be argued that it was Akira's move away from familial interdependence that caused the death of the youngest child.

The setting of the film and the surrounding mise-en-scene is breathtakingly claustrophobic. It captures the innocence and fragility of the four children, yet at the same time thrusts them into an all-too-real world of bills, lack of food and social deprivation. There is a tangential fragility and grounded 'realism' within the film's ambiance.

This film can be seen as a social commentary of the depredation and breakdown of the family structure in the end days of the bubble economy (which burst two years after the events depicted). All four of the children are from different fathers, none of whom are involved in their upbringing. When we do see one of the presumptive fathers, he treats Akira as if he were an adult. Not only is this an affirmation of Akira's place at the head of the family, it is also a comment on how Japanese society views those who have started a family as socially mature.

Conclusions: Reflections of Reality

Notions of childhood in Japanese society are inextricably linked with those of adulthood, notably the ideology that childhood ends when one has responsibility for or to someone else. In both films, the children are 'other' to the adult world. The dichotomy between how the youths and adults see the world is the main point of contention for both the on-screen characters and the viewing audience. For the characters, the crux of each film's storyline is how the youths, when adults either desert them (*Nobody Knows*) or let them create their own social hierarchy and spaces

(*A Gentle Breeze*), break away and create a new sub-culture in order to survive. For a Japanese audience, however, these filmic representations fly in the face of home life based on notions of filial piety and duty (the *ie*).

Throughout both films, this focus on relationships is paramount to understanding conceptions of youth responsibility and agency. These relationships are viewed as extensions of the 'traditional' family unit. In a sense, they follow the paradigm of the *senpai/kohai* relationship, in which the elder children take the role of the *senpai* (or *oniisan /oneesan*) as well as the surrogate parent, while effectively taking the persona of the *tomodachino yoona* (like friends) relationship.

Within both films, the youths first have to deal with the loss of adult supervision then have to modulate their understanding of how to run a society (gained from playing in groups and watching adults). In both films, it is the sense of familial belonging within their own *uchi* group that enables the children to survive. It is only during the scenes in which the youths are together (and thus *uchi* to the group) that they can be true to themselves and survive 'outside or *soto*' of the adult world.

Within the films, the concept of agency is paramount. The dominant theme is that children who have been forgotten or ignored by adult society have to deliberately create and fight to stay alive. Yet there is the question of whose agency is on show. In ignoring the youths, the adults effectively give them the ability to form their own destiny. While seemingly independent from adult society, they are at the same time interdependent within their group. Their 'independence', whether acquired through indifference (*Gentle Breeze*) or neglect (*Nobody Knows*), leads to their eventual interdependence.

The two films present strikingly different views of the role of children in Japanese society. The differences in views should be linked to the locality of each

film, on the one hand the agrarian society in which the adults give children considerable freedom, while turning them into model members of society, on the other an ultra-modern urban lifestyle in which the adult leaves the children to further her own self-centred lifestyle. The urban decline and the most basic structure it takes for a family to work are abundantly clear in *Nobody Knows*, as once the mother leaves (having represented herself as a single mother) the children are left with no contact with their family at all, implying that the mother has cut off all ties.

Nobody Knows is a scathing critique of the way in which Kore-eda feels the Japanese family is fragmenting within modern, 'non-traditional' households. In contrast, *A Gentle Breeze in the Village* urges the viewer to go back into the traditional lifestyle, where they might have the dissolution of some values, but the children remain unscathed from pressing modernization. These divergent views also showcase the negative and positive considerations of the autonomy of childhood represented as either detrimental (*Nobody Knows*) or beneficial (*Gentle Breeze*).

Learning from childhood is conceptually what these films are enabling both Japanese society and the outsider to engage in. For as we watch these representations of Japanese youth, we not only learn what is important to them, as constructors of their own reality, but also how they feel about Japanese society today. For anthropologists, children are barometers of their culture. For by questioning or adapting society's norms, they create a dialogue with the adult world that could fashion new social permutations and paradigms.