

**Positive depictions of the family in crisis:
Analysing the discursive role of 'quiet activism' in Koreeda Hirokazu's family
narratives**

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Abstract

The Japanese family has undergone significant upheavals since the late 20th century and this has had profound effects on cinematic representations. Contemporary filmmaker Koreeda Hirokazu has gained worldwide fame as a director of family dramas, many of which depict the family in contemporary social contexts. This thesis focuses on a selection of Koreeda's films (and a TV series) termed the 'family narratives' (2011-2016) to determine how the representations of family and associated gender roles positively address social developments and anxieties. Recognising their broader role within sociological debates in Japan, this project asks, how do Koreeda's family narratives function as a discourse on contemporary social anxieties related to family and gender? Evading traditional authorship methods, the critical framework relies on a range of approaches examining film as history (Standish 2000; Rosenstone 2012), the family on film (Harwood 1997) and the 'social problem film' to textually analyse the discursive role of Koreeda's representations within socio-historical contexts. Using this framework, I test the extent to which Koreeda acts as a 'quiet activist', subtly challenging and reframing dominant socio-political discourses of the family. Analysis across five chapters reveals the narratives to demonstrate fluctuating levels of quiet activism depending upon the demographics they address. This variation is related to a range of potential factors including historical contexts, individual (filmmaker) subjectivities, and generic format. Ultimately, when acting in the interests of quiet activism, Koreeda's family narratives are determined to possess a unique discursive function within Japanese (and possibly international) cinema by using positive representations of the family to petition for radical socio-political change.

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Introduction

In May 2018, Japanese filmmaker Koreeda Hirokazu premiered his latest film *Shoplifters* (*Manbiki Kazoku*) at the Cannes Film Festival. This was the fifth time the director's work was shown as part of the main competition, and he competed with renowned international filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Spike Lee. On the closing day of the ceremony, *Shoplifters* was awarded the Palme d'Or – the festival's top prize. Koreeda now stood beside renowned Japanese directors such as Imamura Shohei and Kurosawa Akira as recipients of the coveted award, and this was followed by further triumphs at other international festivals. *Shoplifters* became a huge critical success both at home and abroad, gaining nominations at the British BAFTAs and the Oscars for best foreign-language film. In Japan, the film became a huge commercial hit, ending 2018 as the fourth highest-grossing domestic film of the year.¹ While Koreeda was a popular name during the years leading up to the success of *Shoplifters*, this was the first film that truly appeared to strike a chord with international and domestic audiences, critics and festivals alike. However, not everyone was celebrating his success.

In the weeks and months following the film's domestic opening, both the film and the director received rebuke from numerous right-wing commentators and politicians, including active Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Given the subject matter of the film, this was perhaps unsurprising. *Shoplifters* is a social-realist drama concerning a family living on the social margins in present-day Tokyo. The collective live together in an old dilapidated house

¹ Box office statistics have been retrieved from the Motion Pictures Producers Association of Japan (MPPAJ) website: <http://www.eiren.org/toukei/index.html> (last accessed 8 June 2020)

surrounded by towering, contemporary apartments and, alongside the titular shoplifting, the group engage in pension fraud and other petty criminal activities to survive. The film paints an especially bleak portrait of its urban setting, and the impoverished protagonists drew international attention to the nation's increasing numbers living in financial precarity. According to news sources, some commentators took exception to the unflattering light in which Japan is cast, and some even believing the film 'endorses criminal activities' (Ishitobi 2018). Prime Minister Abe, who is usually quick to publicly congratulate his country men and women when they find success on the international stage, failed to comment at all; his silence assumed by many to reflect his unfavourable sentiments (Blair 2018; Ishitobi 2018). Although the film makes explicit reference to contemporary economic disparities in Japan, Koreeda shows less interest in the morality of the crimes themselves and instead explores the depth of family relationships between the protagonists in their challenging circumstances. In interviews, the director has said that *Shoplifters* was inspired by a surge in news reports about pension fraud cases and the moral panics surrounding them. In the film's press kit interview, he states:

In Japan, crimes like pension frauds and parents making their children shoplift are criticized severely. Of course, these criminals should be criticised but I am wondering why people get so angry over such minor infractions even though there are many lawbreakers out there committing far more serious crimes without condemnation. Especially after the 2011 earthquakes, I didn't feel comfortable with people saying repeatedly that a family bond is important. So I wanted to explore it by depicting a family linked by crime (Fuji Television Network/Gaga Corporation 2018).

As this interview suggests, *Shoplifters* is narratively more concerned with issues of representation than outright social criticism. The film's story concerns the decision of the criminal family to offer shelter for a very young girl who has been neglected by her abusive parents. As she adapts to her new family environment and develops close bonds with her adoptive mother and elder brother, we begin to learn that all members of the household have found one another having undergone similar neglect from their own families. Furthermore, though the family members attempt to earn a more honest living, they are unprotected and expendable in the deregulated labour market: the mother is dismissed from her job due to budget shortages; the father suffers a workplace injury but his company offers no insurance to compensate his resulting absence. Therefore, the decision of the group to engage in the criminal activities has occurred predominantly due to circumstances over which they have no control. Their criminal status is further softened by their association with more common or mythologised depictions of the Japanese family. For example, they make a trip to the beach on a hot summer day, enjoy the annual firework festival from their garden, and bathe together. Through the guise of a close, caring family, therefore, Koreeda asks the audience to reassess the disparaging depictions of criminal demographics in common media discourse. *Shoplifters* instead shifts criticism to the precarious social conditions that have pushed impoverished groups to criminal behaviour in the first instance.

Shoplifters is one of a series of recent films produced by Koreeda that focus on family relationships within a changing society. These narratives have, variously, sought to interrogate the function and meaning of the Japanese family and gender roles (in relation to family) in its many social forms. Japan has undergone a series of upheavals since the period

of modernisation that have manifested in the present era as a pluralisation of male and female adult pathways and alternative constructions of the 'family' that oppose institutionally sanctioned notions of 'standardised' family identities. Many contemporary anxieties that have arisen since have been related to changes in the family, anxieties further exacerbated by the nation's desperately low birth rates and an ageing population (Coulmas 2007). Though many sociological studies have investigated the precarious social climate of contemporary Japan, until now there have been very few studies of how this has been depicted through media. This is the area to which my thesis broadly intends to contribute: using Koreeda as a case study, this study will focus on how Japanese cinema has reacted to, and provides a discourse on, social anxieties related to the family and gender roles within family structures.

Film has historically provided a means by which different nations have responded to crisis (e.g. Schaffer 2003; Hansen 2010). Koreeda is one of Japan's most well-known filmmakers in domestic and international circuits for family narratives, and his cinema provides a window on how the family has been mediated in popular culture. Therefore, in relation to the social climate of contemporary Japan, I ask: how do Koreeda's films function as a discourse on contemporary social anxieties related to family and gender? In order to answer this question, there are a number of factors to consider. For example, why study the family in Japanese cinema now, and how might we do so? The current moment gives us good reason to move beyond traditional auteur studies of Japanese directors and to think more about how such films relate to significant social problems and questions challenging Japanese society. To this end, my thesis also asks, how can we challenge author-centred studies of Japanese cinema by focusing on the wider connections between texts and contexts? To

what extent does a focus on family in this contemporary series of films challenge preconceptions about Japanese cinema and society? And how does Koreeda use cinema to subvert common ideologies of the family?

Through an analysis of a cycle of films (and a TV series) focused specifically on the family in contemporary Japan, I argue these are texts that attempt to reframe dominant discursive narratives and present an optimistic vision of the family in the face of current crises.

Koreeda's cinema, I argue, represents a unique form of media that engages with social anxieties through positive narratives that attempt to subtly reframe negative discourses associated with the family. These are narratives that challenge the 'hegemonic' notions of family identity and imagine optimistic scenarios where the family, and associated gender roles, are no longer constrained by boundaries of standardisation.

To understand how Koreeda's cinema provides discourses on the Japanese family, my thesis must break from dominant forms of film analysis and authorship in order to conceptualise how these films engage and shift discursive identity politics. Graeme Turner has argued, 'film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and "re-presents" its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium' (1988: 129). Therefore, narratives that depict or make reference to social problems and anxieties serve a politicised function that provides a window on how cultures perceive and respond to different social developments (e.g. Standish 2000; Pisters and Staat 2005; Hamad 2013). My research project situates Koreeda's narratives within discourses of the family as it has developed and is understood in Japan. These are films that, I argue,

actively subvert some of the more common beliefs and myths associated with the family to empower some of Japan's marginalised demographics.

My thesis focuses on the work of a single director, and this kind of study is traditionally undertaken through the lens of authorship. However, authorship studies have been predicated on investigating the individual(s) behind the representations rather than the representations themselves. Since my work is more concerned with films and the discursive contexts out of which they emerge, my academic framework considers other approaches for extracting Koreeda's discursive role. My work is situated in studies related to the family in cinema, film as discourse, film as history and the so-called 'social problem' film. Combining this range of approaches, I examine the relationship of Koreeda's films against their social contexts and the extent to which they challenge family discourses. My thesis ultimately tests the extent to which Koreeda's family narratives can be considered an example of 'quiet activism': a term I use to denote modest and subtle forms of political opposition. My thesis is divided into three chapters that align with this association, followed by two concluding chapters that test the limits of Koreeda's relation to quiet activism. These chapters will reveal, therefore, that as a discursive presence, Koreeda's representations are still open to particular subjectivities and discursive influences that are traceable to the development of the family across recent Japanese history.

A certain tendency of Japanese cinema studies: Authorship

The study of Japanese cinema in Western academia has undergone numerous shifts since its earliest inception but has remained centred around the director or 'auteur'. Joseph L.

Anderson and Donald Richie's early study *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry* (1959) was categorised by director, and this approach was reflected in Richie's subsequent work (1990). Later influential texts by Paul Schrader (1972) and David Bordwell (1988) focused on Ozu Yasujiro whilst others have emerged on Kurosawa Akira (Richie 1965; Desser 1983; Goodwin 1994; Yoshimoto 2000), Naruse Mikio (Russell 2008) and Mizoguchi Kenji (Le Fanu 2005; Sato 2008). These studies each variably prioritise the individuality of the filmmaker, their specific style in single or multiple films, their autobiographical history and their distinction from other filmmakers. These studies have often prioritised directors from Japanese cinema's 'golden age' (the 1950s – a period celebrated for a high number of productions, large audience numbers, and a high quantity of critically revered films (Sharp 2011: 7)), though a few dedicated studies have emerged of more recent filmmakers, particularly Kitano Takeshi (Gerow 2007; Redmond 2013). Broader studies of Japanese cinema, including edited collections, have similarly been broken down into studies of individual directors or films that predominantly utilise a similar authorship approach (Nolletti and Desser 1992; McDonald 2006; Phillips and Stringer 2007; Russell 2011; Bingham 2015). These studies have seldom considered the role of the films in broader contexts, favouring instead close textual analysis that emphasise the position of the individual filmmaker.²

From its earliest onset, authorship has focused on how films create meaning and from where we can trace their meaning's origins. Whether this has been attributed to the filmmaker as an individual or collaborator, authorship has prioritised the human agency

² There have been some developments in more recent years: newer studies have investigated Japanese cinema in broader contexts, including historical periods (Kitamura 2010; Zahlten 2017), development of the industry (Standish 2006; Gerow 2010) and audiences (Coates 2016). These studies have developed Japanese films studies beyond authorship-led approaches, but these are also unrelated to the type of investigation I will perform.

behind texts. However, authorship has historically not been used as a means to consider how films as texts engage in wider networks of cultural communication. It is through authorship that we can track some of the more significant developments of film studies, from formalism to structuralism, poststructuralism and eventually into postcolonial, feminist and queer studies.

Classic auteurism began during the early 1950s. These early studies were primarily motivated by a desire to raise the cultural status of film as an art form. Film directors of certain perceived levels of quality were deemed 'auteurs' and artistically credited as the creative force behind their films. As John Caughie explains:

Within its distinguishable currents [. . .] auteurism shares certain basic assumptions: notably, that a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director [. . .]; that in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist (an auteur) a film is more than likely to be an expression of his individual personality; and that this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) of his films. (1981: 9)

This was the attitude of French critics for the *Cahiers du Cinema* journal in the early 1950s, who are credited with starting these dialogues. Francois Truffaut, who was of particular prominence in this movement, derided 'quality' literature adaptations that populated French cinema at the time and described their filmmakers as *metteurs-en-scene* – directors who merely 'add pictures' to the texts they adapt (2008: 15). Auteurs, rather, were seen to be those who manipulated the visual style of cinema to tell their stories. The *Cahiers* critics were inspired by Alexandre Astruc's article 'The Birth of a New Avant-garde: *La Camera-stylo*' (1968), originally written in 1948, in which Astruc termed the '*camera-stylo*' (camera-

as-pen) as a 'means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it' (1948: 17).

Through this artistic association, Astruc and the *Cahiers* critics sought to elevate the status of cinema by defining the individual director, or auteur, as an artist.

The romantic conception of authorship practiced by the French critics was soon used to assess Hollywood cinema. Andrew Sarris used the 'auteur' moniker to elevate the status of certain Hollywood directors working in the more industrialised processes of the Studio System. Based once again on revealing directors of a certain quality, Sarris created a model of three 'concentric circles' of 'technique, 'personal style' and 'interior meaning' against which a director's consistency could be scrutinised through an examination of their body of work (2008: 43). Those excelling in all categories, including the esteemed 'interior meaning', across their output would be considered 'auteurs'. Like the writers of *Cahiers*, Sarris' approach was highly subjective and open to later criticism. For example, in a heated article, Pauline Kael opposed the auteurist structures by which films were critically measured and derided Sarris' approach as an 'attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence' (1963: 26). In any case, there was little theoretical underpinning to Sarris' approach, and the purpose once again was to use auteurism to boost the cultural status of films and their directors.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, British critics began conceptualising authorship in connection with emerging theoretical frameworks such as Marxism and structuralism. Though largely rejecting the more romantic conceptions of Sarris and others, these writers still endeavoured to locate the director as authority over textual meaning. This was often undertaken through comparisons between directors and films. For example, Peter Wollen, using structural analysis, identifies a 'a core of repeated motifs' (2013: 75), which

underscore the distinctions between the films of Howard Hawks and John Ford. Robin Wood (1977) emphasised ideological and generic distinctions between filmmakers by comparing Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) with Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). These studies shifted authorship into more formalist textual readings, though quality was still a factor to some extent. This is detectable in Wollen's statement that 'the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford's work that makes him a great artist, beyond being simply an undoubted auteur' (2013: 83). While the overall focus of the British critics shifted from a strictly critical motivation, these studies continue to emphasise the individuals creating the films and the meanings that are bound to a filmmaker's text or oeuvre.

Structuralist conceptions of authorship led to poststructuralist approaches via writers like Ed Buscombe (1973) and Stephen Heath, the latter of whom suggested 'the author is constituted only in language and a language is by definition social' (1973: 87). Scholars became increasingly resistant to the romantic notions of individual agency and shifted the focus onto external and more socialised methods of address. One of the more influential studies from this perspective came from Roland Barthes (1977, originally 1968), who positioned the audience/reader as the site at which texts find their meanings; an act that results in the author's 'death'. For Barthes, a 'text' consumed in different spatiotemporal circumstances invites a plurality of potential meanings. By this reckoning, a singular inscribed intention would be impossible since 'every text is eternally written here and now' (1977: 145). Similarly recognising the role of audiences in constructing meaning, Michel Foucault (1998) suggested the author is merely a moniker that signifies a particular body of discourses; a role Foucault terms 'the author-function'. The author-function suggests, like

Barthes, that authors are constructed by their audiences rather than by their texts, and their names signify a particular 'brand' of repeated discourses and themes.

Though Barthes and Foucault were referring broadly to literature, their ideas have provided new contexts upon which we can interpret the shifting meanings of film according to social, temporal and reception/distribution factors. Poststructuralist considerations of authorship focus less on the individual(s) behind a text (film) or the more formalist concern of the film's 'interior meaning' and are concerned instead with how texts, their authors and their meanings are shaped by the contexts by which they are consumed. Despite poststructuralist developments of authorship and the resulting questions that have arisen regarding intention and agency, Japanese film studies in the English language have maintained an emphasis on individual filmmakers through structuralist and formalist approaches. This has been strongly evident in studies of the Japanese family onscreen.

Authorship in practice: The family in Japanese cinema

Keiko McDonald has suggested Japanese cinema has 'fixed its attention on family relations from its earliest days' (2000: 221), although to date there have been no comprehensive, dedicated studies in the English language on the family in Japanese film or other media.³ Available studies tend to be either chapters within broader works, edited collections or articles on individual texts. Joan Mellen (1976) conducted some of the earliest work on the subject in her study *The Waves at Genji's Door*. Mellen's analysis categorised family representations by a diverse range of directors, among them Ozu, Ichikawa Kon and Oshima

³ Since one of my interventions is to challenge how Japanese cinema has been studied in Western academia, I shall be referring to sources written or translated in the English language.

Nagisa. Operating over differing eras spanning the 1930s to the 1970s, Mellen argues each uses family-based narratives to criticise Japanese society in their present moment. Of Ichikawa, Mellen observes 'the Japanese family seems to possess a particular capacity to cultivate the most unsavoury qualities of human nature' (1976: 331), while for Oshima, a key figure in the Japanese 'New Wave' (*nuberu bagu*), the family 'provides no sanctuary' (1976: 356). Much of Mellen's analysis is saved for Ozu, Japan's most famous director of family dramas. Despite being judged to hold a more sentimental attachment to the family than other directors, Mellen believes 'no one laments the disintegration of the old family system more than Yasujiro Ozu, and no one chronicles its demise with more deeply felt pain and bewilderment' (1976: 315). Mellon's initial study focuses on canonised and 'quality' films by Ozu and others and highlights the differences between the directors as evidence of their specific (and critical) 'voices'. Though these directors were active during separate eras, Mellen reads context through the films individually and variation is linked to authorial specificity. This approach is strongly reminiscent of Wollen and Wood's structural approach to authorship (both were originally written at a similar time). Like these studies, Mellen locates meaning and director through textual dissimilarities.

Mellon's approach to authorship became reproduced in future studies of the family and Japanese cinema. For example, Timothy Iles (2008a) and Adam Bingham (2015) compiled similar studies on contemporary cinema. These studies again scrutinise specific films that offer 'devastating critiques on the Japanese family' (Iles 2008a: 79). Also, like Mellen, both studies briefly discuss the social climate of anxiety and uncertainty but contextualise their analysis through comparison with other filmmakers. Iles focuses on four films depicting the bleaker aspects of contemporary family attitudes, among them Miike Takashi's controversial

Visitor Q (*Bijita Q*, 2001) and Koreeda's *Nobody Knows* (*Daremo Shiranai*, 2004). These films are compared to similarly ominous post-war examples such as Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, 1953) and Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho Dayu*, 1954). Like the older examples, the modern films depict the family 'as a microcosm of social collapse, as existing in a moral crisis of alienation' (2008a: 79). For Iles, Japanese cinema shows the same level of ambivalence about the state of the family as it had been during the golden age of cinema, only these films channel newer anxieties.

Bingham (2015) selects a series of (seemingly random) films by notable directors for auteurist critique, among them *Tokyo Family* (*Tokyo Kazoku*) (Yamada Yoji's 2013 contemporary-set remake of Ozu's *Tokyo Story*), *The Land of Hope* (*Kibo no Kuni*, Sono 2012) and *Tokyo Sonata* (Kurosawa 2008). These films are situated in the tradition of *shomin-geki* – dramas depicting everyday middle-class (often family) life. Ozu has been regarded the most famous and influential director of this tradition and much of Bingham's analyses traces his 'canonical position' across the newer films (2015: 110). As such, Bingham, like Mellen and other structuralist auteur scholars, locates his films and their meanings according to their similarities and divergences from other directors.

The studies listed above represent the approaches I wish to avoid in my own treatment of Koreeda. Though I am studying the work of a sole filmmaker, my analysis will uncover how the films engage in wider cultural contexts during which they were made. For this reason, it is necessary to dislocate the study of Koreeda according to structural comparisons to other filmmakers, and instead situate the films within the discursive contexts of contemporary Japan. When considering the existing (albeit limited) studies of Koreeda, this type of approach has been largely neglected in favour of more traditional authorship methods.

Existing studies of Koreeda have made some links between the films and their social relevance. One film that appears frequently is *Nobody Knows*, a drama based on a real-life incident whereby a group of young siblings were abandoned by their mother in a Tokyo apartment. Koreeda's fictional retelling of this event follows the increasingly desperate lives of the protagonists and climaxes, as in real life, with the tragic death of one of the children. *Nobody Knows* can be seen as a bleak commentary on urban isolation and family abandonment. Iles has argued the film depicts the 'impossibility of a family construction or reconstruction' through the doomed orphaned protagonists (2008a: 101). Painting the film in especially bleak terms as a scathing attack on the family, Iles likens the film to the horror genre (a comparison echoed by Arthur Nolletti Jr. (2011: 154)), and this association is strengthened by the film's unfavourable depiction of the absent mother: the figure condemned for destroying the family unit. Bingham's focus on the more transcendental qualities of *Nobody Knows* reaches similar conclusions, finding the 'inattentive, irresponsible fathers and neglectful, selfish mothers present a very specific picture of dysfunctional parents that amplifies the discourse concerning the erosion of the traditional family unit' (2015: 102). However, Kenta McGrath has contested these arguments and believes the film is more sympathetic to the mother who, along with other adult characters who fail to assist the protagonists, are also victims of the uncompromising urban setting: 'most of these characters have good intentions but none seem willing or able to disturb the social structures in which their lives are entrenched' (2018: 347). Whether blaming individual demographics or not, *Nobody Knows*, probably Koreeda's most frequently studied film (see also, Jacoby 2011; Sørensen 2011), is universally judged to be highly critical and pessimistic about the Japanese family.

Though films like *Nobody Knows* are undoubtedly pessimistic, films like this are not emblematic of Koreeda's entire career. Later films, like *I Wish* (*Kiseki*, 2011) and *Like Father, Like Son* (*Soshite Chichi ni Naru*, 2013) have more positive commentaries on the Japanese family, and these films have been more successful with domestic audiences. However, scholars until now have neglected these kinds of films and, as such, studies have provided a misleading portrayal of Koreeda's cinema. Bingham is, to date, the only scholar who has studied Koreeda's cinema in much depth, but his study evades any detailed analysis of films like *I Wish* and *Like Father, Like Son* in favour of ambiguous texts like *Still Walking* (*Aruitemo Aruitemo* 2008) and *Nobody Knows*. For Bingham, 'Koreeda's work as a whole exists in a particularly marked relationship with Japan's cinematic past' (2015: 104), but since he fails to consider the later films in any depth, we may assume these films are separated from historical examples and, therefore, less significant for Bingham. My own approach brings fresh perspectives on Koreeda, who I believe has been academically misrepresented up until now. The films I analyse are separated from the films favoured by Bingham and others, and their significance is revealed once they are dislocated from cinematic comparison and understood by their social relevance.

Alongside the studies mentioned above, Koreeda has been the subject of numerous decontextualized formalist readings of specific films and themes unrelated to my own study (Marran 2002; Nolletti Jr. 2011; Ehrlich 2011, 2019;⁴ Sørensen 2011; Van Ommen 2014; Cho 2015; Cannon 2016; Yamada 2016). However, his treatment in Western scholarship is typically defined by Ozu comparisons. Ozu has been frequently heralded by scholars and

⁴ Linda C. Ehrlich has written the only available (at time of writing) book-length study of Koreeda in the English-language, entitled *The Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu: An Elemental Cinema* (2019). Though several of the films of this study appear, Ehrlich's approach is once again formalist and discusses how Koreeda uses the elements (air, water, fire, earth) and Japanese aesthetics in the presentation of his films.

critics alike as a quintessential force in the history of Japanese cinema. For this reason, he has been the subject of many studies (Schrader 1972; Richie 1977; Bordwell 1988; Desser 1997; Joo 2017; Choi 2018). Ozu's career spanned several decades beginning from the 1920s, though many studies have focused on his post-war films. A prolific filmmaker and key proponent of the *shomin-geki* genre, Ozu produced several films in the 1940s and 50s that took critical perspectives on the Japanese family, among them *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), *Tokyo Story* and *Tokyo Twilight* (*Tokyo Boshoku*, 1957). Like Koreeda, Ozu's cinema is strongly influenced by contemporaneous social changes, many of which (in Ozu's case) can be linked to structural changes in Japan during the post-war Allied Occupation.

Unlike later Koreeda films, Ozu considered the restructuring of the family with apprehension and his narratives detailed the potentially negative effects of urbanisation and increasing individualisation among younger generations. For example, in *Tokyo Story* an elderly couple travel from their rural town to visit their adult children in Tokyo. Once they arrive, they receive poor hospitality because their children are too busy or troubled by their own demanding urban lives. *Late Spring* also concerns the negative social impact on elder generations. Here, the story follows an ageing widower father who pressures his reluctant daughter to marry, but following her betrothal is then confined to a life of solitude. As Mellen has argued, Ozu's engagement with the fragmentation of the Japanese family has tended to be pessimistic. However, the focus on family themes and certain stylistic similarities between Ozu and Koreeda has meant that the latter has been strongly associated with the former.

David Desser, for example, has argued that 'any understanding and appreciation of Koreeda Hirokazu's internationally acclaimed theatrical debut *Maborosi* (*Maborosi no Hikari*, 1995)

must also take into account a particular intertext: the films of Ozu Yasujiro' (2007: 273).

Desser continues, 'that there have been almost universal invocations of Ozu in reviews of *Maborosi* should not dissuade us from fully appreciating the manner in which Ozu's cinema works to enrich the considerable depths of this film' (2007: 273). Comments such as these are troublesome since they assume that understanding *and* appreciating Koreeda's film occurs solely through his association with Ozu.

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano makes similarly bold proposals. Speaking of *Still Walking*, she states:

the cinematic mimicry that mediates between films from different generations is immediately sensed if not recognized by the audience, whose interest in Koreeda's film is, after all, situated within art-house cinema in the global market. In other words, this is an audience interested, for various reasons, in Japanese cinema from the beginning (2011: 118).

Here, Desser's remarks regarding the analyst or critic's relationship with Ozu is augmented to the entire viewing audience, and Wada-Marciano, without suggesting other avenues through which the film engages an international spectator, ambitiously proposes that foreign audiences approach *Still Walking* with an encyclopaedic awareness of Japanese cinema. Though these studies uncover sound textual comparisons between the directors, they also risk a level of academic essentialism. Just because Ozu has been selected through cultural circuits (and, by extension, Japanese film studies) as the figure upon which the notion of 'Japanese cinema' has so often been defined (Donald Richie famously referred to Ozu as 'the most Japanese of all film directors' (1977: ix)), this does not necessarily equate to the experience of the audience or filmmaker. In the case of Wada-Marciano's claim, this

is especially problematic; there are almost certainly people in the world who have seen *Still Walking* or *Maborosi* having never seen an Ozu film, and they almost certainly comprehended these films in whole or in part nonetheless.

These represent some of the more inflexible associations between the two directors, though similar comparisons have defined other analysis of Koreeda's earlier work. Alexander Jacoby, analysing *Nobody Knows*, believes the references to Ozu are 'less explicit' but still contain stylistic and thematic similarities (2011: 69). Identifying the parallels and oppositions between *Nobody Knows* and *Tokyo Story* (children abandoned by their parents in the former, parents 'abandoned' by their children in the latter), Jacoby believes the film forms a social critique, much like Ozu before him, of the present social milieu (in the case of *Nobody Knows*, the growing ambivalence to youth in urban environments). Though social concerns are alluded to, this is only seen through the antecedent lens of Ozu: 'references to Ozu help to emphasize the greater bleakness of Koreeda's representation of the family' (2011: 79).

Desser mentions the 'universal invocations of Ozu' in critical reviews, and similar associations have been thrown at Koreeda during many interviews with Western press (e.g. Berning 2009; Lim 2009; Bradshaw 2015). But it seems this rather habitual practice by scholars and critics alike have constrained the potential for how these films might be culturally positioned in more temporally relevant contexts. Furthermore, this preoccupation with quality and lineage seems unduly isolated to Japanese and perhaps other 'world' cinemas. An analyst of Hollywood cinema does not necessarily feel obliged to refer to Frank Capra when discussing the films of Steven Spielberg or Wes Anderson, but to discuss any

Japanese filmmaker on the subject of family without considering the influence of Ozu would appear to be scandalous.

This appears to have stemmed from the ongoing tendency in Japanese film studies to favour more traditional authorship methods. Ozu (like other 'Golden Age' directors) has enjoyed an enduring popularity among scholars for his perceived 'quality', and newer Japanese directors have had to run through the gauntlet of comparison; if a contemporary director in Japan has reached a certain standard of quality, the consensus appears to be that this must have stemmed from having followed lessons set by their eminent cinematic forebearers. The role of most scholars and critics, it seems, is to tease out these points of reference. If anything, these studies perhaps demonstrate more about how directors like Ozu have been embedded in scholarship and driven our understanding of Japanese cinema than they do Koreeda.

Of course, these studies have provided key contexts through which we can understand Koreeda's position within the history of Japanese cinema. I do not wish to devalue Ozu's impact on Japanese cinema nor deny that his legacy is detectable within Koreeda's films. I do, however, question whether such comparisons should be of paramount concern. To restrict research to this task runs the risk of essentialising Japanese cinema as judged simply according to the canon of supposedly 'quality' filmmakers and devalues the cultural impact of which film (as any mass media) is capable.

Authorship: Towards a discursive function

Because studies of Japanese cinema have been fixated on the filmmakers and their films, there is very little indication of how the films can be situated socio-politically. In an online journal article, Matthew Flisfeder identified two forms of ideological critique in film studies; these he terms 'the ideological analysis of cinema' and 'the cinematic critique of ideology' (2016). The former, Flisfeder says, 'deals with films as ideological symptoms, and the aim is to deconstruct the film text to locate the ideology present within the frame', while the latter 'tells not something about the ideology of the text; instead it is a practice of using the text to deal with the textuality of our everyday lives—that is, the uncovering or the revealing of ideology as part of the fabric of our everyday culture' (2016). Authorship studies have predominantly been interested in locating the specific authorial 'voice' of the filmmaker, and therefore are more squarely aligned with Flisfeder's first category. Though this has provided a foundation upon which Japanese film has been accessed by scholars, critics and, to some extent, audiences, my approach is more aligned with Flisfeder's second category. In order to assess how films 'deal with the textuality of everyday lives', a break from classic and structural authorship is necessary.

My approach interrogates how the films operate as a discourse amongst social perceptions and anxieties about the family in Japan. For this reason, my methodology is distanced from formalist analysis and is driven by the discursive relationships between text and context. Later conceptualisations of authorship have understated the individual(s) responsible for the film and have located agency and intention behind film texts in wider contexts. For example, Timothy Corrigan, discussing the role of agency in authorial expression, has stated:

the practices of auteurism now must be retheorized in terms of the wider material strategies of social agency. Here the auteur can be described according to the conditions of a cultural and commercial *intersubjectivity*, a social interaction distinct from an intentional causality or textual transcendence (1991: 104).

For Corrigan, the messages transmitted to audiences through film are not entirely autonomous and communicate through wider networks of cultural meanings. This reduces the role of the filmmaker as sole authority over a film and recognises the role of films in more social discursive categories.

These arguments are comparable to the 'author-function' Foucault establishes in *What is an Author* (1998). Here, Foucault understates the individual and instead declares the 'author' as one by whose name 'permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others' (1998: 211). The author is thus a name under which a certain discursive tendency emerges. Foucault refers to this as 'the author-function' which implies 'the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society' (1998: 211). In this manifestation, the author is rendered less by an individual or necessarily unique commentator, but rather they are the sum of existing discursive positions that have been grouped under a particular name.

Sato Tadao's (1987) analysis of post-war Japanese cinema provides one of few examples utilising this type of approach in a Japanese context. Concentrating on father-son relationships, Sato considers how changes to the patriarch in pre and post-war cinema reflected the changes taking place in a rapidly changing society. Of Kurosawa's drama *Ikiru* (1952) he states:

Although the modern father tries to exert the utmost influence on his son's character, it is already too late, and the best he can do is try to live his own life beyond reproach. Kurosawa reaches this bitter conclusion in *Ikiru* and in this film is reflected the true situation about the family and society in modern Japan (1987: 131).

In this reading, Kurosawa's agency over the narrative is recognised but so too is a more generalised development in social perceptions of the family. Similar conclusions are reached regarding Ozu's father protagonists and their development over time. Comparing Ozu's 1932 comedy *I Was Born But...* (*Otona no Miru Ehon - Umarete wa Mita Keredo*) and 1959 remake *Good Morning (Ohayo)*, Sato finds that, whilst the disgraced patriarch leading the original film desperately tries to regain his lost authority over his disappointed sons, the father in the remake is always aware of his compromised position as patriarch: 'the loss of paternal authority does not seem to bother this father, as if Ozu concluded that a father's authority is no longer necessary in the home' (1987: 137). Broadening his argument to the changes in society occurring simultaneously, Sato believes this development is reflective of general social attitudes that were increasingly critical or despondent with the role of the father, who was often away from the home and no longer the source of his children's moral education. Though directors such as Kurosawa and Ozu are seen to express distinct articulations on these social developments, they also function as an active component in their changing society rather than passive observer. In other words, Sato recognises that the specific beliefs readable within the films have emerged from a collective rather than individual consciousness.

As Foucault suggests and Sato applies, I am defining Koreeda's cinema by their common discursive function rather than his individual agency. Like Sato, I too am interested in how filmmakers reflect and articulate discursive positions that have emerged from social developments. Koreeda's films are also responsive to their native social conditions in the present moment, and his narratives, settings, characters and their motivations are comprehensible within these contexts. My work is mindful of the approaches to authorship that Foucault and Corrigan have suggested, and how cinematic agency is socially and culturally defined. However, my analysis will go a step further and seek to uncover a more active discursive position in Koreeda's cinema than the more 'reflective' functions as suggested by these studies. In as much as Koreeda is a discursive function, my thesis is interested in how the films reframe power structures related to family and gender and, therefore, how they challenge dominant beliefs. The texts I analyse do more than adopt a common discursive position, they actively engage in social discussions and attempt to shift the power structures by which family and gender lifestyles have been dominantly positioned.

Discursive approaches to authorship have been accused of removing agency from filmmakers. Janet Staiger (2013), who has made some significant comments on the topic, has regarded such approaches as a 'dodge' because they attempt to overcome the tricky business of defining the 'intention' behind a film. They do this by suggesting that such intentions, whatever they may be, occur irrespective of the author's control (2013: 46). Thus, if the author is 'dead' then any number of interpretations can explain the meaning of the film. Likewise, if the author is defined by discourse (as Foucault suggests) then they can be treated as unconscious mediators of the 'material discourses' embodied within the film

(2013: 46). Sato's analysis is a good demonstration of this, insofar as the distinctions between Kurosawa and Ozu's films are treated as a reflection rather than intervention within the changing social image of the father during the post-war era.

There are further implications of this authorship approach in terms of cinema's more radical potentials. Staiger believes the 'death' of the author is bad news for feminists, gay and lesbian activists and antiracists. She quotes Nancy Hartstock, who has argued from a feminist perspective, 'why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?' (in Staiger 2013: 49). These are issues I wish to address in my consideration of Koreeda's representations of the family, particularly as the discursive function of these films is more radical than other studies have recognised. Staiger asserts that 'forgetting authorship and individuals takes away a history necessary for social activism and utopic imaginings' and that 'authorship discourse may have positive political effectivity' (2013: 30). To solve this issue, Staiger conceptualises authorship as a *'technique of the self'* to recognise the discursive consistencies or 'citations' that occur across a single text or body of work. This approach works in favour of films with more radical discursive elements because 'rebellious or resistant authorship would be understood as a particular kind of citation with the performative outcome of asserting agency against the normative' (2013: 51). Having overcome the issues of agency in authorship-as-discourse, Staiger believes this technique works particularly in the favour of 'subjects in minority-subject positions' (2013: 52). Since my interest is similarly in the 'social activism and utopic imaginings' of Koreeda's cinema, authorship as *technique-of-the-self* helps to articulate how the discourse in these films is

more proactive and subversive than Foucault's conception. Like Staiger, and those who have utilised this approach for studying film (e.g. Grant 2001), my intention is to identify the 'rebellious or resistant' discourses in Koreeda's cinema that have activist properties. However, in accordance with traditional authorship methods, Staiger treats this conceptual approach as a function befitting particular (minority) subjectivities, which maintains a precedence for identifying *who* is behind the 'citations'. Therefore, just as authorship as *technique-of-the-self* solves some of the issues of agency when studying authorship as a discourse, it remains, like other techniques, fixed on the role of the filmmaker(s). My interest, rather, is in investigating the function of the 'citations' (the 'resistant' discourses) themselves rather than *who* is making them. To clarify, I'm not exploring 'unconscious' discourses in the manner Foucault describes (and with which Staiger takes issue) but rather I argue that conscious level of activism or resistance is present. Though this falls largely in line with Staiger's concept of authorship as *technique-of-the-self*, my method (unlike Staiger) deemphasises the *speaker*, or how Koreeda's subjectivity is or may be linked to his films' discursive function; instead, I am interested in the films as *speech acts* that interact in wider socio-historical contexts.

Staiger's concerns with authorship-as-discourse provide further evidence of how authorship has been problematically enforced as a universalising method of analysis. Whether assuming the individual(s) behind films are responsible for the messages or not, authorship has not, through its various developments, provided a singular foundation upon which we can assess the social role of cinema. Within Japanese cinema, and especially in relation to the family or Koreeda, studies have favoured more formalist approaches to authorship that give precedence to the director as a creator of meaning. My approach breaks from this

tendency and assesses the role of Koreeda's cinema in dialogue with social discourses of the family. For this reason, when I use the term 'Koreeda', I am talking about the discursive function of the films; I'm more interested in how these films connect to society than Koreeda as an artist. While this treats Koreeda as an 'author-function', as Foucault has suggested, my intention is to examine how the films manipulate and reframe discursive contexts in the process. The films I discuss contain discourses that reach beyond questions of authorship or the individual director and into socio-historical contexts related to the family. My approach investigates the subversive discourses in Koreeda's films, how they are shaped by and react to social contexts, and how they try to reframe dominant discourses of the family. This requires me to look beyond Koreeda as a filmmaker and investigate how these films are shaped by socio-historical and political contexts. For these reasons, my thesis turns to studies that have investigated the social role of cinema. It is upon these studies that my own methodological framework for discussing Koreeda's cinema is based.

Methodology

In order to examine Koreeda's cinema in discursive social contexts, my thesis relies on a patchwork of different methodological insights since my type of study has yet to be attempted in existing scholarship. Therefore, my approach and analysis are shaped and guided by the following studies.

One of the closest approaches to my own was undertaken by Isolde Standish in a study entitled *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema* (2000). Here, Standish investigates the relationship between ideology and myth in the negotiation of social anxieties and issues

onscreen in popular 'war-retro' genre films in the 1960s and 70s. Standish used such a framework to detail the emergence of the 'tragic hero' narrative structure in post-war cinema; a structure around which Japanese people could interpret the events of the war, offering the spectators 'avenues of exculpation from a foreign-imposed sense of guilt' (2000: 3). Standish insists the films of this era worked through deeper social issues from which the nation was recovering. Koreeda's films, I argue, fulfil a similar role in relation to contemporary anxieties related to the family. For this reason, Standish's approach is comparable and provides a framework upon which to understand Japanese cinema in a discursive light.

Standish highlights the role of cinema in articulating and disseminating the dominant structures by which Japanese society is ordered and responds to social crisis. In popular post-war genres such as the 'war-retro' or yakuza films, Standish assesses the social conflicts between pre and post-war ideologies and film as a consolidation process between the two. A similar approach is used in her study of Japanese New Wave cinema (2011). Contesting Desser's (1988) method of comparing films of this movement to similar movements in the West, Standish believes, once again, meaning is to be established through an investigation of specific national contexts:

If we accept cinema's status as one component of a complex cultural system of audiovisual communication, any study of a cinema within a national context should not ignore the socio-political and economic conditions that at times impact on practice, independent of human consciousness (2011: 4).

The family is another measure by which socio-political and economic conditions alongside cinematic representations influence how individual subjectivities are defined. Discourses of

the nuclear family – the hegemonic family structure and corresponding roles for men and women – continue to dominate in the present era. Though various competing family and gender identities have emerged more recently, and despite the less accommodating environment for family ‘standardisation’ that has arisen following economic collapse, the nuclear family continues to penetrate socio-political discourse at all levels and is strongly sanctioned across economic structuring, social welfare and the employment sector.

Koreeda’s cinema, meanwhile, is responsive to and even challenges these structures, and this is achieved by a reordering of discursive precedence in his representations. Thus, like Standish, my work identifies discursive power (im)balances within Koreeda’s cinema, how these engage with the socio-political climate of the present era, and how the films imagine solutions for these anxieties.

Standish’ work provides a good template for understanding how Japanese cinema engages in different historical contexts, but this approach pays little attention to how film directors develop distinct perspectives. Robert Rosenstone (2012) has investigated the role of filmmakers in shaping our perceptions of socio-historical developments. In his extensive research into ‘film as history’, Rosenstone has argued that film can act as a historical document that has the same influence in our perceptions of the past as the written text or tome. History, like film, is ‘a particular kind of practice, one that insists on a certain kind of historical truth and tends to exclude others’ (2012: 5). For the spectator, therefore, film provides an interpretation of (historical) events that, much like a literary source, shapes our understanding of cultures and societies. One of my research aims to is demonstrate how Koreeda uses cinema to subvert common dialogues of the family, and Rosenstone’s approach, though focusing on historical narratives, provides a useful framework.

Rosenstone believes filmmakers have the potential to act as 'cinematic historians' who 'both engage the discourse of history and add something to that discourse' (2012: 133). This can be handled or stylised through three categories: to '*vision* history' which is 'to put flesh and blood on the past; to show us individuals in life like situations, to dramatize events, give us people to identify with, make us feel to some extent as if we have lived moments and issues long gone'; to '*contest* history', which is 'to provide interpretations that run against traditional wisdom, to challenge generally accepted views of particular people, events, issues, or themes'; or to '*revision* history', which 'shows us the past in new and unexpected ways, to utilize an aesthetic that violates the traditional realistic ways of telling the past, or that does not follow a normal dramatic structure, or that mixes genres and modes' (2012: 133). Each approach, says Rosenstone, is premised on 'making the familiar unfamiliar and causing the audience to rethink what it thinks it already knows' (2012: 133). This function is comparable to Koreeda's which, though presenting films in relatable and 'realistic' scenarios, challenges audiences to rethink the present state of society.

Rosenstone's categories are explored in relation to Oliver Stone, a US filmmaker (or cinematic historian) who has made many films about historical events (several of which about the Vietnam War). Stone's contribution to history, according to Rosenstone, is not simply about depicting historical events as they 'really' happened, but historical events are dramatized by Stone to redefine the way through which such events are (or can be) broadly interpreted. For example, *Salvador* (1986) details the story of renowned photojournalist Richard Boyle (who also co-wrote the film) and his entanglement in the Salvadorian Civil War during the early 1980s. Rosenstone argues that, while the film depicts certain actual events as they occurred (or at least reasonably accurately) during the early days of the

conflict, Stone's depiction includes a political thesis on the contexts that surrounded this and similar conflicts. Through this perspective, the film 'becomes symbolic not just for what happened in that country in the early 1980s, but for the whole thrust of American anti-communist foreign policy' (2012: 142). Accordingly, *Salvador* is not only a historical account, it is also a 'legitimate and exceedingly contestatory interpretation of US history rendered for the general public.' (2012: 142). Inasmuch as Rosenstone approaches film as history, therefore, he also approaches it as a device for contesting or reinterpreting the beliefs, motivations and discourses by which certain cultural events occur and how they can shape our perceptions of historical and modern reality.

Rosenstone's analysis is concerned with the depiction of history through the discursive lens of the present and, as such, is comparable to Standish' work on 'war-retro' films during the Japanese post-war; films that similarly reinterpret historical events according to modern perspectives. Though Koreeda does not address the past in his films (his family dramas are all set in the present), I argue a similar process is taking place: cinema here is used to reframe the present moment through an alternative social perspective. Like cinematic historians, Koreeda is not interested in reproducing or framing the Japanese family as it exists in the current historical moment. Instead, the family is repurposed and provides a 'contestatory interpretation' of dominant family ideologies. In other words, Koreeda uses cinema to *contest* or *revise* the myths through which the family is culturally understood, thus presenting an *alternative present*.

The family has often been a theme in historical studies of Japanese cinema but until now it has rarely been at the centre of such debates. For the purpose of my own analysis I must ask, how might we approach a topic of such historical relevance and complexity as the

family in Japanese film? Sarah Harwood (1997) followed this line of enquiry in her study of the family in popular Hollywood films during the 1980s; an era beset by 'change and crisis' (1997: 38). During this period, the role of the family underwent significant demographic changes that were opposed through more conservative socio-political discourses, thus revealing a 'sharpening divergence between the ideological family and its material referent' (1997: 55). Popular films of the period followed a similar trajectory and 'fell squarely between those discourses which posit the family as problem and family as solution; as site of abuse or restitution' (1997: 71). Harwood recognises the importance in discussing film in relation to the discursive complexities that frame the family in spatiotemporal circumstances. My approach is similarly concerned in revealing how Koreeda's films engage social dialogues on the family in contemporary Japan.

The condition of the Japanese family in the contemporary era is remarkably similar to how Harwood describes the UK and the USA during the 1980s. Japan has seen an increasing divergence between ideological expectations of the family in popular discourse and the changing life decisions and behaviours of newer generations. Once again, this divergence has been augmented by an institutional safeguarding of the nuclear family, and this model discourages the alternative family and gender identities that have emerged in opposition. Like Harwood, I am interested in exposing the 'gap between lived experience and cultural forms' of the family and how this provides a context to discuss their cinematic depictions (1997: 55). The 'gap' that Harwood describes between social expectations of family and actual lived experience is particularly useful in comprehending the situation in Japan. Similarly, it is the process of situating Koreeda's representations in the gap that reveals how they make discursive interventions. However, while Harwood considers the wide range of

genres and styles that denote the most successful Hollywood films of the 1980s, my thesis is localised to a specific filmmaker and his output between 2011 and 2016. As such, the films I discuss do not demonstrate the same contradiction or variation as Harwood's examples; instead my work seeks to highlight the common discursive position by which Koreeda's cinema negotiates the 'gap' that separates social constructions of the family.

Channelling a variety of popular films, Harwood's analysis reveals how the family has cinematically taken diverse roles in response to changing social circumstances. One particular concept Harwood uses for this that similarly guides my own analysis is part of the 'dimensions of narrative' through which family depictions are negotiated onscreen, specifically the '*potential narrative outcome*'. This refers broadly to the resolution of a film and how the family or the 'promise of family' is part of this resolution. Harwood terms the protagonists by which this conclusion is determined 'the family of possibility' and 'concerns its ability to close the narrative and achieve its potential as a nuclear family unit' (1997: 61). This can be further defined by two potential outcomes: the utopian film, which 'locates the family as the solution to the narrative hermeneutic and its obstacles'; or the dystopian film, wherein 'the family is itself the problem, whether in full, fractured or absent form, and can neither be achieved, represented or even desired' (1997: 61). Harwood uses these distinctions to investigate a variety of different popular Hollywood films, some of which are more focused on the family than others.

'Utopian' and 'dystopian' films may be interchangeable across Hollywood cinema, but they are not so open to debate in the context of Koreeda's family narratives since each begins and ends in roughly the same way. Every film begins with some form of threat or disruption to the nuclear family unit: this either happens in the context of the narrative, such as *Like*

Father, Like Son where the harmony of the nuclear family is disrupted upon the revelation that their son was switched at birth; or it occurs prior to the narrative's opening, such as *I Wish* and *After the Storm (Umi Yori mo Mada Fukaku 2016)* whose central characters attempt to reunite their divorced families though the divorce itself occurred before the film's diegesis. At the end of the films, the protagonists accept and come to value their current 'imperfect' circumstances instead of the nuclear family unit: the structure they had previously strived to maintain. The threats to the nuclear family are not subverted or resolved, instead those involved learn to adapt to their present circumstances. In Harwood's terms, these are 'dystopian' films since their resolutions reject the possibility of the nuclear family; however, unlike Harwood's examples, these films present a 'utopian' perspective on the non-standard or dissolved family unit.

Like many studies of the family in Western cinema, Harwood identifies how the nuclear family has become 'mythologised' through utopian resolutions. Cinema, like other cultural forms, is one avenue through which 'the family functioned to secure other mythologies, mythologies which attempted to resolve contemporary social panics, in order to identify the structuring dilemmas and the alternatives' (1997: 12). Separate studies have similarly referred to 'the long cultural shadow of the nuclear family' (Tincknell 2005: 1; see also Chambers 2001 and Jenkins 2015). To understand how the family has become mythologised in cinema involves understanding it as a historical process. Harwood, for example, considers how the family was culturally understood through different upheavals in the UK and the US over the 20th century. Throughout key developments, the family, in cinema as in society, provides a 'discourse of permanence' through which cultural anxieties can be averted (1997: 174). When approaching Koreeda's cinema, it is equally important to understand the role

played by myth in the construction of family and how this is culturally situated. The family has been mythologised in Japan just as it has elsewhere, although in Japan the family has undergone a far different developmental process than in the West. Therefore, the evocation of family as a mythologised principle occurs differently in Koreeda's cinema than it has elsewhere.

Marin Lisiecki has argued that myths are 'representative of [a nation's] way of thinking about themselves and their surrounding (both social and the physical one)' (2016: 138). Furthermore, the Meiji period (1868-1912, Japan's era of modernisation) provides 'an exquisite example' of how national mythologies are formed (2016: 139). During this period, strong ideologies were institutionalised positioning the nation as one large 'family state' (*kazoku kokka*) under the newly reinstated Emperor. The family was, therefore, discursively positioned as a more collective enterprise than the more privatised nuclear family which would come later. Therefore, when approaching the family as a mythologised concept, it is important to understand how these kinds of discourses have formed and developed through Japanese history by the time we get to Koreeda's cinema.

Given Japan's historical development of the family, it comes as no surprise that Koreeda's cinema shows diverse links between the family and myth compared to Hollywood studies such as Harwood's. While Western media has been seen to mythologise the nuclear structure, the processes in Koreeda's cinema are more complex. In some cases, this process sees Koreeda refer to far older and more culturally embedded constructions of the family from the pre-war era and beyond as a means to validate depictions in his films. For example, as will be discussed in chapter one, the divorced families in *I Wish* are comparable to social structures from the Edo period (1603-1868). The depiction of rural Kamakura in *Our Little*

Sister (Umimachi Diary 2015) is highly romanticised and frames the otherwise liberal lifestyles of the sisters in a form of nostalgic tradition – this will be elaborated upon in chapter two. Therefore, while these families and characters circumvent the nuclear family – the dominant structure in Japan – they maintain a relationship with culturally mythologised social forms.

Koreeda's representations subvert the dominant structural norms associated with the Japanese family in the 21st century. Instead, and as I argue throughout the chapters, the films evoke older and more culturally specific family concepts in order to create new mythologies out of emerging, alternative family structures and identities. Like Harwood (and similar studies), therefore, my analysis pays attention to how the family is mythologised in cinema, how this relates to historical developments of the family in Japan, and how Koreeda's cinema exploits this function to subvert common discourses of the family.

To summarise, my analysis reproduces Standish' method of interrogating Japanese cinema as a *discursive negotiation* between social anxieties and developing power structures. This will require an understanding of how the family in Japan has developed over modernity and how anxieties have frequently stemmed from challenges to social hegemony, particularly during the post-war and contemporary eras. Like Rosenstone, my analysis discusses the links between filmmaker, culture and discourse; this situates Koreeda by a body of work that reveals a *contestatory interpretation* of contemporary social anxieties. Drawing on several of Harwood's concepts, I will also use sociological studies to find the 'gap' between dominant discourses of the family and the lived experiences of the Japanese and consider how this gap is articulated cinematically. Furthermore, while my analysis considers the texts as a whole, my interest is in how Koreeda depicts the family as a 'resolution' in his narratives and

how these resolutions empower particular discursive positions. These positions create new mythologies of emerging family structures that underscore the facilitation of 'utopian' resolutions. By adopting these largely historical methodologies, my thesis investigates the shifting meanings of the family in contemporary Japanese cinema using Koreeda's films as case study.

Of course, Harwood and Rosenstone's research is based on Western examples of cinema, and as such, these studies are mindful of the conditions (social, cultural or otherwise) that give the texts meaning. When speaking of a non-Western nation such as Japan, especially as a Western scholar, it is important to understand the regionally specific contexts and not to let my own perceptions and experience of family guide my analysis. Debbie Olson (2018) recognises how an essentialist approach to cross-cultural analysis has constrained existing research on children, arguing that 'much of childhood studies scholarship frames discussions about childhood with the unstated assumption that the child emerges from a Western position with little to no distinction between the real lived, cultural experiences of children globally' (2018: x). Karen Lury, in a study of children in world cinema, has similarly argued 'the category of childhood and the figure of the child are caught up in and enact the ambitions and ideology of modernity and the West' (2010: 24). Expanding the category of children to the family, my research is also premised on the belief that comprehension of these narratives and the roles of demographics can only be gained from an awareness of the conditions of the nation they depict. Therefore, and following the similar examples of Standish (in a Japanese context) and Harwood (in a Western context), my research is guided and contextualised by sociological studies of the family in the contemporaneous Japanese context. This entails a thorough examination of the socio-historical conditions that have led

to the current moment in Japan. This approach allows me to ask, as Estella Tincknell has in relation to the mediated family, 'why is this text *now*?' (2005: 4).

To establish how the family has been understood in Japan, I have surveyed recent English language scholarship. Due to the dominance of English scholarship in these fields, there is an abundance of available sources compiled by researchers of varying cultural backgrounds. In many cases, the sources referred to are based on ethnographic, anthropological or historical studies within Japan itself. While I have endeavoured to prioritise sources from Japanese scholars, research from non-natives is also used. My process for defining social attitudes and discourses stems from a broad canvassing of different studies and compiling the consistent observations across them. Where appropriate, separate arguments and observations are noted to accommodate a broad range of perspectives. Generally, in terms of social analysis, native and non-native scholars working within similar disciplines and utilising similar research methods appear to meet consistent conclusions. By identifying the core components academics have frequently analysed in connection to, for example, historical events, policymaking decisions, socio-political discourses, and behavioural shifts, I am able to relate the family in Koreeda's cinema to the wider discourses by which the family is culturally understood in its present moment.

The Japanese family in the Meiji era to the present day

As explained above, to understand how Koreeda's cinema provides a discourse on the family necessitates an understanding of how the family has developed in Japan up until the present moment. Like many nations, the Japanese family features strongly within socio-

political upheavals that have occurred over the last century. The period of modernisation and post-war era were two such times that saw dramatic social changes in Japan, and the family played an enormous role in establishing social cohesion. However, in the early part of the 21st century, the collapsing strength of the family has played into the ‘precarious’⁵ socio-economic circumstances the nation has struggled to negotiate. At the same time, though many have considered the family to be in decline, there is also evidence that the contemporary era is merely one of transition.

According to Richard Ronald and Allison Alexy, ‘for the more conservative minded, the family – the very basis of Japanese life – has appeared to be in peril’ (2011: 1). The peril, in this regard, refers to falling birth-rates and marriages, the rise of divorce, and the growing ambivalence to marriage from younger generations. However, the Japanese family has also been described as ‘changing’ (Rebick and Takenaka 2006) or in ‘transition’ (Ochiai 1997), and just as one temporal notion of family is seen to be in decline, alternative adult or family lifestyles have been seen to emerge. Koreeda’s cinema addresses the anxieties related to the ‘transitioning’ family; how these are framed cinematically is contingent on the family as a historical and developing social concept. The following section briefly contextualises the more significant developments of the family since the period of modernisation and how these developments have shaped the anxieties felt in the contemporary era.

Merry White has identified three temporal moments since modernisation during which the Japanese family has undergone strong influence from state ideologies: the Meiji era, the period immediately following Japan’s defeat during the Second World War, and in the years

⁵ Anne Allison has used the term ‘precarious’ to describe the insecure socioeconomic conditions Japan has faced since the 1990s in her ethnographic study *Precarious Japan* (2013).

following the early 1990s collapse of Japan's high-growth 'bubble' economy (the 'post-bubble' era) (2002: 20). Given the emphasis political institutions continue to place on the standardisation of family, the third era White speaks of continues to the present day. State expectations have been anchored to the second of these periods, and the officially sanctioned image of the 'ideal' Japanese family has changed very little since the post-war era.

For many years up to 1947, Japanese families were modelled on the *ie* – a Confucian three-generation structure that organised families akin to businesses. These were centred on a male 'head' of household, and homes were typically comprised of the male head, his wife and children, and his parents. Women would often 'marry-in' to these structures and assume domestic roles taking care of the whole family (including the husband's parents), and lineage was prioritised through successive generations of eldest sons (Saito 2000; Kuwayama 2001; Maeda 2004). The *ie* was strongly patriarchal and offered very few rights for women: in cases where no son was produced by a family, an alternative 'son' would be adopted in. If a daughter was present, these adopted sons could be added through marriage. Though the *ie* was eventually ousted in changes made in the Allied Occupation, Kuwayama Takami has suggested 'the *ie* lies at the heart of Japanese cultural identity and nationalism' (2001: 3) and 'constitutes a broad "discursive" sphere in which different aspects of Japan are discussed in the same rubric' (2001: 32).

The nuclear family became the new legal family structure in following Japan's war defeat; this having been put in place in by occupying Allied forces who sought to remove the patriarchal structuring of the *ie* and improve the rights of women (Hendry 2012: 27).

Although many households continued operating under the *ie* structure for many years

(especially in rural areas), the nuclear family was gradually adopted and eventually became the common urban household. Individual roles were, like before, strongly gendered: breadwinning husbands would commit very long hours to companies as white-collared 'salarymen' (Dasgupta 2000, 2003, 2013; Hidaka 2010); wives, meanwhile, would assume domestic responsibilities and dedicate their efforts to home tasks and childrearing in their husband's absence (Vogel 1978; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Facilitated by this social organisation, Japan experienced an unprecedented post-war recovery and became an economic superpower from the mid-1950s; a period since referred to as the 'economic miracle' or 'high-growth' era (Katz 2015). Employment stability and economic growth aided a rising consumer movement known as 'my homeism' (*mai homu shugu*), the ambition of which was to secure a 'dream home', thereby 'encapsulating the Japanese dream of postwar prosperity, corporate capitalism, and nuclear family making' (Allison 2012: 117). The affluence enjoyed by the nation during the second half of the 20th century created strong ties between family (and respective gender roles) and the state (Garon 1997; Takeda 2005). Many men and women aspired to fulfil personal and national expectations in the new urban middle classes of nuclear families.

The social hegemony of the nuclear family endured for many years reasonably unopposed, but from the 1980s social attitudes began to change. Younger generations of women, jaded at the prospect of becoming full-time housewives, increasingly resisted the linear pathways into adulthood (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002). Males similarly resisted the demanding and increasingly ridiculed lifestyle of the salaryman and sought alternative and more individualist masculine identities (Dasgupta 2000; Charlebois 2017b). Resultantly, marriage rates and birth rates started to fall and nuclear households decreased (Nagase 2006;

Tokuhiro 2009; Ronald et al. 2018: 1018). Exacerbating this trend, the high inflation 'bubble economy' collapsed in 1991 leading the nation into a prolonged recession (Tsuruta 1999). The corporate sector experienced significant changes, with companies making mass redundancies and hiring on part-time or temporary contracts (Chuma 2002). Fewer full-time positions were available for men, and this forced many housewives back into the labour market to supplement household costs (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Job security lost its former strength which subverted the previous economic and consumer security associated with 'my-homeism', causing many to either delay or forgo marriage (Raymo et al. 2004). Birth-rates have steadily dropped since the 1980s: the national birth-rate in 2018 was 1.4 children per woman, far below the required repopulation rate of 2.07 (McCurry 2018). This has caused Japan to become a rapidly ageing society where some estimates have predicted that by 2030 one in every three citizens will be over 65 years of age (Muramatsu and Akiyama 2011: 426).

Newer generations have been forced to adapt to the unaccommodating socio-economic conditions in post-bubble Japan, but so far there has been little change in the discursive structures of politics, economics and employment to facilitate this transition. Companies still pressure many employees to put long hours into work which creates strain for households with two working parents (Kano 2018). Gendered attitudes towards marriage and partnership remain prevalent: men are often expected to prove their earning capabilities in order to be considered suitable for marriage even though the job market has lost its former vitality (Nemoto 2008); women who obtain careers are often considered less desirable for marriage (Yoshida 2011), especially if they earn more than their partners (Mandujano-Salazar 2017: 530). Resultantly, both genders have encountered difficulties

finding suitable marriage partners (Dalton and Dales 2016). Couples who do marry are often discouraged from childrearing due to a range of economic factors including childcare availability and affordability (Tabuchi 2013), and the distance between family networks due to work relocation (*tanshinfunin*) (Nakazawa et al. 2000). For these reasons, parenting has become either less desirable or less attainable.

In Japan, strong stigmas remain for unmarried mothers. In 2005 only 2% of births occurred out of wedlock, compared with 43% in UK (Hertog 2009: 2). Single or divorced women with children often encounter huge difficulties due to poverty and inadequate social welfare (Raymo and Zhou 2012). Moreover, children in single-parent households are often stigmatised for not receiving a 'normal' upbringing (see Chapter 1) (Hertog 2009: 132).

Women returning to work after maternity leave have trouble resuming careers due to corporate practices that prioritise and reward consistent employment (Macnaughton 2015), but men are deterred from taking paternity leave due to fears of stigma that abound in patriarchal working environments; in 2008, less than 1% of eligible fathers took paternity leave (Sano and Yasumoto 2014: 324). Despite this, men have been increasingly pressured to interact more with children, and government-sponsored initiatives have been created to increase paternal engagement (see Chapter 3) (Mizukoshi et al 2015; Charlebois 2017b).

However, this contradicts ongoing expectations for men to dedicate many hours and energy to careers to sustain working reputations and household income. Robin LeBlanc has claimed that 'the dominant expectations for Japanese men and women may remain anchored in early twentieth-century notions of a gendered division of household labour, but the place of those gendered expectations in shaping individual life courses has greatly changed' (2011: 121). With many spouses dissatisfied with the conditions or impracticalities of marriage,

divorce has risen dramatically since the post-war era (Fuess 2004; Ono 2004), while many others have chosen not to marry in the first place (Nemoto 2008; Dales 2014).

Given the manner through which it has changed over the 20th century, the Japanese family has also been 'highly adaptive' (Ronald and Alexy 2011: 3). Despite ongoing restrictions, there are signs that many are defying state expectations and forging their own families and identities in the present era. White (2002: 26) uses the term 'accommodation' to describe the methods of adaptation Japanese families have historically employed to sustain themselves. These kinds of methods have been noted in, for example, the increase of dual-income households, single-parents moving in with elderly parents to help with childrearing, or the various domestic arrangements to assist retired parents (Takagi and Silverstein 2011). Where the standard family is unobtainable, alternative versions have been forged, such as platonic 'friendship marriages' or couples who live together in unromantic cohabitation arrangements (Raymo et al. 2009). Society itself has tried to accommodate contemporary lifestyles; recent reports have noted a rise in restaurants and travel experiences that cater exclusively for singles (Rich 2019), and multi-tenant 'shared housing' complexes (Ronald et al. 2018). Moreover, White notes expansions in the 'family support industry' which could be seen to oppose officially sanctioned familism, such as an increase in day-care centres to assist working women, or 'day visitors' to support the elderly (2002: 3). Despite these changes, those who choose alternative routes into adulthood are often still met with derision. For example, women who choose not to marry have been branded with monikers such as *ohitorisama* ('singleton') or *makeinu* ('loser dog') (Mandujano-Salazar 2017: 531). Further contempt is aimed at younger generations who delay or fail to assume expected adult identities, such as *furitā* ('freeter') – referring to those employed in part-time or

temporary work rather than the full-time careers associated with the 'salaryman' (Honda 2005), unemployed 'NEET's' ('not in education, employment or training') (Genda 2007), or 'parasite singles' – a term for those who continue living with their parents into adulthood, taking advantage of cheaper living costs (Masahiro 2001).

During different periods over recent Japanese history, the family has taken many forms and closely corresponded with social and economic upheavals. The ideological strength of the family served the nation to great industrial and financial successes in the modernisation period and later during the post-war economic miracle. However, unaccommodating economic circumstances and changing social attitudes have meant the family as a singular 'standardised' form has become problematic. A plurality of emerging family and gender lifestyles have emerged that resist the linear social functions of previous generations. Yet, these demographics must negotiate state, economic and employment structuring that continues to benefit the nuclear model. This has caused difficulty both for standard families and those who elect alternative lifestyles. Social discourses have, therefore, met emerging family forms with rebuke and uncertainty. Ueno Chizuko has suggested that 'many people see a crisis in the family as the very sight of its transformation into something unknown to them. These people simply do not know or cannot imagine any other form of family than the existing one' (2009: 3). Policymakers have been similarly unable or unwilling to imagine how the family can be accommodated in these precarious social conditions. White concludes 'it is the attempt to deny these differences and the real sources of these changes that have created a sense of crisis in Japan; enforcement of singularity and glorification of even the recent past will not solve it' (2002: 12). Koreeda's cinema, rather, resists

'singularity' and positively addresses the plurality of family structures and gender lifestyles that have emerged in the post-bubble era.

Koreeda as a cinematic discourse on social problems

Given that Koreeda will be treated as a discursive identity in this thesis, it is worth detailing the kinds of messages in his films. Throughout his career, Koreeda has returned again and again to dramas about the changing nature of the family in the contemporary era. It is due to this abundance of films that he has been selected as a case study for this thesis.

Furthermore, he is one of few recent filmmakers who has managed to build a strong reputation in domestic and international contexts, gaining much acclaim and press attention in the process.

Koreeda's cinema intersects within contentious social issues and ongoing debates that have arisen during an era of anxiety, economic downturn and uncertainty about the future in Japan. His films have fluctuated between optimism and pessimism yet are chiefly concerned with the small details and complex interpersonal relationships that define contemporary lifestyles and issues. The director has said 'in my filmmaking, one of the things I am trying to do consciously is to show the things in our daily lives that seem banal and ordinary, but that are actually very, very special' (Murray 2014).

Early films tended to be more bleak explorations of individuals going through crisis. Debut feature *Maborosi*, a film exploring themes of 'loss, trauma (and) memory' (Desser 2007: 273), details a grieving young mother who tries to overcome the sudden, unexplained suicide of her husband. Filmed mostly in static shots and avoiding the intimacy of close-ups,

the film is an ambiguous meditation on life and death. 2001's *Distance* drew upon the widely reported terrorist attack on the Tokyo Subway in 1995 by the Aum Shinrikyo cult. In Koreeda's fictitious film, family and friends gather to commemorate the deaths of loved ones who were part of a similar cult who, three years previously, had poisoned the Tokyo water supply before committing mass suicide. *Nobody Knows*, based on a real incident during the 1980s, details a group of young siblings abandoned by their mother in a Tokyo apartment whose lives spiral into desperation and tragedy. A far more socially critical piece, the film draws attention to, as Leann Wolley argues, the 'machine-like indifference of post-modern society' (2009: 10). Reflecting the bleakness of some of his narratives, Koreeda has stated 'some people want to see characters who grow and become stronger over the course of a film. But I don't want to make such a movie. I don't portray people or make movies where viewers can easily find hope' (Rich 2018). These earlier films provided ambiguous and unhelpful commentaries on Japan's bleak post-bubble social landscape. Though family featured prominently in these films, it was beset by crisis, uncertainty and death.

From 2008, Koreeda's cinema became more focused on interpersonal family relationships, and this is the period my research targets. *Still Walking*, based on the director's own experiences with his parents, explores the fragile generational relationships between family members who gather at a commemoration event for the deceased eldest son. *Still Walking* is a more subtle exploration of family relationships than many of the films that preceded it and is relatable to the *shomin-geki* tradition popularised in Western scholarship through directors like Ozu and Naruse Mikio. Like the work of these directors, *Still Walking* is tonally light but somewhat ambiguous and pessimistic regarding its social commentary on the family. However, this was followed by more upbeat narratives such as *I Wish, Like Father*,

Like Son, *Our Little Sister* and *After the Storm*, the latter of which reunites cast members from *Still Walking* in a new story that explores the relationship between an elderly widow, her recently divorced son and his ex-wife. Unlike his more melancholic former output, these films are also characterised by markedly optimistic narratives that attempt to find solutions for their troubled protagonists' family predicaments. Acknowledging the tonal shift between *Still Walking* and *After the Storm*, Koreeda confessed:

I'm coming from a different perspective this time. We can see loss as something missing, but that missing space can be filled with something else, and that creates healing. Maybe the shift is toward seeing loss as a possibility or an opportunity for change, instead of something you want to obsess over. I've changed, I've become more optimistic in that sense (Macfarlane 2017).

With these tonal adjustments comes a more politicised depiction of the family. While earlier films often touched on sensitive social issues and anxieties but ended with ambiguous conclusions, these family narratives imagine answers to their themes.

The cycle of family narratives starting from *Still Walking* have proven to be popular amongst both domestic and international audiences. Following its Cannes victory, *Like Father, Like Son* earned more than \$30 million at the domestic box office, making the film Koreeda's biggest hit at that point. *Our Little Sister* earned a respectable \$15 million two years later. One of the likely factors that inspired their domestic success was the casting of stars in central roles. *Like Father, Like Son*, for example, features Fukuyama Masaharu, a famous musician and actor. Here, he is cast in an unusually unsympathetic role as a hardened salaryman whose life and paternal identity are threatened when he learns his son was switched with another at birth, and his 'real' son has been raised by a much softer, lower-

class father. The star of *Our Little Sister* is Ayase Haruka, another popular face from television and film, who plays the eldest sister running an all-sibling household in Kamakura. Other domestic stars making frequent appearances include veteran actress Kirin Kiki, who has featured in many of Koreeda's later narratives, TV and movie star Abe Hiroshi, and Yamaguchi Tomoko – the 'queen of "trendy dramas"' - who appeared in Koreeda's TV series *Going my Home* (*Goingu mai Homu*, 2012) following a 16 year absence from television (Brasor 2012). Koreeda's more liberal use of stars during this period has meant that his narratives and their messages have gained a higher level of engagement with the Japanese public.

While these films are dressed-up by their starry casts, they are also harbouring more dynamic politics of the family, often through their star leads. As shall be discussed in chapter three, in *Like Father, Like Son*, Fukuyama's character Ryo reassesses his patriarchal position after being confronted by the more engaged and playful father who has been raising his biological son. Recognising the detrimental effect his work-obsessed and mostly absent form of parental interaction has had on his son, Ryo eventually vows to prioritise his family over his work. In *Our Little Sister*, discussed in chapter two, Ayase's character Sachi aspires to leave her younger siblings and become a wife and mother, but these plans are eventually abandoned after she realises the value of her current situation and her rewarding career at the hospital; a job she would likely leave if she followed more normalised pathways into marriage. These narratives, both with happy endings for the main characters and their families, may seem incidental and even sentimental, but the journeys of these characters are, in fact, more politicised. In both instances, the characters must question the efficiency of 'standardised' roles of men and women, and in both cases, they circumvent these roles in

favour of alternative gendered identities. Therefore, though the films may be more incidental, positive and, through their star performers, more mainstream in appeal, these films present radical discursive perspectives of the family.

Koreeda has often stated that many narratives are influenced by his own family experience and some, particularly *Still Walking* and *After the Storm*, are highly personalised to his history with his parents (Lim 2009; Dunn 2017; Heskins 2017). However, the anxieties inherent within these films are also relatable to broader swathes of Japanese society. Both films are concerned with adult male protagonists who have failed to live up to the expectations of their elderly parents; this, Koreeda has stated, is motivated by his own feelings of guilt over his apparent absence in the final years of his mother's life (Wada-Marciano 2011: 216). However, these sentiments have also been observed on a national scale. Responsibility for elder generations has been a source of anxiety for many younger generations. While the more traditional practice of co-residence with elderly parents (as was common for *ie* families) has been rapidly declining in recent decades, residual cultural pressures remain for younger generations to provide at least some form of assistance for retired parents. John Traphagan has argued that a 'strong sense' remains among Japanese that 'the best locus of care for elders is the multigenerational home and the primary provider of care is an adult child' (2006: 205-6). Therefore, though these narratives are personal to the director, they reflect broader anxieties. Koreeda has stated his ongoing mantra is 'the more personal you make it, the more resonant it'll be' (Murray 2014), which identifies how his family themes, however personal, are relatable with swathes of domestic or even international audiences.

The optimistic and socially resonant role of the family in Koreeda's later films distinguishes this work from observations of earlier films. For example, Diane Wei Lewis (2019) has argued that Koreeda's interest in the family has made him blind to alternative forms of sociality. Speaking of urban fantasy *Air Doll* (*Kuki Ningyo* 2009), a manga adaptation, Lewis believes Koreeda 'mourns the loss of family stability without exploring why subjects have no choice but to conform to social norms if they are to flourish' (2019: 101). However, this is not reflected in later films whereby 'social norms' are critiqued and largely overcome by an exploration of alternative family forms. For example, in *Our Little Sister*, the sisters' parents are divorced, and their father was remarried twice before his death. Sachi's lover is a married doctor engaging in an affair. In this film, marriage is inherently unstable and there is no security through the heteronormative expectations of family. The collective decision of the sisters to retain their current household, thus remaining single and childless at the end of the narrative, is framed positively. Koreeda's 'failure to think beyond the reproductive family and embrace alternative forms of sociality' (2019: 121) in *Air Doll* is not, therefore, reproduced in his other manga adaptation *Our Little Sister*, and sociability (among siblings and half-siblings) provides a more suitable familial pathway.

Just as *Our Little Sister* seeks alternative adulthoods that defy traditional conceptions of family, other films disrupt traditional structures and the interpersonal relationships and responsibilities within formed families. Koreeda's cinema is 'positively rife with single parents and fractured families, indicating his awareness of ever-evolving living patterns in contemporary Japan' (Saint-Cyr 2015: 94), though these have been depicted variably. Earlier films like *Maborosi*, *Distance* and *Nobody Knows* detailed the 'absence' of family members and how this negatively affects remaining members. The young grieving widow in *Maborosi*

eventually relocates to a seaside village with her son where she remarries. However, her grief is never truly overcome, and the film ends ambiguously with a suggestion she too has taken her own life. Conversely, in *I Wish* the divorced family, though initially distressed by the annulment, come to accept their present conditions in their new homes despite parents and children remaining separated from one another. While Koreeda can be seen to have repeated certain themes and issues across his career, the manner through which they have been dealt with cinematically have strongly differed and their discursive effects should thus be treated separately. This is why I have chosen to focus my analysis on his more optimistic narratives made between 2011 and 2016.

Koreeda's films have, through different levels of engagement, provided a discourse on social issues in contemporary Japan. Previous studies have labelled similar kinds of film as the 'social problem film', defined broadly as 'films [that] use individual dramas to present morality tales with wider social implications' (Grisham and Grossman 2017: 65). Academics have usually resisted referring to these kinds of narratives as a 'genre', though many have noted generic elements. Charles Maland's 'working definition' of a social problem film is a 'central narrative concern or conflict [that] relates to or includes the presentation of a social problem' in a contemporary setting, and is 'animated by a humane concern for the victim(s) of or crusader(s) against the social problem and, often, by an implicit assumption that the problem can be treated or even eliminated through well-intentioned liberal social reform' (1988: 307). Social problem films are broadly understood to provide a very clear and accessible discourse on a given social issue and inspire some form of (predominantly left wing) response from the audience. Many studies have emerged treating social problem films as a phenomenon strongest in Hollywood during the post-war years (Campbell 1978;

Maland 1988; Neale 2000; Cagle 2017), but similar films have been studied elsewhere including the UK (Hill 1985), Iran (Zeydabadi-Nejad 2009) and Japan (Freedman 2011a; Vij 2014), making this an internationally recognised cinematic form.

Social problem films have been problematically defined in specific generic terms but the discourses surrounding them are useful for understanding the socio-political role of Koreeda's films, several of which have demonstrated a very clear engagement with social issues. Some of Koreeda's films fit 'generically' within the category of 'social problem films', such as *Nobody Knows* (abandoned children), *Shoplifters* (urban crime/poverty) and *Distance* (cults), though they fail to present a solution to their problems. Other films are not about social 'problems' but engage with social anxieties in a similar manner to how social problem films have treated their subjects. In his study of British examples, John Hill provides the following definition:

A social problem is the product of discourse rather than the property of any particular condition in itself. What then becomes accepted as a social problem is not in any way inevitable but a consequence of the ability to have any particular definition legitimated, be it via the media, or other 'accredited agencies.'[...] To this extent, the 'social problems' so defined are not so much the problems of 'society' as a whole as the 'problems' of those who enjoy the ability to universalize their particular point of view as the point of view of all in society (1985: 35).

Social problems result from a disruption or challenge to the social status quo and are resultantly derided in popular discourse. In Japan, many moral panics relating to gender identities, changing youth lifestyles and more liberal conceptions of the family have been discursively linked to broader problems regarding the birth deficit and perceived social

degradation (Allison 2013). As such, the depictions in Koreeda's cinema distance these emerging family and gender lifestyles from negative associations. For example, in *I Wish*, the two young brothers who have become separated from one another and a stable nuclear family household would likely, according to common beliefs, receive an impaired upbringing (Hertog 2009). However, in Koreeda's depiction, the brothers each gain 'replacement' family members either through their extended family or other members of the community. The more negative associations that tend to be linked with children in single-parent families are subverted through this representation. In *I Wish*, therefore, Koreeda reframes anxieties surrounding divorce and single parent families to make it 'suitable' as a family environment. This process, I argue, is repeated across his family narratives.

Following from this, the texts I have selected for analysis are those which reflect a 'positive' depiction of the Japanese family. These are the narratives Koreeda made from the years 2011 to 2016, comprising *I Wish*, *Like Father, Like Son*, *Our Little Sister*, *After the Storm* and TV series *Going my Home*. These are connected to one another and distinguished from Koreeda's other cinema by their light and accessible narratives, themes explicitly connected to the family, contemporary settings, non-fantastical nature,⁶ and optimistic conclusions. Although *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters* are focused on the family, films like these are not included in this thesis due to their pessimism and overt social criticism. My selection of narratives pays close attention to how they conclude, and I have favoured those with optimistic or positive outcomes. Koreeda has tended to favour ambiguous conclusions throughout his career and *Shoplifters*, ending with no clear future for the separated or imprisoned central protagonists, signals a return to this narrative preference. *Still Walking*,

⁶ *Going my Home* contains light fantastical elements regarding the possible existence of a mythologised species of tiny people. However, this is not a central plot concern and does not infringe on the family contexts.

though fulfilling many of the criteria, is more ambiguous than positive in its approach to the intergenerational family conflict leading the narrative. The film does not contain 'answers' for overcoming anxieties as later films do, and, as such, has been omitted from this study. The selection of narratives chosen here are connected to one another and separated from the director's other body of work for their ability to positively address social anxieties. For ease of reference, I will refer to this specific body of the director's work as the 'family narratives'.

Quiet activism in Koreeda's family narratives

Koreeda's family narratives fulfil what I argue is a unique role within cinema: they are calling for a change to the way the Japanese family is culturally understood. Rather than resolution being guided through more typically mythologised depictions of the family, Koreeda is resolving his films by creating new family mythologies that subtly try to upend dominantly held conceptions of what the family is *supposed to be*. By combining all the approaches listed above and assessing the discursive role of Koreeda's family narratives against their social background, I will ultimately demonstrate how they embody a covert form of activism. However, rather than the overt political activism of more explicitly critical or subversive cinema (e.g. Third Cinema), Koreeda's cinema is more subtly engaged to the extent that the films conceal their political nature behind positivity. These narratives each deal with contentious issues related to the Japanese family, yet they do not explicitly criticise injustices nor lament the loss of a prior social alternative; instead, these films emit positivity towards the very social changes that have raised anxiety from individuals or scorn

from politicians. As such, I will position and assess how Koreeda's family narratives are engaged in a form of 'quiet activism'.

Laura Pottinger terms quiet activism as 'modest, embodied acts that often entail processes of production or creativity, and which can be either implicitly or explicitly political in nature' (2017: 216). Originally coined by Linda Eisenmann to describe the equal rights campaigning of individual female educators during the post-war era, quiet activism is separated from the 'lively and boisterous' (2005: 1) movements such as the Suffragette Movement and the 1960s feminist protests by 'a quieter voice and a less radical face' (2005: 8). Further studies have considered how movements as diverse as student unions (Beck 2019) and hobby crafting (Hackney 2015) have had the potential to contest and discreetly develop progressive social attitudes.

Studies of quiet activism have drawn attention to individuals and movements that have subtly endeavoured to improve the rights of marginalised groups; it is this function I will analyse in relation to Koreeda's narratives. The majority of studies have brought attention to the work of feminist movements, though other studies have highlighted separate causes like homosexuality (Beck 2019) and environmentalism (McCauley 2019). My thesis is similarly interested in a feminist reading of Koreeda's cinema, insofar as women remain in Japan, as any society, a marginalised demographic, but my work is not limited solely to strictly feminist concerns. As has been argued (LeBlanc 2012), the social climate in contemporary Japan has been unaccommodating for a wide range of demographics and Koreeda's narratives address a range of social groups. At the same time, there are social groups who are not addressed by these same narratives and this is not always limited to women. Therefore, my approach retains a feminist focus, insofar as how the narratives treat

different demographics under the same lens of quiet activism; however, the chapters are not always focused on female demographics.

Quiet activism has been distinguished from more discordant types of activism through a more subtle engagement with their subject matter and this can be seen through Koreeda's lighter and more positive approach in the narratives discussed here. This is in contrast to films occurring before and after this trend, such as *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters*, the latter of which was successful in opening dialogues related to urban poverty. Reporting the political uproar the film had caused in Japan following its Cannes success, foreign news sources began highlighting some of nation's poverty issues in connection with the film (Blair 2018). Through this capacity to stir global debate regarding its central themes, *Shoplifters* is more *openly* politicised than the films discussed here. *Nobody Knows*, sharing similar politically-charged themes of urban poverty, is comparable. Though not encouraging the same kind of political engagement, the later family narratives are, as Pottinger states of quiet activism, 'characterised by qualities of gentleness, slowness, subtlety and subversion' (2016: 216). These 'gentler' films explore concepts related to the family that are also socially provocative, albeit in a more disguised form. By this method, Koreeda's narratives demonstrate a more approachable and optimistic filmmaking style that make the provocative ideologies they endorse more congenial.

It is precisely the manner through which these films have managed to evade much critical discussion that makes them fascinating and their politics perhaps more penetrative.

Reviews and interviews in the west have tended to classify these films as 'slice-of-life' (Slater-Williams 2016) or 'delicate' (Bradshaw 2011) without attempting to get beneath any of the social themes. For example, *Our Little Sister* was almost unanimously lauded by

Western critics for the engaging drama between the all-female sibling protagonists leading the narrative, or the exquisite depiction of rural Kamakura (David Fear's review (2016) is a good example). However, that the film also narratively advocates young women to abandon traditional adult trajectories by forgoing marriage to pursue careers and individual fulfilment slipped through mostly unnoticed. 'It's *just* a beautiful story told in a gentle fashion' (my emphasis) says one reviewer (Slater-Williams 2016). Other journalists have also perceived the genial attitude towards these films, though again significantly downplaying their radical potential: 'if some have dinged these as "lesser" Koreedas, presumably for their lack of dramatic severity, each demonstrates the lightness of touch that's become the auteur's signature' (Macfarlane 2017). Critic Tony Rayns's similar dismissal of these films as melodramatic and 'soap opera-ish' only heightens their surreptitious nature (2017). This demonstrates how Koreeda's lighter, potentially 'commercial' cinema has been overlooked due to their tonal lightness and, ergo, a perceived lack of overtly politicised narratives. Like Harwood, who argues that in the case of popular Hollywood cinema, 'we should take these films seriously precisely because they ask not to be' (1997: 10), I am fascinated by the potential Koreeda's family narratives have to surreptitiously dispute dominant social structures.

Investigating quiet activism debates in connection to the family in Japanese cinema provides new ways of approaching the family in global media contexts. Positivity and resolution in cinema have traditionally been perceived as a passive reinforcement of dominant (capitalist) ideologies. Studies of the family in Western cinema have noted a tendency to rely on dominant and 'mythologised' aspects of the nuclear family to answer social anxieties related to emerging family structures (Chambers 2001; Tincknell 2005; Jenkins 2015). For example,

Daniela Berghahn (2013) considered the impact of globalisation and increased mobility on the depiction of diasporic families in European cinema. In these films:

the will to integrate, to be upwardly mobile and to become somehow similar to the normative model of the white hegemonic family, yet without replicating its shortcomings and failures, are essential prerequisites for the positive endorsement of the Other – and for the crossover appeal of diasporic family films (2013: 4).

Just as Harwood discusses in relation to Hollywood cinema, the traditional family structure is once again evoked to solve local anxieties or contradictions and validate emerging, globalised constructions of the family. Berghahn's research is indicative of how contemporary unconventional notions of family have become more integrated within recent cinema, but also demonstrates the enduring influence of the nuclear model within the mediatization of these emerging forms. In a more recent study of Hollywood film, Claire Jenkins (2015) similarly believes films are 'torn between more liberal and diverse ideals based on the actual nature of changing families, and a traditional familial structure' (2015: 5). Jenkins also considers films that present positive depictions of new, alternative family structures. However, whereas in a film such as *The Kids are all Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010) the depiction of the non-standard family (in this case headed by a lesbian couple) is done, as Jenkins argues, through an association with the heteronormative nuclear family (2015: 168-170), Koreeda's cinema rejects the nuclear family and validates his non-standard families through this rejection. In other words, newer constructions of the family are usually validated through an association with the mythologised and dominant nuclear form; in Koreeda's cinema, newer constructions of family are similarly validated, but this occurs precisely through a rejection of the nuclear family.

In a similar manner, scholars investigating social problem films have often been critical of an apparent transposing of social problems from institutional to individual responsibility. Since these films are interested in 'solving' social problems narratively, scholars have often noted how films fail to engage with systemic social issues on a broader political level. For example, Russell Campbell has argued 'social consciousness' films in Hollywood 'depict social problems as aberrations within a fundamentally sound system rather than pointers to the inherently exploitative nature of a capitalist economy; that solutions may be entertained without contemplating any decisive shift in existing power relationships' (1978: 60). In many cases, it is the individual character of the film who is tasked with overcoming the social issue, thus returning to a former state of harmony as is so often sought in conventional Hollywood storytelling. Speaking of British films, John Hill believes 'the discourse conventionally mobilised by the 'social problem' film is that of social control, the maintenance of social order by either assimilation or containment' (Hill 1985: 36). The political order itself is untarnished through these narratives and responsibility is charged to the individual.

Similar patterns have been detected in other Japanese media depicting social problems.

Alice Freedman's (2011a) study of the cycle of adaptations based on the biographical novel *Homeless Junior High School Student* (Tamura Hiroshi, 2007), finds the film is indicative of 'a fashion for sentimentality' when depicting social issues. This franchise, Freedman believes, 'provides a case study in how the Japanese media dress up social issues in sentimental garb' (2011a: 400), and these findings are likened to other depictions of homelessness in manga, art, film and magazines. The films Freedman discusses are comparable with Western examples of the social problem film, insofar as such narratives are presented 'as an

individual experience rather than a larger social problem demanding a political solution’ (2011a: 387). However, unlike all these examples, Koreeda’s films have more closely targeted the system. The characters are not required to ‘solve’ their family problems, their closure comes after they accept their new, ‘rebellious’ family lifestyles. The family dilemmas in Koreeda’s cinema are not *problems* to be solved; they should not be treated as *problems* in the first instance. In this process, the responsibility is shifted to the institutions that have caused them to become problems.

As scholars have noted, social issues are discursive issues. Many have come as the result of power structures that dictate the extent to which a social occurrence or phenomenon is considered undesirable. In other words, there is not simply one discourse on social issues but rather a multiplicity. For example, though divorce persists in the Japanese socio-political imagination as unfavourable and potentially damaging to those involved, the 21st century has also seen a rise in ‘divorce ceremonies’ – whereby separating couples attend mock-wedding events together and ritualistically destroy their rings during the ceremony’s climax (Kawamura 2010; Lah 2010). Events like these demonstrate how, for some groups, divorce does not carry the same social stigma as it continues to for others. Therefore, while Koreeda’s films *I Wish* and *After the Storm* show the potential for positive outcomes from divorce, these are not wholly polemic inasmuch as they are simply emphasising a particular (emergent) discursive perspective; a perspective that empowers a less institutionally sanctioned view of the Japanese family. This follows Foucault’s conception of the author-function - Koreeda is not ‘creating’ new discourses as such, he is, as a quiet activist, instigating a shift in favour of these discourses.

There appears to be a consensus within existing studies of social problems or social issues in cinema that, in the process of offering a 'resolution' or answer, a film supposedly evades socio-political criticism. We may deduce that films must bear more pessimistic or ambiguous narratives (in the vein of, say, Ozu) in order to exhibit a truly activist or critical stance against the status quo (Mellen 1976; Iles 2008a). This thesis, rather, presents Koreeda's cinema as one of positivity: rather than simply evade institutional criticism, these films imagine optimistic solutions whereby it is the people who overpower and circumvent social anxieties by changing how they discursively perceive their own conditions.

Films of a positive temperament have often been overlooked or disregarded merely as serving mainstream political ends. As I have already discussed, Hollywood cinema with its preference for 'resolutions' has often been scrutinised for an inability to overcome patriarchal ideologies despite developing social attitudes that have called patriarchy more and more into question. At the same time, Japanese cinema, as studied through authorship, has been considered more socio-politically active and critical though overwhelmingly pessimistic by comparison. However, Koreeda's family narratives demonstrate how film can be politically active but through the unassuming positive lens of quiet activism. Since academia has not accounted for this type of cinema until now, revealing this discursive function of Koreeda's work is one of the major interventions of my thesis. These are not films calling for radical political action per se, they are campaigning more subtly for power shifts in socio-political consciousness. They quietly advocate for more accommodating attitudes towards the plurality of family and gender lifestyles that now make up the Japanese social landscape. Koreeda's cinema is one through which he reimagines how the Japanese family, in its non-singular form, can shift discourses from anxiety to

accommodation. In effect, these narratives are trying to turn social abnormalities into a normality.

Chapters

The following chapters will analyse the position of Koreeda's cinema as a form of 'quiet activism.' The initial three chapters provide evidence to support Koreeda's role as a quiet activist by focusing on specific social themes in three of his family narratives. These chapters are each concerned with the depiction of particular demographics who have been marginalised or have been at the centre of ongoing social anxieties and debates.

The first chapter examines how Koreeda approaches the downfall of the key proponent in family standardisation: the nuclear family. Since the 1980s, increasing divorce, single-parent families and non-standard households have provided impetus to the gradual waning of the nuclear family's former strength. Inflexible state policies and corporate structuring continues to favour nuclear households operating under a sole (usually male) breadwinner; this has fuelled anxieties over sustainable income for single-parent households and the perceived unsuitability of these households for raising children. These concerns are most strongly addressed in *I Wish*, a film about two young brothers who become geographically separated by divorce. Following their separation, the brothers each enter a distinct 'post-nuclear' household that differentially harken back to pre-war family structures such as the *ie* and rural *kyokodai* (village community). Koreeda's depiction of these households reveals the potential for a 'borderless' approach to the Japanese family, and his single parent families, like the traditional structures of before, are emphasised by sociality and community. By

considering the effects of family standardisation on different generations of characters depicted in the narrative, this chapter explores how Koreeda uses the single-parent family to attack the rigidity of the nuclear structure and its effect on marginalised demographics. Furthermore, the child protagonists are optimistically positioned as a figurative 'generation of compromise' who will find a way to coalesce emerging family structures with traditional, communal structures in order to overcome the privatised rigidity of the nuclear family.

Moving on to family gender roles, chapter two considers the all-female, all-sibling household at the centre of *Our Little Sister* amid the emerging socio-political discourses surrounding 'Womenomics': Prime Minister Abe's initiative to increase female labour participation. Economic decline has been one of the central issues addressed during Abe's leadership and the move to boost women in career roles was implemented in an attempt to augment the nation's fortunes. However, this political manoeuvre has been considered largely unsuccessful due to a lack of incentive and strong gendered ideologies that continue to influence corporate structuring. Furthermore, the initiative has failed to account for the hardships undertaken by women who balance careers with childrearing, and residual post-war ideologies maintain a preference for women performing domestic functions as a sole priority. *Our Little Sister* explores the links between career, family and childrearing through the stories of the twenty-something sister protagonists who adopt their teenage half-sister. Focusing especially on the eldest sibling/main protagonist Sachi, this chapter explores the negotiations between career and family and how these contend with social contradictions between female labour participation and maternal discourses. Set in a romanticised depiction of Kamakura – a popular traditional tourist spot south of Tokyo – Koreeda

sentimentally draws upon notions of a nostalgic 'lost' image of Japan that the sisters preserve through their focus on career and rejection of urbanised family standardisation.

Chapter three is the first of two chapters looking at *Like Father, Like Son*; the first of which considers the film's masculine roles. *Like Father, Like Son* emerged during new discourses and pressures for Japanese fathers to perform a stronger parental role for their children.

These new role models challenge the post-war salaryman, whose masculinity was typically centralised on a strong dedication to work and an absence from the domestic space.

Koreeda explores this development through the comparison of two fathers of opposite financial classes who discover their six-year-old sons were switched at birth. Through this conflict, the lead protagonist – an archetypal salaryman figure – is forced to reassess his conservative and unsentimental approach to parenthood. In this film, possibly Koreeda's most sentimental offering, the 'failures' of working fathers to live up to new idealised parental masculinities is blamed on corporate settings. Fathers are depicted as 'good fathers' by default, and Koreeda separates his characters according to the work environments that have shaped their paternal ideologies. By treating the central protagonist as a victim, *Like Father, Like Son* addresses the competing pressures on Japanese fathers in a manner to reassure those who have struggled to negotiate their paternal roles amid conflicting corporate and domestic pressures. Following this, and despite advocating stronger parental engagement from fathers, the film also re-mythologises all fathers through a subtext that defines fatherhood by mere 'presence' or simply existence in the lives of their children.

The limits of quiet activism

Chapters four and five utilise the same approach as the preceding chapters, but my attention here shifts to questioning *to what extent* Koreeda is acting as a quiet activist in his family narratives. As has been argued by Rosenstone in relation to cinematic historians, social problems and social anxieties are often subjective and their treatment within a narrative can vary widely depending on a particular discursive perspective. Rosenstone uses this framework to assess the more liberal tendencies of director Oliver Stone and how his approach to American politics shapes an audience's perceptions of Vietnam through cinema. Social problem films have similarly been associated with different forms of populism throughout the 20th century; Steven Neale has argued the politics of these films have varied from left to right-wing politics, though 'liberalism of one kind or another continued and continues to dominate Hollywood's social problem films' (2000: 110). Hill and Richard Maltby (1983) have also argued that social problems are a discursive matter, and their treatment on film is subjective and often partial to more widespread political sentiments during the time of their production.

Just as these studies have argued, Koreeda's family narratives are also sites where we find differing balances of power depending on different demographics. These narratives are linked by their positive treatment of emerging family and gender identities, but at the same time their representations are subjective and at times either contradictory or potentially discriminating. Insofar as I am positioning Koreeda as a quiet activist, I also wish to investigate the limit of this activism. The term quiet activist implies that Koreeda is campaigning for change that supports marginalised social demographics and challenges the unaccommodating status quo. However, there are times within these same narratives

where this position falls short and Koreeda's representations either ignore certain demographics or contradict one another. Rather than simply avoid these anomalies (as would be the temptation in traditional authorship studies) I wish to explore how and when they occur, how they can still be linked to optimism, and how they relate to broader narratives of family and gender in contemporary Japan.

Chapter four considers *Like Father, Like Son* from the mother's perspective. Linking analysis to chapter three, I draw upon Hannah Hamad's (2013) study of post-feminism in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Assessing the surge in paternal masculine figures from a feminist subjectivity, Hamad argues 'the normalization of postfeminist fatherhood frequently entails the appropriation and/or marginalization of motherhood' (2013: 17). In *Like Father, Like Son*, a similar process occurs and demonstrates how the patriarchal gaze of Hollywood cinema, though nominally perceived as progressive, is relatable to Koreeda's narratives. This chapter considers the two mother characters contextualised against the changing roles and responsibilities of Japanese housewives from the post-war to post-bubble eras. Although, while the fathers modify their behaviours to meet contemporary paternal role models, the mothers are not permitted the same propensity to overcome their linear social functions. Instead, Koreeda's depictions draw upon mythologised notions of *ryosai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) – an ideological concept from the Meiji era that taught women to become passive, nurturing wives and child bearers in adulthood; a principle that has largely endured in social imagination up to the present era. Mothers across Japan have increasingly resisted their marginalised position in family standardisation, and this has been one reason why many have forgone marriage at all. However, in *Like Father, Like Son*, Koreeda leaves the plight of mothers relatively unaddressed and relies on

longstanding maternal myths to justify his characters' positions; myths many have come to regard as a restriction.

Chapter four highlights the demographics that may be figuratively left behind in Koreeda's petition for social transformation, the fifth chapter then considers how some of the directors' recent projects may contradict others. Actor Abe Hiroshi has featured in several of Koreeda's narratives, playing the lead roles in *After the Storm* and TV series *Going my Home*. These narratives are more comedic than the director's other work, with many of the comedy moments occurring at the expense of Abe's character (named 'Ryo' in each narrative). Both feature Ryo either as embarrassing to others (*After the Storm*) or in a state of perpetual embarrassment (*Going my Home*), and in both cases this embarrassment stems from his inability to perform in accordance with the dominant masculine traits expected of his generation. Making a slight methodological departure from previous chapters, this chapter uses a conceptual framework related to comedy and embarrassment to discuss how Ryo is a 'distorted image' (Laine 2001) of conflicting masculinities in contemporary Japan. The two Ryo's are positioned as hybrid male identities humorously embodying competing social roles such as 'freeters' (*After the Storm*) or domestic responsibilities (*Going my Home*) with the more conservative expectations of the post-war salaryman. These representations collectively satirise the contemporary confluence of contradictory expectations for men of Koreeda's generation. However, the Abe narratives are further distinguished from Koreeda's other family narratives by resolutions showing support for a singular masculine identity. This chapter considers, therefore, the contradictions in the 'Ryo' narratives and how these can be related to the comedy format, author subjectivities, or, in the case of *Going my Home* which was never released outside of Japan, target audience.

These chapters collectively reveal a tendency to address the complex and contradictory landscape of the family in 21st century Japan, but the manner through which this is addressed is not without its own contradictions, paradoxes and marginalisation. These narratives are united by their attempts to overcome the fears, frustrations and uncertainties that have met the post-bubble Japanese family; feelings exacerbated by the looming crisis of the nation's shrinking population. They seek to positively overpower discursive attempts to constrain a diversity of family structures and adult identities. But these solutions are, in much the same fashion to the conservative desires of the ruling classes, bound within their own subjective rules of engagement. Koreeda's cinema represents a resistance insofar as it challenges dominant ideologies, but even these ideologies occasionally seep within supposedly oppositional representations.

Chapter 1

Post-nuclear family structures: Bridging old and new communal family networks in *I Wish*

The changing social status of the nuclear family and its attendant ideological forms (e.g. gender) is a theme that resonates across Koreeda's cinema. All of his family narratives are concerned with families and/or family members who struggle to live up to social expectations linked with the 'hegemonic' nuclear family. In many cases, this is explicitly linked to the performance of gender and how gender roles in contemporary Japanese society have developed beyond the expectations of post-war families. Later chapters will examine gender and how Koreeda provides positive representations of changing masculine and feminine identities. This chapter, however, looks more broadly at how family structures are depicted and how these respond to the contemporary rise in non-standard households. The numbers of adults neglecting normative pathways into marriage and childrearing have been increasing exponentially over the last forty years (Ronald and Alexy 2011). At the same time, divorce rates have also grown, leading to higher numbers of single-parent households (Bassani 2007; Raymo 2016; Nonoyama-Tarumi 2017). These developments have severely undermined the social strength of the standardised nuclear family and faced oppositional discourses from many who see the family as under threat.

This chapter will explore how issues and anxieties regarding divorced single-parent families in Japan are addressed in Koreeda's 2011 feature *I Wish (Kiseki)*. Set six months after the consensual divorce of their parents, *I Wish* follows the plight of separated young brothers Koichi and Ryu (played by real brothers Koki and Oshiro Maeda) who attempt to cope with

their new lives. Focusing on both brothers, Koreeda depicts two distinct household structures each brother enters under a single parent. While Koichi lives with extended members of his family alongside his mother, Ryu's home with his father is more communal and features non-family members. Despite their divergence from normalised family settings, Koreeda depicts both households as positive environments for the brothers and their other family members. By doing so, *I Wish* provides a counter-discourse to the anxieties regarding increasing divorce and non-standard households.

Koreeda's positive depiction of 'post-nuclear'⁷ single-parent families represents a challenge to the institutional preference of a homogenous family structure. By deconstructing the contemporary efficiency of the nuclear family, *I Wish* is an example of quiet activism in favour of family de-standardisation. To explain this, my analysis explores how the child protagonists benefit from their new environments. Koreeda depicts highly contrasted single-parent households (distinct from one another as well as the nuclear family) to demonstrate how suitable households need not be tied to a specific structural organisation. The second half of the chapter explores the connections between the brothers' households and traditional pre-modern family structures related to the *kyokodai* or 'village community'. By drawing these comparisons, Koreeda highlights the adaptability or fluidity that has characterised the Japanese family as a historically developing entity. This creates further criticism of the institutional resistance to emerging family structures, and Koreeda even suggests the nuclear family is culpable for social divisions that have grown between traditional 'agrarian' conceptions of the family and the contemporary demands of a

⁷ Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan (2012) have used the term 'post-nuclear family' to describe the alternative family structures (involving children) that have emerged in the wake of increasing divorce and single parent families worldwide. My use of the term shares their definition.

postmodern society. Furthermore, *I Wish* has positive outlooks for the future and, as shall be discussed in the latter part of the chapter, this is related to the children. Through the young protagonists leading the narrative, Koreeda suggests the next generation will overcome social divisions and find a 'compromise' between the competing discourses of old and new. This compromise is generated by a loosening of the legislated rigidity of a homogenous family form, and an acceptance of more 'fluid' constructions of the family. In this manner, and using quiet activism, *I Wish* rejects institutional preference for family 'standardisation' and advocates for a future supporting broader networks of family interconnectivity.

Family standardisation in the Meiji and post-war eras

Japanese family structures have undergone significant changes across modernity and 'standardised' families do not and have not necessarily reflected the actual living conditions of the population. Across history, there have been many examples of demographics who have fallen outside state expectations due to numerous historical and/or personal circumstances. The contexts I detail in this chapter (and subsequent chapters) are limited to understanding how the legislated or 'dominant' family structures have developed from the modernisation era to the present. Therefore, this does not provide an extensive history of the Japanese family as it has developed socially, but rather my interest is in how it has been shaped by socio-political expectations and how contemporary behavioural shifts have resisted standardisation.

Family standardisation only became a widespread concept during the Meiji era (1868 – 1912), Japan’s period of modernisation. Until this point, families, especially those in rural areas (comprising the vast majority of the population), did not comply with a normalised structure and tended to be ‘governed by local custom and the exigencies of land use and production’ (White 2002: 46). The *ie* (or ‘stem’ family) was initiated in the 1898 Civil Code as part of a wider strategy to unite the nation under a shared ideology and common purpose to facilitate the nation’s rapid modernisation (Irokawa 1985; Kuwayama 2001). Strongly guided by patriarchal Confucian principles of loyalty and filial piety, *ie* households comprised three-generations of family members. Most were constructed around a male ‘head’ of household (also the family business owner), his wife and children, and his elderly parents. Members tended to have set roles and expectations – the male head would manage the business while his wife handled domestic tasks including the care of children and her parents-in-law (Saito 2000; Kuwayama 2001). The household would be passed down through successive generations of men. Typically, the eldest son would succeed his father in managing the house, younger sons would form their own ‘branch’ households separately, and daughters would be married off to other households (Hendry 2012: 25). Family and business were intertwined in *ie* households, and since many businesses operated from the home, they were considered ‘self-sufficient’ enterprises (White 2002: 66).

Ie households were contingent on an ‘insurance of continuity’ (Hendry 2012: 26), and for this reason they could be highly adaptive. For example, if no sons were begotten, parents may ‘adopt’ a son from another family to become household head (2012: 26). Within this environment, relations were ‘characterised less by love and affection than by duty and filial piety’ (2012: 25). The permanence and status of the family were above and all paramount;

as Fukutake Tadashi explains, 'the *ie*... was far more important than the individuals who were at any one time living members of it, and it was seen as natural that the individual personalities of family members should be ignored and sacrificed if necessary for the good of the whole' (1982: 28). Seen this way, *ie* homes were highly flexible depending on the needs of the household, and non-related family members were not uncommon. However, this flexibility was far less accommodated by the succeeding standard family structure – the nuclear family.

The nuclear family was introduced in Japan by Allied forces during the post-war Occupation. American forces were keen to install an individualised, democratic and egalitarian household structure modelled closely on their own to compliment the democratic political system they also established (Hendry 2012: 28). These changes aimed to eradicate the influence of the Confucian and nationalist ideologies that facilitated the nation's fascist policies during the Second World War, ideologies to which the *ie* was perceived to be strongly connected (Duus and Okimoto 1979). Nuclear families reduced the capacity of Japanese households to the husband, wife and their children, and gave wives equal rights over the household (Hendry 2012: 28). The elderly parents, once integral and respected members of the *ie*, were cast aside by new legislation. For this and other reasons, many found it difficult initially to adapt to the post-war changes, particularly as parents had new roles to assume that were detached from the authority and guidance of the older generation (Vogel 2013; White 2002). Nuclear families transformed the Japanese family, therefore, into a reduced, rigidly structured and more privatised household unit.

The nuclear family has been considered instrumental in facilitating Japan's unprecedented economic growth during the post-war era (Garon 1997). Though originally envisioned to

promote individuality among family members, its structure was soon utilised as an opportunity to serve national needs. As had been the case with the *ie* in pre-war contexts, the roles of men and women in the nuclear family were mandated by the demands of modern institutions: men would work outside the home for long hours as ‘salarymen’; women would stay home, tend to her husband’s needs, and work hard to educate children so they too could fulfil similar roles in adulthood (Vogel 1963). Companies offered breadwinning male employees attractive ‘lifetime employment’ and seniority-based promotion packages that provided more than enough to support growing families (Ono 2010); housewives benefitted from economic security, full domestic management and steadily improving living conditions (Holloway 2010; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Vogel and Vogel 2013). Sacrificing individual fulfilment, husbands and wives worked hard to ensure a steady flow of hard labour that would guide the nation’s economic recovery (Vogel 1963).

Though the public had responded tentatively to the new legislation during the early post-war years, more positive attitudes were fostered by economic growth during the 1950s and 60s. Technical innovations led to a boom in consumer electronics such as televisions and refrigerators that enticed an emerging middle-class consumer lifestyle; these discourses were strongly modelled on the stay-at-home wife (Vogel 1978; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). The urban nuclear family became an increasingly attractive lifestyle goal, and the hard work of salaryman husbands and housewives were supported by official discourses as being directly responsible for the nation’s changing fortunes (Dasgupta 2003; Takeda 2005). By the end of the 1960s, the nuclear family provided an attractive consumerist lifestyle that was ‘culturally supported’ in mainstream discourses as well as fulfilling political needs by aiding the nation’s ‘economic function’ (White 2002: 76). During these years, the nuclear family

was successful because it served social, cultural and economic demands to a high degree, which offset the issues caused by the highly restrictive roles into which it positioned men and women. However, this would become challenged when public attitudes and the economic situation started to change.

From the 1980s, younger generations started becoming less enticed by the linear adult pathways promised by the nuclear family (Dasgupta 2000; Mathews 2004; Charlebois 2017). Many started to delay marriages, whilst others elected alternative lifestyles focusing on careers or individual goals. Public discourses decried the attitudes of younger generations who resisted the normalised pathways into adulthood and family; many were accused of selfishly disavowing 'the values of hard work and thrift that had fuelled Japan's engine of post-war economic success' (White 2002: 82). After the financial crash in the early 1990s, the economic security and consumer ideals that had previously supported the nuclear family destabilised further. The employment sector underwent dramatic restructuring that saw many salaryman husbands lose the generous benefits packages from before, while others lost their jobs completely (Krawczyk 2014). This caused a sharp reduction in households supported by a sole breadwinner. With both parents often having to work to make ends meet, the attractive lifestyle promised in earlier discourses of the nuclear family became less attainable, thus lessening its desirability. This steered many younger generations away from marriage and childrearing, whilst those already married increasingly turned to divorce.

Rising divorce and non-standard families in the post-bubble era

Towards the end of the 1990s, divorce and its consequences became significant social anxieties. Harald Fuess, in his extensive research into divorce in Japan, observed how all major Japanese newspapers on New Year's Day 1999 reported that the divorce rate in 1998 was the 'highest in history'. One stated 'the number of divorces has risen for the eighth consecutive year', another; 'one couple split every two minutes and ten seconds' (2004: 144). Since the early 1990s, following the economic collapse, divorce figures had been growing at an astonishing rate (2004: 145). Though divorce rates still remained low compared with other industrialised nations, particularly the UK and US, the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* headline declaring 'The Divorce Rate Has Reached European Levels' stirred a growing social panic (2004: 144). Suddenly unable to distinguish themselves from Western societies through the previously strong national ties between family and nation, Japan had become a 'normal' industrialised society in the present (2004: 145). As the media reaction demonstrates, the social strength and cultural pride in the family unravelled as the nation approached the 21st century. Furthermore, it was becoming clear that marriage and the nuclear family was no longer accommodating to the demands of growing numbers of Japanese adults.

Since 2002, divorce rates have regressed slightly yet remain high in comparison to levels during the high growth era (Alexy 2011: 238). Studies in 2014 predicted that roughly a third of all marriages are now expected to end in divorce (Raymo et al. 2014). Domestic media discourses tend to group the high divorce rate among other demographic shifts such as later marriage and low birth-rates (Alexy 2008); along with divorce, the financial collapse and recession triggered the acceleration in the growth of 'non-standard' families, such as single-

parent households, childless married couples and solo adults (Ronald and Alexy 2011).

While the nuclear family comprised 45.7% of all households in 1975, by 2005 it had dropped to 29.9% (2011: 9). However, despite its dwindling presence and the growing social defiance, the nuclear structure has maintained its presence as the hegemonic structure according to economic and welfare policies, employment structures, and political discourses (White 2002; Nemoto 2008; LeBlanc 2011). This has made society far less accommodating for non-standard families, particularly single-parent households.

According to figures from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the number of single-parent households in Japan went from 1,022,000 in 1988 to 1,461,000 in 2011 (in Nonoyama-Tarumi 2017). Roughly 60% of all divorces involve children, and it is the mother who receives custody in more than 80% of these cases (2016: 66).⁸ Unlike many other nations, Japanese parents who are not awarded custody of children following divorce are less likely to maintain relationships with their children. In 2012, 50.8% of single mothers said there was no contact between fathers and their children (Nonoyama-Tarumi 2017: 915). This means single mothers, a large demographic in Japan, often receive little financial support raising children and must rely on their own sources of income.

Divorced mothers struggle to find stable employment since many of them had spent their years of marriage fulfilling domestic duties with little time to build employment skills (Hertog 2009). Due to a lack of welfare support, 85% of unmarried Japanese mothers were in the labour force in 2011, the highest figure among OECD countries. Furthermore, over half of these households were below the national poverty line during the same year, which

⁸ This is based on an ideology that women are seen to be more crucial for a child's educational upbringing (Tsuya and Coe 2004)

was again the highest of all the OECD countries (Raymo 2016: 67). Forced back into the labour market, many struggle to find the means to support themselves and their children because Japanese employment practices are still based on family breadwinner models. In many cases, single-mothers must work in part-time or temporary positions since companies continue to prioritise male staff for permanent positions, or because mothers must balance their work hours and childcare demands (Hertog 2009; Raymo 2017). Therefore, due to the high levels of commitment required of full-time staff, income disparities between sexes in Japanese companies, and the lack of availability and high costs of childcare, many divorced single-mothers in contemporary Japan encounter poverty and impaired wellbeing (Hertog 2009; Raymo and Zhou 2012; Shirahase and Raymo 2014; Raymo 2016). This demonstrates how the preservation of the nuclear family in ruling discursive structures has meant those who fall outside these expectations, such as single-mothers, are poorly accommodated.

Furthermore, children raised in single-parent families have been subjected to negative discourse that directly relates to their non-standard households. In her extensive research into single-mothers in Japan, Ekaterina Hertog recorded a common opinion amongst divorced and unwed mothers who felt single-parent households are a 'detrimental environment' for children to grow up in, and that 'a suitable family environment is argued to be the crucial counterpart of formal education and a necessary condition for the child to be able to achieve the best possible results' (2009: 132). As a result, many single-parents fear their children will not benefit from the same advantage as their married counterparts, and the media perpetuates an image of 'problematic' children resulting from mothers who, due to work commitments, cannot commit full-time to childrearing (2009: 140). These concerns are reflected by academic performance; children in single-parent families have, on average,

performed lower academically (Nonomiya-Tarumi 2017). It has even been suggested that children raised in single-parent households are overlooked by the biggest companies for hiring (White 2002: 88). This has meant many have faced derogatory attitudes alongside unaccommodating socio-economic structures that have strong influences across their lives. These are discourses Koreeda seeks to overturn in *I Wish* through the positive depiction of the two brothers.

Mieko Hinokidani has argued recent sociodemographic changes ‘demonstrate a rise in non-conventional households together with an increasing diversity of lifestyles, which contradicts concepts of homogeneity and standardisation’ (2007: 114). But this is not necessarily a new phenomenon, and Japanese families have demonstrated more diverse behaviours throughout the post-war era. For example, though the *ie* was abolished in the post-war Civil Code changes, it has retained a strong social influence. Cohabitation with elderly parents has continued to be a more common practice in Japan than Western nations (Ogawa and Ermisch 1996), and studies have suggested that approximately 30% of married women of reproductive age were living with their parents-in-law at the beginning of the 20th century (Ogawa et al. 2006: 20). Care for elderly family members continues to have a ‘significant influence’ on the structure of Japanese families (Traphagan 2008: 225), and numerous living arrangements have been observed that attempt to bridge the ideological remnants of the *ie* with more modern social demands (Takagi and Silverstein 2011). Therefore, *ie* ideologies have endured long in the public imagination despite the major changes following the War, demonstrating the cultural value in the *ie*’s traditional (Confucian) principles (Kuwayama 2001). Furthermore, this also demonstrates how

Japanese families have defied the strict parameters of (nuclear) family standardisation over generations and developed lifestyles according to needs and requirements as they see fit.

The nuclear family may have been wielded in socio-political discourses as the definitive family unit across the post-war era, but the Japanese have historically demonstrated 'highly adaptive' approaches to family (Ronald and Alexy 2011: 3). In the post-bubble era, the standardised nuclear family has become less accommodating to the changing socio-economic conditions or the lifestyles sought by newer generations. The high levels of divorce demonstrate how the nuclear family has become increasingly rejected as a social institution. But despite this, policymakers have insisted on its continued hegemony (2011: 8). This has meant non-standard family structures such as single-parent households, a large demographic in the 21st century, have become socially and economically marginalised. The ongoing financial issues the nation has encountered coupled with the encroaching population crisis suggests family reform should be encouraged, or perhaps even an end to family standardisation altogether.

This is the discursive context within which we can understand Koreeda's representations in *I Wish*. This film, depicting divorced single-parent families, creates an optimistic image of contemporary family diversity. Adam Bingham has suggested the difference between families in this film and Koreeda's earlier family drama *Nobody Knows* 'is reflective of a spectrum of representations of Japanese families by Koreeda wherein a clash of nominally dichotomous elements underlines the fact that Japanese families are not of a piece, not adherent to a homogenous model' (2015: 105). *I Wish* brazenly opens a discourse for the dissolution of the obstinate standardised model and does so through the positive representation of distinct single-parent families. Demonstrating how non-standard (single

parent) families are a desirable alternative to the restrictions of the nuclear family, *I Wish* subtly encourages an abolishment of family standardisation through quiet activism.



Figure 1.1: Brothers and central protagonists Ryu (L, played by Maeda Oshiro) and Koichi (R, Maeda Koki) ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

Building new families in *I Wish*

Koreeda's depiction of Koichi and Ryu's (see Figure 1.1) single-parent households are emphasised in their particularity. Twelve-year-old elder sibling Koichi lives in a three-generation household (similar to the *ie*) with his mother Nozomi and her parents Shukichi and Hideko. The house is a two-storey building in a busy area of Kagoshima. Since Shukichi previously ran a business making *karukan*, a kind of local sponge cake, the home also contains catering facilities and a large open-plan living area at the front of the house (suggesting it may once have also been a café). Shukichi now works a more leisurely job as a local parking attendant, although once Nozomi and Koichi move in, he decides to try earning a more stable income to support his extended family. Upon hearing about a forthcoming

bullet train (*shinkansen*) station nearby, his friend suggests he exploit the coming market by resurrecting his old business and making a kind of bullet train-themed *karukan*.

Koichi's household is a socially common setting for divorced mothers in Japan, about a third of whom choose to move in with their parents following divorce, usually for financial reasons (Shirahase and Raymo 2014; Raymo 2016). Like many of his social counterparts, Koichi continues to receive the prerequisite social demands of male and female parenting, only his grandfather has assumed the paternal role. Shukichi's adoption of this role is further underscored by his decision to re-enter employment, thus consolidating his renewed position as family breadwinner. Here, Shukichi reassumes a 'head' position unquestioningly, demonstrating how the 'roles' of family members are flexible in Koreeda's representation. Very quickly, Koichi's new family structure means he is spared from common anxieties since he has an extended network of male/female parental figures. This provides a more conventional demonstration of how the normalised roles of 'mother' and 'father' can be fulfilled through wider networks of family members, which solves some of the immediate concerns regarding single parenthood upbringing. For younger brother Ryu, with no maternal figure to replace his mother, the situation is more complicated.

It is uncommon for fathers to take custody of children following divorce. In 2011, single father households accounted for 223,000 of the total households in Japan while single mother households totalled 1,237,700 (Raymo 2016: 67). This follows a common social belief that mothers are inherently better for a child's wellbeing and are therefore awarded the upper hand during custody negotiations (Fuess 2004: 157; McCauley 2011). Custody is likely to be offered to the father if the mother is deemed incapable of offering suitable care, yet this is not financially motivated (hence the number of single mothers living in poverty)

and situations such as these are therefore rare (McCauley 2011). In a more socially uncommon setting, Ryu lives in Fukuoka with his father Kenji and members of Kenji's rock band in a one-storey house. Although Kenji appears to work a basic manual labour job, most of his efforts are spent making music with his band; it was this 'slacker' attitude towards a stable income that supposedly caused the separation from his wife, Nozomi. During most scenes in the home, Kenji is seen sleeping or making music, whilst Ryu is often left to cater and care for himself, which he manages to do with efficiency. As a father without a stable income and a seemingly indifferent attitude towards his family's wellbeing, Kenji is an unlikely candidate to receive child custody. However, like Koichi's home in Kagoshima, his household is presented as an appropriate setting for Ryu's upbringing.

The mutual suitability of both the households is emphasised by a short sequence that directly compares them. In Fukuoka, Ryu, Kenji, his band and some of Ryu's friends enjoy an evening in their garden making music and playing with fireworks. There is little audible dialogue or continuity during the scene, Koreeda instead draws our attention to the bonding between the extended group (see Figure 1.2). Though we are aware it is a fictional construct, the handheld camera and improvisational quality liken it to documentary or even a home video.⁹ The scene then cuts to Kagoshima, where Koichi and the family are having a meal in the kitchen and speaking about Ryu and Kenji. In contrast to the previous scene, the lines are clearly scripted, the shots are static, and there is no soundtrack music (see Figure 1.3). The scenes are polarised by their styles, yet they are both depicting symbols of family bonding. The family meal – a more generic form symbolising union within families – is a

⁹ Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has noted the 'stylistic merging of dramatic feature and documentary' in Koreeda's cinema (2012: 58). In *I Wish*, there are numerous techniques to this effect, including the scene discussed here.

constructed ritual common across families and an easily identified principle of domestic custom since the Meiji era and beyond (Sand 2003: 33). In Fukuoka, the ritual is less common, yet the essence of familiarity is the same. The principle of bonding and community is established, albeit in a distinct aesthetic from the standard family meal. This presents the potential diversity of family if, as an institution, it was not so rigidly legislated and could improvise.

The polarity between the scenes attests to the possibility of a variety of families, of the ability to adapt to an environment, as Richard Ronald and Allison Alexy have described (2011). In a manner akin to Karen V. Hansen's (2005) observations of contemporary nuclear families in social contexts, the single-parent families here rely on 'networks' of extra members. Koichi and Nozomi find Shukichi and Hideko to complete their divided family and share moments of familial bonding. In the absence of blood-family members, Kenji and Ryu enlist friends to fill the void. With specific regard to the single-father family – a demographic that has been approached more critically in social discourse (Miyamoto 2000; Maruko 2014) - Koreeda draws attention to the unusual setting and conditions but presents them as an efficient deviation as opposed to an ersatz replication of the customary family. By filling in family members with networks of individuals (family or friends), Koreeda establishes how non-standard families are adaptable to the conditions and needs of the individuals involved.



Figure 1.2: Diverse family networks - Ryu, Kenji (Odagiri Joe), band members and Ryu's friends play with fireworks at their house ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).



Figure 1.3: Diverse family networks - Koichi, Nozomi (Otsuka Nene) and her parents gather for dinner ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

These comparisons emphasise how single-parent families can form diverse household structures without negatively impacting children. Rather than demonstrate how the non-

standard settings reproduce the same conditions as the nuclear household, Koreeda emphasises the potential diversity between them, and between each other. Koichi's family, based on a more common demographic (single mother with parents), represent a modest deviation from the social standard, but Ryu's family introduces a comparably radical alternative.

Bruce White studied similar communities united by common music interests emerging in major Japanese cities, groups inhabited predominantly by families and individuals outside of corporate or bureaucratic employment (2011). Gathering at communal outdoor events, many members typically emphasise their separation from mainstream society, which they see as somewhat 'outdated' by social distinctions dividing family and community (2011: 37).

White describes his observations of interactions with these groups:

Just as the topic of occupations was spoken about in deliberate contrast to 'the (mainstream) Japanese' other, so the topics of parenting and familial community seemed to occupy an exclusive space away from dominant parenting attitudes and approaches of 'the Japanese' (2011: 35).

Although limited in national scope, White's research suggests these subcultures imagine themselves as a precursor of growing paradigmatic shifts in social constructions of the family. With a similar engagement with music and outdoor activity, Ryu's family possess similar ideologies. However, the significance of 'family and community' within the principles of both White's subcultures and Ryu's family evoke far older tenets than their contemporary symbolism initially suggests. By doing so, Koreeda relates his family structures to more traditional and cultural forms of familial and social organisation. To explain this, it will first be necessary to detail some of the histories of the *kyokodai*.

Agrarian communities in the pre-modern era and beyond

Unlike many other myths of modern Japan, *kyokodai* predates the Meiji Restoration era (1868-1912). Takeuchi Yoshimi declares *kyokodai* as the site in which ‘the tradition of “indigenous belief” originates’ (in Irokawa 1985: 273). The term translates literally to ‘community’, yet its ideological function contains a specifically agrarian identity. According to Takeuchi, ‘the village *kyokodai* is based on real and fictive kinship bonds, shared religious ceremony, and the “old custom of mutual neighbourhood aid”’ (in Irokawa 1985: 273). Up until the emergence of state capitalism and resulting industrialisation during the Meiji period, Japan was, like most other nations, a predominantly agricultural society, and it was from these communities that a sense of cultural identity was established. To support this ideology, political principles and social patterns were ‘closely articulated with farming’, and the industry provided the ‘economic cornerstone’ of pre-modern Japan (Havens 1974: 4). As an ideological foundation, *kyokodai*, ‘does not refer to any specific institution but simply to the ways the masses join together’, reinforcing a principle of community over state control or subservience (Irokawa 1985: 275).

At the start of the Meiji Restoration period, government oligarchs were keen to establish *kyokodai* as a crucial component of *kokutai* (national polity) as the nation approached the period of modernisation. As an agricultural nation, the government endeavoured to promote agrarian principles (under which communities were already united) that would penetrate society and steer the nation together towards industrialisation and modernity (Kosaku 1992: 92). *Kyokodai*, being an existing ideological foundation, would become the base upon which new state-favouring concepts would be built. Thus, ideologues in the

government established new doctrines combining agrarian and Confucian principles to unite, and therefore control, the masses into nationalist subservience (Irokawa 1985; Kosaku 1992: 91). As part of this strategy, Meiji government leaders instilled a familial concept of state which would suppress popular sovereignty (Kosaku 1992: 90). With this in mind, the *kazoku kokka* (family state) was initiated as a hegemonic ideology. According to Ishida Takeshi, this was 'the most essential construct of the entire system of control under the Meiji system' (in Irokawa 1985: 280). Under the ideology of the *kazoku kokka*, the emperor was heralded as the father of the nation, and his subjects the children. Since the emperor was mythologised as having descended directly from the Shinto sun goddess and chief deity, Amaterasu, his status was further aggrandised as the 'creator of Japan' (Irokawa 1985: 283).

It was through the *kazoku kokka* that the *ie* family structure was originally legislated. With its emphasis on continuity, the *ie* drew parallels with the emperor's lineage, and with it, ancestral worship. As part of the *ie*, family ancestors were immortalised and revered in altars located within the home (a practice still common today (Hendry 2012: 28)). As Irokawa explains, 'this was part of the attempt to incorporate the popular belief in ancestral spirits into the emperor system by associating it with the belief in the imperial ancestors and the myth of divine descent' (1985: 285). Just as 'branch' households were ancillary to the main *ie*, all were ultimately subordinate to the emperor, uniting, as Ito Tasaburo says, 'the whole nation as one family under the rule of the emperor, his life unbroken for ages eternal' (in Irokawa 1985: 247). Thus, the *ie* was conceived as an integral element to the *kazoku kokka* and fulfilled the nationalising strategies of imperial loyalty (emperor as father) and filial piety (ancestral worship). Conceived 'at the village level', these ideologies fed into the

more established principles of *kyokodai*, eventually becoming absorbed together in the same nationalist myth (Kosaku 1992: 91; Irokawa 1985: 283). This demonstrates how the *ie* and *kyokodai* are strongly connected to traditional and highly mythologised cultural identity.

Throughout the period of modernisation, *kyokodai* became a source of variable, often conflicting nationalist discourses as the nation transitioned from an agrarian to an urban society. At the start of the modernisation process, when Japan was still a predominantly agricultural nation, *kyokodai* provided the fertile ground on which to grow the new imperial ideologies. However, as capitalism began to grow at the start of the twentieth century, and industrialisation forced many to abandon villages and farmlands for positions in the expanding cities, resistance to the emperor system grew in rural areas (Gluck 1985: 163).

Blaming 'individual morality' in the Western-influenced political structures of the Meiji government, growing numbers of villagers began to subvert *kyokodai* into a resistance against the emperor system rather than a prop, fearing cultural identity was becoming lost in the race towards modernisation (Irokawa 1985: 275). To confuse matters further, influential government figures too began to criticise the growing exodus to the cities.

Politician Yanagita Kunio, speaking at the meeting of the Greater Japan Agricultural Association in 1906, accused the increasing amounts of citizens abandoning village *ie* households as committing 'domicide' to the unborn descendants of their family legacy (in Irokawa 1985: 288). Since industrialisation was forcing people from their rural lands, this government criticism was contradictory. However, this establishes how, even at this early period of modernisation, the rural myths of *kyokodai* have stood in opposition to the nation's expanding urbanisation.

The influence of agrarian ideology spread beyond the abolition of the Civil Code. Speaking about its political use in the early 1990s, Jennifer Robertson believes the term *kyokodai* is 'fetishistic, for it is invoked, often nostalgically, as the "authentic" Japanese rural community, the implication being that farm villages inherently are cooperative' (1991: 89). Consequently, politicians in the late 20th century, like those at the start of the century, held onto *kyokodai* as an ideal for society to conserve despite the contradictions this creates in an urbanised capitalist society. As Robertson continues 'it thus connotes a pristine moral society, the resurrection and revalorisation of which is the ultimate objective of *furusato-zukuri* ('old village making') campaigns today' (see chapter two for more details about *furusato zukuri*) (1991: 89). These observations were made as Japan experienced the collapse of the bubble economy and the nation's future had become ambiguous. *Kyokodai* was used once again, therefore, as a political tool to unite the country and build the nation (back) towards prosperity, proving the ongoing cultural value contained within the agrarian myth.

As this demonstrates, *kyokodai* has emerged at separate points across modernity as a resistance to Westernisation and, to some extent, modernisation. The discourse surrounding *kyokodai* has suggested Japan has struggled to comprehend its own national position and identity as urbanisation took hold and the nation developed into a significant (globalised) economic superpower. The evocation of *kyokodai* could be seen, therefore, to represent anxieties regarding the loss of cultural heritage that was instigated by modernisation, and then later the post-war economic miracle. In *I Wish*, Koreeda relies on *kyokodai* as a means to culturally validate the diversity of the non-standard families. Furthermore, the film also suggests non-standard families may be the answer to unite the

traditional principles associated with *kyokodai* with the modernised and urbanised reality of contemporary Japan.

Family as postmodern village community

In many ways, the houses of both brothers operate under the same harmony as the *kyokodai*. As a three-generation household, Koichi's family collectively shares many similarities with the *ie*, the only difference here being the lack of eldest son; the traditional 'head' of household. Shukichi assumes control in this absence and becomes the primary financial contributor and manager of the premises, as evidenced by his command of the living spaces around the home (Nozomi and Hideko are almost always in the kitchen - the domestic space). Although the eldest son position is vacant, Koichi (the eldest son of Nozomi) is positioned to inherit the household responsibility when he reaches maturity. To consolidate this, Shukichi teaches Koichi how to make *karukan* cake in his specific method so that he may potentially continue the family business later (see Figure 1.4).

Along with these physical similarities, the household is characterised by other aspects of the *ie* linking the household more explicitly to the *kazoku kokka*. Shukichi prays before an ancestral shrine in his house, expressing filial piety and loyalty, which Koichi imitates awkwardly as if he is doing so for the first time. The presence of the altar suggests a continuity in the same household, that Shukichi is part of a heritage of family members who have resided in the same property for generations. This is then linked to agrarian principles of *kyokodai* by the presence of the catering facilities for making *karukan*; although they are based in the city, the household can run by the same self-sufficiency as their traditional *ie*

counterparts. *Karukan*, a food specifically originating from the Kyushu region, further supports the household and livelihood as part of a localised community.



Figure 1.4: *Ie* legacy - Shukichi (Hashizume Ishao) teaches Koichi how to make *karukan* ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

Ryu's house also supports an ideology of self-sufficiency and community. This is personified explicitly by Ryu's new fondness of growing vegetables in the garden, but a more contemporary symbol is utilised in the creation of rock music. Kenji's band reside together and produce music in the house which they later perform at local live shows for money. Ryu joins the band at their live shows and sells their merchandise as they perform, making him instrumental in both the agricultural (vegetables) and musical avenues of production within the home (see Figure 1.5). With Ryu's inclusion in the domestic and social spheres of production, cultivation of music is linked with both family and self-sufficiency within a community. As with the ideologies White describes of recent music-based subcultures, music is associated here with a rejection of mainstream corporate conformity (in this case,

the standard household), which is then traced back to anti-capitalist agrarian nationalism through the symbols of self-sufficiency. Unlike Koichi's home, imperial symbols (filial piety, loyalty) in Ryu's home are un-emphasised, favouring instead a more purely agrarian, or pre-Meiji, *kyokodai*. To accentuate this, the house itself bears a physical similarity to a *nagaya* or 'row' house from the Edo period (1603-1868). Therefore, in Koreeda's presentation, the Japanese family is not bound by any specific historic institutional conception, but in its ability to utilise national identity within the environment of its own historical moment.



Figure 1.5: Self-sufficiency - 'farming' vegetables and music at Ryu's house ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

By representing the two homes using different historical sites of comparison, Koreeda demonstrates the ability of contemporary non-standard family structures to maintain a cultural identity. This is then further supported by the relationships formed or maintained between past and present symbolism. Shukichi's *karukan* business, a symbol of tradition and community, is resurrected and supported by two contemporary symbols: divorce and the bullet train. Since Shukichi had closed the business five years before the narrative events, the *karukan* trade would likely have disappeared at the end of his life. The divorce and subsequent return of his daughter prompt his decision to start his trade once again, and the new bullet train station promises a market he can exploit for better sustainability.

Furthermore, because of the divorce, he now has a potential heir to the family business in Koichi. The maintenance of cultural identity is made possible, therefore, by postmodern symbols of change.

A similar relationship is created in Fukuoka between the pre-Meiji agrarian symbol of the house and Kenji's modern band. Both are dependent on one another for the functioning of the home, and both build into the same cultivation principle of *kyokodai*. Despite their separation, the brothers themselves remain connected to one another by phone. During a phone call between the two near the start of the film, Koreeda cuts between shots of the two speaking with one another whilst showing an animated telephone cord connecting the intertitles 'Fukuoka' and 'Kagoshima', identifying the locations of each brother (see Figure 1.6). This edit demonstrates how family networks remain interconnected through modernised means of telecommunications. Most prominently, these bonds are established in the urban environments of Kagoshima and Fukuoka, signifying a unity between industrialisation and *kyokodai* which had formerly been impossible. In *I Wish*, a mutual co-dependence between single-parent families and traditional forms is created. Ultimately, therefore, Koreeda suggests the nuclear family has stood between individuals and desirable social structures, and the deregulation of family standardisation offers a chance to regain culturally mythologised forms of national identity.



Figure 1.6: Koreeda links two shots of the brothers speaking by an animated telephone line connecting 'Kagoshima' (left) and 'Fukuoka' (right) ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

Both houses blend contemporary and traditional family structures. This is demonstrated respectively by the single mother/*ie* dichotomy in Koichi's house and the music subculture/agrarian in Ryu's. These representations subvert more common discourses deriding single-parent families through a suggestion that the modern Japanese nation was founded on such diverse social organisation. In this manner, responding to social concerns raised by a growing national non-adherence to the nuclear family, *I Wish* transforms common discourses so that non-homogenous family structures are reframed as mythologised family structures; this is how the film is an example of quiet activism. The two considerably different families depicted here are, in their own separate ways, adaptable to contemporary society in ways the nuclear family is not. Koreeda's representation of the two single-parent families is positive and optimistic, but at the same time, it is an attack on the institutional preservation of the post-war nuclear structure.

Since single-parent families are rendered through such empowering discourse in *I Wish*, where does this leave the future of the nuclear family? While maintaining a positive diegesis around the lifestyles of the two brothers, Koreeda's narrative simultaneously presents a discursive subtext that derides the institutionalisation of a legislated family form. This, as

the next section demonstrates, is explored through the development of the children, and it is they who potentially lead the nation to a future supportive of more fluid conceptions of family.

Koreeda's children: the generation of compromise

Roger Goodman describes the social image of the Japanese child as a 'tabula rasa', one who 'learns through imitation and effort, in opposition to the Western idea of education wherein the child is seen as having innate abilities which need to be drawn out by the teacher' (2003: 17). Children in this sense are perceived as 'malleable' and learn by experience, which is one of the reasons a suitable family environment is deemed essential for their upbringing (Hertog 2009: 130). Reflecting this ideology, the young protagonists of *I Wish* develop their understandings of the family according to their experiences throughout the narrative. Given that, as discussed above, *I Wish* demonstrates how emerging non-standard family structures are culturally situated and presented as a positive alternative to the nuclear family, this section considers how the young protagonists are charged with carrying these new attitudes to the future. The children find a compromise between traditional expectations of the family and the emerging lifestyles that have rejected the nuclear family. Presented this way, Koreeda suggests the next generation can potentially overcome the problems that have seen a waning social strength of the family and even reverse the nation's bleak future projections.

The institutional preservation of the nuclear family despite changing social circumstances provides the context for the film, and this conflict is narratively depicted in the developing

attitudes between the two brothers. Koichi, the more serious of the brothers, represents the institutional devotion to the standard (nuclear) model. Near the beginning of the film, he overhears a rumour that, at the time and place where two bullet trains travelling at high speed pass one another, the energy created is powerful enough to grant 'miracles' (*'kiseki'* – the film's native title). Believing the rumour, or perhaps looking for a desperate solution to reconcile his family, he plans a journey to the Kumamoto region where the trains pass. Here, he intends to wish for nearby volcano Sakurajima to have a strong eruption, the resulting chaos of which devastating Kagoshima and inspiring his family to reunite.

During the narrative set-up, Koichi is presented as overly concerned with the society around him. Throughout the film, Sakurajima in a state of perpetual minor eruption and the city of Kagoshima is consistently rained upon by thin layers of ash. At the start, Koichi is juxtaposed with his classmates by allowing himself to become distressed by the ongoing eruption.

While the other children are generally complacent and ignore this presence, Koichi continually fusses over cleaning ash off his belongings and openly questions the obliviousness of other residents to the ceaseless volcanic activity. Koreeda presents the volcano as a metaphor for the aberrations or the 'imperfections' that plague one's life; for Koichi, it is his new non-standard household, and his concern for the eruption and ash levels mirror his concern for his broken family. Other residents have adapted or grown accustomed to social aberrations and pay little attention to the ongoing eruption. Koichi's journey in this film is to adapt to the imperfection as represented by his non-standard family and the volcano metaphor – this is eventually completed in the film's final shot. However, at the start, he can only focus on the negatives. He sees his non-standard family as a blemish which must be repaired. Metaphorically, he embodies the ideological persistence of a

standard family; continually ploughing through unbreakable barriers created by social progression, rather than admitting the past is lost.

The brothers are close, but their ideological views of the family are polarised. Much to Koichi's dismay, Ryu is not so keen on the plan to reunite the family. The pair frequently speak by phone and Koichi becomes increasingly frustrated by his brother's acceptance of his new life. Ryu is younger and far more optimistic than his brother, ever in a comedic level of happiness and intolerant of negativity in others around him. If Koichi is a metaphor of the cantankerous institutional faith in the nuclear family, Ryu represents the growing social pressure for change. During the film, the brothers each have a dream recalling their family as a unit. In Koichi's dream, the family sit in the shadow of the Tower of the Sun monument in Osaka enjoying a picnic, which is filmed in a static long shot. Two men enter the frame from the background carrying away one of the tower's 'arms', eventually taking attention away from the family. Earlier in the narrative, Koichi recalls a happy memory with his brother when the family gathered at the Tower for a similar outing; his dream metaphorically suggesting, therefore, that such happy memories are being taken away from him. In the dream, Koichi tries to stop the men dismantling the Tower, but fails. Ryu's dream is more of a flashback which pictures the family as a unit having a meal in their kitchen. A heated argument breaks out between his parents, causing Ryu to turn away towards the camera, attempting to ignore the situation. Koichi's dream supports his insistent belief in the permanence of the standard nuclear family, although even here he cannot disregard the flaws which taint his utopian image. In Ryu's dream, the standard family is a site of adversity and struggle, and he chooses to turn his back on the past.

The relationship between the brothers represents the struggle between the growing presence of nonstandard families/households and the ongoing institutional pressure to maintain the standard nuclear structure. Ryu's obliviousness to the importance of the family as a unit troubles Koichi, who berates his brother as 'selfish' for appearing initially impassive towards reuniting, much as political figures have denoted individualist attitudes as culpable for growing numbers who have rejected institutionally-approved standard family lifestyles (Jolivet 1997: 1; Takeda 2011: 58). Ryu tells Koichi he is apprehensive about leaving his home because he planted seeds which will be harvested the following spring, revealing his preference for maintaining *kyokodai* principles rather than re-joining the nuclear structure. Ultimately, however, it is Koichi who decides to give up his dream and accept his current family, as demonstrated in the narrative's closure. Eventually, the brothers, each accompanied by a group of friends, reach their destination and witness the bullet trains. In the moments before the trains pass, Koichi suddenly reflects upon his experiences during the preceding events of the narrative via a series of 'pillow shots': short static-camera images of different everyday objects such as flowers, swimming shorts soaking in a sink, the remaining crumbs in an empty bag of potato chips; this is a visual technique of Koreeda's for which he has been compared to Ozu Yasujiro (Desser 2007: 282; Jacoby 2011; Bingham 2015: 104). Suddenly realising the small pleasures and fulfilment his new life and family has contained, something he previously missed in his obsessive focus on rebuilding the past, he decides not to make his wish. The resolution to the anxieties created by the loss of the institutional strength in the standard family is, therefore, to move forward, to let go of ungraspable and unsuitable concepts. Having had this demonstrated to him throughout the narrative, Koichi is finally able to accept the present state of the family. In the end, he

overcomes his fear of losing his place in a standard family after he recognises the value of family de-standardisation.

The nuclear family is ultimately rejected by Koreeda's young generation. Koichi, having realised the selfishness of wishing for volcanic devastation and the potential tragedy it could cause, honours the community over the individual. He later tells Ryu his decision not to make the wish was based on choosing 'the world' over himself and family. This confirms Koichi's place among a community, favouring the 'village' or group. The final shot of the film has Koichi standing on his balcony testing the air for ash levels by licking his finger and holding it up in the air (a technique he witnessed Shukichi use earlier). Deducing the ash will not pile up, Koichi happily returns into his home. This ending completes Koichi's journey: he has learned to live with his non-standard living conditions, as metaphorically personified by him having adapted to the eruption. Moreover, his repetition of his grandfather's ash-testing method consolidates Shukichi's position as his new father figure and implies Koichi's own acceptance of his sequential position (after Shukichi) in his *ie*-style urban home. The children of *I Wish*, in this manner, best represent the hybrid of traditional (Meiji) and contemporary influences which arise frequently in the film. Koichi, Ryu and their friends, through experience and historical moment, occupy a position between the two ages, cementing, as it were, the discourses between old and new.

A further encounter near the end of the narrative demonstrates both the value of adherence to tradition and the social problems caused by the nuclear structure; this fundamentally influences the children's actions in the conclusion. Accompanying Ryu and Koichi are a group of friends each met in their residual cities. Among them is Megumi, a friend of Ryu's from Fukuoka who aspires to be a famous actress. She lives with her mother

Kyoko in a home doubling as a bar - Kyoko's business (another non-standard household).

While we are not informed of the whereabouts of her father, Megumi alludes to her father having 'forgotten' about her, suggesting he abandoned the family. Like her daughter, Kyoko too had dreamt of becoming an actress when she was younger, but these were never realised, and a thread of resentment hangs between the two when Megumi is headhunted by a talent agency based in Tokyo. Kyoko admonishes her daughter and forbids her from moving, declaring she does not have the determination to cope with the competitive environment of the industry. Megumi's character is comparably understated next to the brothers', yet her development towards the end of the narrative is equally key to the film's familial themes.

Megumi joins Ryu and the others intending to use the 'miracle' so she can wish to succeed as an actress. The group eventually reach the small town of Kawashiri where they will complete their bullet train quest, but the day grows late and they realise they have made no plans for overnight accommodation. One of the children becomes separated from the group and is picked up by a local police officer. Catching up with the rest of the children, the officer enquires about their unsupervised presence and offers to escort them to their premises. Megumi attempts to dismiss him by pretending her grandmother lives at a house down the road they are walking along, however, the police officer knows the identity of the resident Megumi randomly identifies and follows the children to the gate. Upon arriving, Megumi falsely introduces herself to the elderly lady residing at the property as her granddaughter, yet rather than deny any relation, the lady plays along with the charade and invites the group into her home. The elderly lady and her husband give the children food and allow them to stay overnight, and the following morning they drive the group to a place

where they can see the bullet trains. During their stay, the elderly couple divulge that, due to an argument, they have lost contact and become isolated from their daughter and granddaughter. The visit from the group gives the couple an opportunity, albeit brief, to once again experience a family environment, and as they bid farewell to the children on the following morning, they comment on how the previous night was 'everything we could ask for' (see Figure 1.7).

This sequence draws attention to the consequences that have accompanied the homogenisation of the nuclear family – the neglected roles of elderly family members. This is likened to the disparities between industrialisation and family which grew from the contradictions between urbanised modernisation and *kyokodai* in the Meiji era. Like the agrarian communities at the start of the 20th century, Kawashiri is becoming abandoned. Koreeda depicts the town as motionless, merely a collection of old houses and devoid of any physical human activity save for the patrolling police officer. As the children explore, they pause to look at flowers which have grown over a vacant space where a house previously stood, symbolising the decline of rural communities caused by sprawling urbanisation. Elderly family members, once integral in the formation of *ie* households, were pushed aside and given less responsibility as a consequence of the nuclear family's installation (White 2002: 68); the deserted elderly couple in *I Wish* have been similarly neglected. Since they are not part of the structural apparatus of the nuclear family, they, like their village, have been left behind. This is in contrast to Nozomi's parents, who are spared a similar fate by their post-nuclear extended family. Just as the divorced families open the possibility for extended networks of family members, the nuclear family's rigid structure, shown here, has the adverse effect of neglecting others.

The nuclear unit is culpable therefore, in the same respect as urbanisation was before, in the threat to *kyokodai* and the neglect of elderly family members. High-growth industrialisation is specifically alluded to; the contemporary symbol of the bullet train passes through Kawashiri on elevated tracks, rendering the old town invisible to travellers who race from one city to the next. In this representation, the exclusivity of the nuclear unit has consequences: the marginalisation of filial piety, as personified in the ideological symbol of the abandoned elderly couple, and the omission of *kyokodai*. Koreeda's depiction of Kawashiri suggests urbanisation has a stranglehold on agrarian nationalism, and this has permeated through the Meiji era to the high-growth period and beyond.



Figure 1.7: Temporary family network - the children are helped by an isolated elderly couple in Kawashiri ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

The derisory treatment of urbanisation may seem to contradict the harmonious pairing of old and new cultural symbols in the non-standard city homes of Koichi and Ryu as described earlier, but Koreeda presents a solution to the disparities between urbanisation and a

traditional family state: the children. Having been exposed to the consequences of industrialisation and family standardisation in Kawashiri, Megumi returns home to her mother and informs her that she will travel to Tokyo to become an actress, against her mother's wishes, but that she will return home 'sometimes'. Having previously been steadfast in her ambitions, even at the expense of abandoning her mother, Megumi sees the effects of family desertion in Kawashiri and finds a balance; fulfilling her ambition without neglecting her heritage. Her attitude finds an equilibrium between the family-serving myths of *kyokodai* and the individualist demands of capitalism. Koichi also finds this balance, choosing to go against his selfish desire for reconciliation and favouring 'the world', and returns to his urban *ie* community in Kagoshima. The parents, coming from the period of high-growth and capitalism, tend to be more invested in themselves; as demonstrated by Kenji's devotion to music above a stable income for his family, Nozomi's decision to instigate the divorce, or Megumi's jealous mother and absent father. The children have the ability to tie the urbanised ideologies of the present with agrarian communal ideologies of the past, fulfilling both the demands for a modern capitalist society and maintaining a communal family state.

Although conflicts exist in the contemporary Japanese family, Koreeda implies the new generation are better equipped to deal with them. While elderly generations were born into the pre-war *kazoku kokka*, and their children in the high-growth capitalist nuclear family, the new generation have been begotten in a new era, the 'post-nuclear' era. 'Post-nuclear' in this context, much as Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan (2012) have argued, is a response to the incompatibility of the nuclear family with the social conditions of the contemporary era. In Japan, the ruling ideology of the nuclear family has become problematic, leaving a society

without an accommodating model or legislation to satisfy personal and institutional demands; and this has contributed to the shrinking population (Jolivet 1997; Hirata and Warschauer 2014). In Koreeda's depiction, it has also contributed to the marginalisation of elder demographics and rural communities. Seeing the limitations of the contemporary ruling ideology when enacted in isolation, the new generation in *I Wish* combine the past and present, they find a *compromise* between the conflicting discourses of old and new (see Figure 1.8). The urbanised, privatised tendencies of the city and the agrarian principles of *kyokodai* and the *kazoku kokka* are fused together. A new structure is created, but not one which can be legislated, for this new structure is defined by its 'fluidity'.

Jordan Sand used the term 'fluid' to describe the diverse households of pre-Meiji society (in Ronald and Alexy 2011: 4). Houses in this time could be filled with children, adopted children, in-laws, apprentices, lodgers and others, and the occupation of these properties would feed into larger networks of obligations based on community and/or occupational demands (2011: 4). Koreeda promotes this same fluidity in the families of *I Wish*; in Koichi's modified *ie*, Ryu's commune-inspired home or the temporary adoption of the children by the elderly couple. Sand's fluid homes existed at a time before legislation began, allowing a more open approach to what can be defined as 'family'. In the contemporary era also household organisation has, like Koichi and Ryu's homes, demonstrated greater fluidity. Koreeda's depiction suggests the more borderless nature of household and family increasingly experienced by contemporary youth could yield stronger community and kinship ties for multiple generations. Therefore, and despite its absence, the suggestion in *I Wish* is not necessarily to dissolve the nuclear family as a unit, but rather it is to dissolve legislation.

Institutional pressures continue to favour a homogenous structure, yet the diverse families here find their own identities and contribute both as a product of urbanised postmodernity and cultural specificity. By representing an idealised scenario whereby single-parent families and their offspring circumvent anxieties regarding the future, Koreeda discreetly reframes endemic attitudes about the family. Since it is the post-nuclear families that have all the answers, the problem here is reframed and undermines the continuing beliefs in the durability of the post-war family model. The film presents a new discourse empowering socially derided family structures over the institutionally supported ones and even suggests this could be a means by which the uncertain future can be reversed. By calling for this level of reform in family standardisation through an optimistic diegesis, *I Wish* is an example of quiet activism. Were the ideological boundaries of the standard family loosened, made fluid, anxieties of the present and the unknown future could be eradicated. Society may be at a loss to define the family in the present moment, but *I Wish* optimistically suggests the new youth will learn from the mistakes of the past and build a promising future.



Figure 1.8: The 'generation of compromise' - the children wait for the passing bullet trains ('Kiseki' Production Committee 2011).

Conclusion

The nuclear family has maintained its position as the institutionally sanctioned family model in contemporary society. However, it has also become incompatible with the changing desires of newer demographics or the post-bubble socioeconomic climate. Despite this, common beliefs have maintained that the nuclear family structure is the most appropriate setting for raising children. This has meant divorced, single-parent families have struggled in unaccommodating social conditions and faced oppositional discourses. *I Wish* responds to these anxieties through a narrative that, through quiet activism, advocates for the deregulation of family standardisation by positively reframing diverse non-standard families. By focusing on the disparate single-family household structures of two brothers separated by divorce, Koreeda presents a narrative that demonstrates how non-standard families provide suitable environments for nurturing children.

The post-nuclear structures of *I Wish* combine principles from traditional and contemporary social structures and ideologies, thus fusing them with cultural specificity and (post)modern desires. The households of Ryu and Koichi integrate diverse networks of family and community members to build suitable family environments that satisfy the lifestyles of individual members; something the impenetrable nuclear family and its defined roles have not accommodated. Evoking the traditional pre-modern social structures of the *ie* and *kyokodai* through the single-parent dwellings of the separated family, Koreeda suggests that diverse and fluid constructions of the family are reflections of cultural heritage; this traditional rendering also serves to validate the ostracised single-parent families as more

inherently Japanese than the nuclear family that replaced it. In this manner, the homogenous nuclear structure is condemned for having overshadowed more social or communal family structures of the past.

The evocation of *kyokodai* is also significant given its historical position as an 'antithesis' of sorts to rapid urbanisation. Koreeda retains the agrarian symbolism in his construction of Koichi and Ryu's city-based families and suggests non-standard households (or family de-standardisation) may coalesce the long divisions between tradition and modernity. The nuclear family is posited here as an 'interruption' between older, communal social structures and the demands and desires of newer generations. Perhaps for this reason, *I Wish* pays the majority of attention to young and elderly characters. The brothers' parents are present in the narrative, but they are dwelled on far less. When they do appear, they seem more concerned with their own interests than their children. By comparison, Koichi's grandfather Shukichi and the abandoned elderly couple at the end of the narrative have far more significant roles to play in the lives of the children. Shukichi even helps Koichi and his friends leave school early so they can embark on their bullet train quest, and then later refuses to explain their absence to Koichi's mother when she enquires. The young and elderly are united in ways to which the generation 'in-between' are oblivious. Since the elderly protagonists are symbolically connected to *ie* or *kyokodai* social organisation, this strengthens the links between the new generation and more culturally rooted forms. In this manner, the dwindling presence of the nuclear family, occurring between these generations, is presented as an optimistic 'return' to more fluid, communal and inclusive families.

In *I Wish*, the nuclear family is associated with urbanisation, a rejection of tradition and increasing social isolation. This is not explicitly suggested by the film, but rather it is through the more positive representations of the non-standard family and the actions of the (non-standard) children. This is a key measure by which Koreeda demonstrates his role as a quiet activist – not by openly criticising dominant structures, but by discursively framing marginalised structures (such as single-parent families) as a potential superior. Given how recent social developments have been unaccommodating to the nuclear family, the act of positively reframing alternative family structures can even be perceived as an answer to Japan's more pressing social problems. The dwindling birth-rate has been directly connected to the inability of younger generations to marry and begin families of their own in the present socio-economic conditions (see, for example, Coulmas 2007). Koreeda's depiction, which suggests that families built on wider social networks of individuals are stronger, carries with it a discourse that alternative avenues into parenthood are acceptable. The children in *I Wish* lead wholesome lifestyles irrespective of their domestic conditions, which circumvents more common beliefs in gendered parental roles. Since the gender division of household responsibility that was common in post-war standard families has become far less common, and reliance on broader networks of individual and institutional support for the functioning of standard families has become the new norm, Koreeda's narrative suggests the deregulation of families has already begun. In this manner, and as a measure of quiet activism, *I Wish* seeks to shift opposing discourses to embrace the new realities of Japanese family structures.

Chapter 2

Single women, careers and *furusato* communities in *Our Little Sister*

Koreeda's recent films are full of female characters who present intriguing commentaries on changing gender roles. However, 2015's *Our Little Sister (Umimachi Diary)* is the only narrative with a focus on female characters. This film, the adaptation of manga *Umimachi Diary* (2006-2018) by Yoshida Akimi, is about a group of young adult sisters who adopt their teenage half-sister following the funeral of their father. Living together in an old house in rural Kamakura, the sisters negotiate everyday occurrences such as jobs, relationships and friendships. This chapter explores how the film's sibling protagonists can be understood when contextualised against concurrent social debates regarding the role of women in the home and in employment. In this film, Koreeda builds a positive depiction of women who reject normative adult pathways into reproductive families and instead focus on careers. My analysis in this chapter will focus on how this optimism is built, and how *Our Little Sister* builds a discourse calling for the abolishment of traditional gender 'roles'.

Our Little Sister engages in timely debates regarding women, careers and family. Japan has struggled with low birth-rates and a low GDP across the 21st century and various political initiatives have arisen seeking to remedy both deficits. A significant recent example of this is 'Womenomics,' an initiative conceived in 2013 to increase numbers of women in careers and provide better options for working mothers (Dalton 2017). On the surface, Womenomics was promoted as part of a strategy to improve the limited career options of Japanese women. This was in some ways a response to the nation's poor ranking in global surveys on gender equality; for example, in the 2012 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, Japan ranked 101 out of 135 countries (Hausmann et al. 2012).

However, despite its feminist window dressing, Womenomics functions more overtly as a neoliberal strategy to boost the GDP by putting more women in employment. Moreover, women are expected to balance these career roles whilst simultaneously fulfilling their hegemonic functions as mothers and housewives. Though attempting to address two of Japan's major social problems – the birth deficit and the low GDP – Womenomics has been seen as an attempt to shift responsibilities to women without addressing the highly patriarchal social and corporate infrastructures that continue to constrain them. For these reasons, Womenomics is further evidence of how Japanese women continue to be marginalised in post-bubble political discourse. *Our Little Sister* does not directly address Womenomics as an initiative, however, the themes of family, careers and motherhood in the lives of the twenty-something female protagonists make significant interventions within these contexts and reimagine feminine 'roles' away from socio-political meddling.

Of course, these kinds of issues are not limited to Japan and there is evidence that women have faced similar hurdles in other industrialised societies across the world. Global conceptions have tended to equate domestic tasks and childrearing as 'women's work' (Coltrane 2000). Furthermore, domestic responsibilities between working parents have often been negotiated depending on who earns more or works more hours (Deutsch et al. 1993). Since working mothers have often been employed in marginalised positions, this has meant they are often expected to shoulder domestic tasks alongside careers (Arendell 2000; Shafer 2011; Steiner et al. 2019). In Japan, these inequalities have been particularly pronounced.

Though the numbers of working women have increased, many have faced obstacles and 'glass ceilings' in their pursuit of careers (Goto 2016). A 2018 incident shook the

international community when it was revealed that several top medical universities had tampered with exam results to ensure lower cohorts of female applicants (Anon 2018). The event caused scandal and was strongly condemned by politicians. However, sources have suggested that such measures were taken because many female graduates end up quitting their professions after marriage and childbirth (Tan 2018). Women in Japan are often pressured to quit jobs upon childbirth for several reasons: corporate structures continue to be unaccommodating for returning mothers or dual breadwinner households (Mirza 2016; Dalton 2017); companies tend to offer job roles to young women on the understanding they will leave after marriage/childbirth (Jolivet 1997; Ogasawara 1998); mothers are pressured to dedicate themselves to domestic roles full-time, particularly in the early years of a child's life (Holloway 2010). For these reasons, women feel forced to choose between work and family at a young age (Nemoto 2013) and the 2018 incident suggests leading institutions would sooner reinforce gender divides in the workplace than take stronger measures to address them. In this regard, Womenomics can be considered a contradictory discourse insofar as it identifies a need and desire to develop gender attitudes without really addressing the structural inequalities that have continued to limit career opportunities or life choices for women.

Our Little Sister responds to the issues raised by female labour participation and ongoing attitudes about women's roles. Through this narrative, Koreeda presents a positive outcome whereby the twenty-something sister protagonists give up the prospect of marriage and reproductive families and instead focus on careers. This is built through a narrative and aesthetic that removes the emphasis on gender roles and hierarchies both in the home and in the workplace. The sisters, once freed from traditional roles and hierarchies that have

influenced domestic and employment spaces, craft new household structures built on more fluid conceptions of role responsibility. This circumvents the necessity of traditional maternal roles, or even men altogether.

The progressive gender politics of *Our Little Sister* set the film apart from Koreeda's other family narratives. In other films, the family is fragmented but still functions along similar parameters of reproductive structures both past and present. Conversely, *Our Little Sister* does away with the reproductive family to begin with and has the female protagonists choosing their careers (and each other). Therefore, the film suggests that women may benefit from evading reproductive family responsibilities altogether since here the standard family is treated as a restriction. This is a more polemic stance *against* the family than other Koreeda narratives have offered, yet *Our Little Sister* masks this radical discourse through its idealised representation of the Kamakura setting. The romanticised depiction of Kamakura incites feelings of *furusato*, a term denoting 'old home' and referring to nostalgic elements of pre-modernisation Japan (Robertson 1988, 1991). By depicting Kamakura as a nostalgic haven whereby traditional gender hierarchies and expectations are erased, Koreeda builds quiet activism against urban centres where post-war gender ideologies have endured.

Koreeda made *Our Little Sister* shortly after *Like Father, Like Son* and both films thematically engage with sociological debates regarding family and work. *Like Father, Like Son* explores these discourses in relation to men, *Our Little Sister* takes a female perspective. The film is an episodic tale chronicling the lives and struggles of a group of sisters: elder sister Sachiko (referred to as 'Sachi' throughout the film), a nurse in her late twenties; Yoshino, a bank teller in her mid-twenties; and Chika, a sports-store employee in her early twenties. The three live alone in a large, traditional house where their family has dwelled for generations.

Both their parents left the house following a tumultuous divorce many years previously leaving the sisters with their grandmother who died a few years before the events of the film. At the start of the narrative, the sisters learn their estranged father has died in Yamanashi and they decide to attend the funeral. There, they meet their thirteen-year-old half-sister Suzu – the offspring of their father’s second marriage. Since Suzu’s mother also died some years previously from illness and she is now left with her stepfamily, Sachi invites her to come live in their Kamakura house. What follows is roughly a year in the presence of the four sisters as they undergo various everyday events and gradually come to terms with the failures of their elders.

The film is set over the course of a year, beginning and ending in the late summer and bookended by funerals. There is no specific thread of narrative progression; as Tara Judah explains, it is ‘a film almost entirely uninterested in plot but completely immersed in character and tone’ (2016: 77). Instead of a specific dramatic focus, Koreeda’s narrative follows the various ways the sisters each negotiate their lifestyles as they undergo common occurrences such as job promotions, failed relationships, seasonal events and domestic disputes. Some of the bigger concerns of the narrative include Sachi’s problematic relationship with a married doctor, Yoshino’s job progression with a local bank, Suzu’s attempts to come to terms with her father’s troubled past, and local café owner and matriarchal figure Sachiko’s degenerative illness. The central concern here, like Koreeda’s other recent output, is the operation of and relationships between the non-standard family collective.

Japanese women and social expectations - from Meiji to Womenomics

The narrative setup of an all-female, working household with new maternal responsibilities resonates strongly with recent social contexts. Two years before the film was released, Prime Minister Abe Hiroshi introduced Womenomics as part of the 'three pillars' of Abenomics - a wider initiative to rebuild Japan's struggling economy (Dalton 2017: 96). Womenomics was conceived in response to a report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that claimed Japan's financial problems could be averted by a higher rate of female labour participation (Steinberg and Nakane 2012). Under the banner of 'making women shine', the strategy of Womenomics was to boost the numbers of women in employment generally, but with a specific focus on the numbers of women in managerial positions within influential economic and government institutions (Kano 2018: 2). Early targets of Womenomics planned to have 30% of women in managerial positions by 2020 (Dalton 2017: 96), and various incentives were offered to companies who hired significant percentages of female employees in 'career-track' positions (Kano 2018).

Womenomics signals a growing normalisation of women in the labour force which has followed significant discursive renegotiations of women's 'roles' in society, though these have remained tied to motherhood. During the Meiji era, when Japan underwent the process to become a modernised nation, women were ascribed roles as 'good wives, wise mothers' (*ryosai kenbo*) (Koyama 2013). Their primary responsibilities were to raise children and provide purely domestic roles. 'Good wife, wise mother' has been considered the 'the official discourse of women in Japan' (Uno 1993: 294) and was built upon principles that women embodied special characteristics that made them especially qualified for raising children. Official changes were made during the post-war Occupation that sought to

improve the rights and social roles of women. However, many would then largely fulfil similar roles in suburban nuclear families (Vogel and Vogel 2013).

Second wave feminist movements in the 1960s and 70s sought to improve women's reproductive health, employment opportunities and social status. However, the objectives of these movements were often misinterpreted as a more radical opposition to motherhood. Sugawa-Shimada Akiko (2011) cites conservative social critic Hayashi Michiyoshi as a typical example of this backlash. Hayashi blamed the feminist (*feminisuto*) movements of the 1980s for younger generations' increasing despondency towards parenting (Sugawa-Shimada 2011: 105). Resultantly, the term *feminisuto* became associated with women who wished to forego motherhood and were subsequently labelled 'a destructive threat to hegemonic norms' (2011: 105). These attitudes demonstrate how feminist movements have struggled to loosen the strong cultural beliefs around defined female 'roles', and this can be traced through more recent political discourse. For example, in 2001, a Tokyo governor declared in a magazine article that 'it is useless and sinful for women to live after the menopause because they cannot reproduce children... such humans are extremely harmful to the entire earth', and in 2007, a minister for the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry infamously referred to women as 'birth-giving machines' during a public address about the population crisis (Nemoto 2008: 222). Although recent initiatives like Womenomics are political in origin, it, like feminist movements seeking to broaden women's social roles, has also been forced to reckon with ongoing conservative and misogynistic beliefs that women are best suited for parenting.

Given the treatment Japanese women have long suffered from politicians, feminist commentary on Womenomics has been highly critical. Kano Ayako suggests Abe held a less

egalitarian stance during his initial term as Prime Minister and his new fondness for Womenomics is motivated purely for fiscal gain: 'although its policies might appear feminist on the surface, the administration is not moved by a genuine concern for women's human rights or gender equality as a principle of social justice, but by what helps the nation and its economy' (2018: 5). Emma Dalton believes

The common sense argument about the problem of the low number of women in the workforce is that women need to be able to juggle work and family and the inability to do this in Japan is one of the primary causes of women dropping out of the workforce (2017: 97).

Women entering the workplace are often under immense pressure to emulate masculine behaviour to succeed in career-track employment, which often means many hours of overtime (Nemoto 2013). With childcare an expensive and limited resource, particularly in the cities, raising children is especially difficult for households with two working parents (Dalton 2017). Women continue to be socially regarded as the more suitable candidate for domestic roles and childrearing, which means men are less likely to help in the home (Sano and Yasumoto 2014).

Workplace culture itself is reportedly very patriarchal, and many firms continue to marginalise women even though more are progressing to higher positions (Nemoto 2013). Some have stated that Womenomics ultimately fails since the focus should be on changing hyper-masculine workplace culture rather than statistics or the GDP (Macnaughton 2015; Goto 2016). The aspirations of women are only regarded in accordance with the nation's economy rather than personal needs, and Womenomics simply highlights the ongoing social gap between genders. The 'role' of women in Japan has, therefore, become conflated and

contradictory, with women now expected to perform masculine work roles whilst retaining similar domesticity based on traditional principles of 'good wife, wise mother'.

Female labour participation has increased since Womenomics was announced, but women still largely struggle to obtain career-track positions. In 2014, 70% of all non-regular (not full-time) employees were women (Goto 2016: 444). While Womenomics still exists as an initiative at the time of writing, the original aim to have 30% of 'decision-making positions' occupied by women by 2020 was eventually seen as an impossible feat and was downgraded at the end of 2015 (Dalton 2017: 96).

There is little evidence Womenomics and the developing status of working women has had much of an impact within social discourse. For many years, women who delay or forgo marriage have been subject to misogynistic slurs. The term 'Christmas cake', once part of common parlance, referred to the apparent lack of attraction of unmarried women over the age of 25, suggesting women from an early adult age would be under enormous pressure to marry and dedicate themselves to domestic duties (Mandujano-Salazar 2017: 531). In more recent times, disparaging monikers such as 'Christmas cake' have been replaced by new labels targeting employed single women such as *makeinu* ('loser dog'), *ohitorisama* ('singleton') and *arufo* ('around 40'), which demonstrates how the strong connections between women and marriage/motherhood have persisted (Freedman 2011b; Mandujano-Salazar 2017). Coupled with the difficulties in obtaining careers, these attitudes have continued to pressure women out of the workplace.

Womenomics can be seen as the culmination of how Japanese policymakers have been unable to process, adapt or respond to the changing desires and demands of women in the 21st century. No longer content with dedicating their lives to domesticity, Japanese women

have increasingly delayed or turned their back on normative roles into reproductive families due to the highly conservative expectations to which wives and mothers are still held. At the same time, even those who have chosen careers have faced further restrictions because of prevailing attitudes that full-time careers exist in a strictly male sphere of duties. Due to these difficulties, many women are still forced to choose between work or motherhood (Mirza 2016: 28). Womenomics fails because it does little to cut through the patriarchal attitudes (in corporate, political or domestic settings) towards gender 'roles' that women are desperate to overcome. Instead, it is motivated purely by economic purposes and reaffirms how the plights of women have been routinely ignored in official discourse. Emma Dalton concludes 'Japan has a long and unhealthy tradition of male policymakers and male politicians deciding what is best for women' (2017: 103). Therefore, Womenomics both highlights and is symptomatic of the troubles women have faced trying to separate themselves from pre and post-war (maternal) gender roles. *Our Little Sister* intercepts within these social debates through a narrative that seeks to loosen and pluralise the contemporary roles of women.

***Our Little Sister* – sisters and careers**

Our Little Sister, released into the fray of circulating discourses related to female labour participation, challenges the notion that women need necessarily aspire to normative roles and develops new forms of familial or social networks operating on a horizontal hierarchy. The elder siblings here all work and support their household without the presence of a male

breadwinner. They are all single and childless, yet they are approaching an age around which women become increasingly stigmatised for remaining single. The narrative process of *Our Little Sister* can be interpreted within these discourses as to how the women negotiate their responsibilities between home and the workplace. In this context, the absence of men in their home supports the position that families need not necessarily operate according to defined gender roles. The women, therefore, are freed from individual responsibilities of motherhood, and careers are balanced with a broader and shared family network. Eldest sister Sachi, played by popular star Ayase Haruka, specifically personifies this progression.

When *Our Little Sister* begins, the sisters have developed hierarchal roles based on their ages and the household operates in many ways like a reproductive family. In their Kamakura home, Sachi prepares breakfast and orders her younger siblings to eat properly and get ready for work. Her performance is stern and disciplinarian, jarringly dissimilar to her more casual sisters. Yoshino arrives home in the opening scenes having spent the night with a boyfriend - the latest in a string of unreliable partners for which she is frequently berated by Sachi. The relationship between the two sisters is comparable to that between mother and teenager, with Yoshino frequently drinking and resisting Sachi's criticism about her lifestyle. Chika is introduced lying on the floor with her head protruding from her bedroom doorway. Wide-eyed and frequently exhibiting more playful behaviour, she is the most childlike of the family. As is evident in the opening scene, Sachi commands most of the activity within the house; Yoshino even refers to her as the 'dorm matron' to her boyfriend. While Koreeda is careful to establish the clear personality differences between the sisters, Sachi clearly holds an elevated position to Yoshino and Chika. In many shots of the trio near the start,

particularly at their father's funeral, Sachi is frequently positioned between and slightly ahead of the other two, signalling an authoritative and protective role (see Figure 2.1). As detected in present society, femininity here is constructed by pressure to perform what one believes one *should* do rather than what one chooses. Hence, Sachi adopts a hegemonic function despite not having a dependent family of her own and leading a lifestyle almost identical to her similarly aged sisters upon whom she insists on doting.



Figure 2.1: Sachi (centre, played by Ayase Haruka) leads sisters Chika (L, Kaho) and Yoshino (R, Nagasawa Masami) after their father's funeral (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

The initial household organisation of the sisters is disrupted after Suzu's introduction. Following Sachi's invitation, Suzu moves into the Kamakura home shortly after the funeral of the sisters' father. She quickly adapts to the community and lifestyle, making friends at school and joining a local unisex soccer team. Her presence changes the hierarchal behaviour of the elder sisters, with each developing more mature roles: Yoshino begins drinking less and forgoing casual encounters with men; Chika teaches Suzu about the family

heritage and introduces her to various figures around the community, essentially assuming a more custodial role. While Sachi was the more maternal figure before Suzu's appearance, all the elder sisters equally begin performing more parental behaviour towards their younger sibling. Sachi gradually becomes less commanding to her adult siblings as Chika and Yoshino assume more responsible behaviour within the home, and before long the elder sisters share a similar degree of hierarchy. This signals a breakdown of household 'roles' which is further developed by the sisters' attitudes towards their jobs.

One of the key issues raised by *Womenomics* is the lack of accommodation between demanding work environments and the demands of parenthood (Nemoto 2013; Macnaughton 2015; Dalton 2017). However, in *Our Little Sister*, the arrival of a child has the opposite effect and strengthens the working lifestyles of the sisters. Sachi is offered a promising position in a forthcoming terminal care ward in her hospital, the acquisition of which would demand a bigger commitment to work, not least due to the emotional ramifications of the role. Although initially apprehensive, she eventually accepts and by the film's conclusion, she declares an ambition to become fully ensconced in her new position. Yoshino, meanwhile, is promoted to an advisor position for the bank which requires her and a colleague to visit business clients in financial difficulty and offer support. She too finds pride for her new position and largely replaces her evening drinking behaviour with overtime. Though this can be seen to appeal to the more utopian intentions of *Womenomics* (women balancing careers with children), this is only facilitated through a non-standard household organisation and a collection of adults.

Furthermore, Koreeda emphasises a shared aspect of maternal behaviour among the elder sisters. This is explicitly revealed in a scene not long after Suzu moves in, during which Sachi,

Yoshino and Chika watch over an (accidentally) inebriated Suzu as she sleeps and excitedly identify various facial features which could have been inherited through their shared bloodline; it is an image not unlike the spectacle of parents watching over a sleeping newborn. While this does connect the sisters more directly to conservative maternal ideologies, their collective presence means they are not individually tied to the role. In early scenes, Sachi performed a maternal role for her younger sisters, seemingly based on an age-oriented hierarchy. Here, however, the sisters collectively perform the same role, suggesting maternal responsibilities need not be individually filled. Furthermore, Yoshino and Chika build sisterly bonds with Suzu in separate scenes: Yoshino talks with her about boyfriends and teaches her to apply nail polish; Chika attends her soccer games and goes out for meals with the team. Therefore, they relate with Suzu on multiple hierarchal lines that blur maternal/sibling distinctions.

Sachi and Yoshino's new passion for their careers along with their maternal inclinations positions them, like many women, simultaneously juggling between traditional masculine (work) and feminine (maternal/domestic) roles. They too are now responsible for facilitating a household income whilst assuming parental responsibility for a child. However, rather than the ongoing hardships faced by those (especially women) who attempt to balance demanding jobs with childcare, these characters are motivated to work precisely because of the new responsibilities arising from Suzu's residence. Sachi is tempted to leave the household when her lover – a separated doctor – promises to divorce his wife and invites her to move with him to Boston where he has been offered a promising career (a situation highly reminiscent of her father's desertion years previously). Despite strong considerations, not least due to her preceding strong yet reluctant desire to follow more conservative

feminine expectations, Sachi ultimately declines his invitation because she finds sufficient reward in her current family environment and job. This occurs after the elder sisters have overcome the hierarchy presented at the start; when the sisters have 'roles' to play, they do not get on so well and there is tension. The initial scenes of *Our Little Sister* have the protagonists bickering and generally looking for means to escape one another: Sachi through her developing relationship; Yoshino through drinking and casual romantic encounters. By the end of the narrative, the sisters (with Suzu) have developed a more cooperative household whereby they need not rely on individual responsibilities or others (including men) to determine their future trajectories.

Helen Macnaughton believes for Womenomics to succeed as an initiative it must include men in a process of shared domestic and fiscal responsibility (2015). In *Our Little Sister*, the characters thrive easily without the presence of male family members. However, the film does not so much state that men are 'unnecessary', but rather the problems of work and motherhood unaddressed by Womenomics cease to be problems when the construction of families is loosened. These characters demonstrate how, if freed from restrictive domestic roles as an individual responsibility, they can fashion their own pathways into adulthood that balance home and work responsibilities.

The sisters in this film balance demanding careers and childcare because there are several of them and they can better share their time between domestic responsibilities and their jobs; Suzu is never seen at home on her own due to her abundance of parental figures.

Furthermore, the sister's fluctuating maternal and sisterly relationship with Suzu suggests family members can develop a range of responsibilities. The underlying assumption in Womenomics is that working women who become mothers must continue to perform the

domestic roles with which they have been historically tasked *on top of* careers; for this reason, Kano has suggested Womenomics requires women to perform ‘acrobatics’ by ‘becom[ing] breadwinners and leaders without being too threatening to men, to the traditional family system, or to their reproductive labour at home’ (2018: 7). Koreeda’s narrative suggests a balance between work and home can be achieved when maternal responsibilities are spread across a wider intra-family network and women are not tasked with multiple roles individually. Much like *I Wish* (as discussed in chapter one), *Our Little Sister* (quietly) advocates once more for a loosening of (nuclear) structurally defined gender responsibilities; in this case, so that women can thrive in careers and (collective) maternal positions.

Expanding feminine ‘roles’

Though *Our Little Sister* does not follow a clearly defined narrative, the conclusion is optimistic and follows a revelation (of sorts) from central character Sachi regarding her position within her own family and her potential future outside of it. The traditional concept of preordained maternal roles is broken down in these scenes, having culminated through the developing relationship between Sachi and Suzu. This development frames a discourse that interrogates the necessity of maternal roles.

After Suzu moves into the property, Sachi endeavours to replicate the maternal behaviour necessary for raising a minor by instructing Suzu how to eat properly during meal times, ordering her to do certain chores around the house, preparing her lunch, and bestowing their grandmother’s Yukata on her for an annual fireworks festival. However, despite her

attempts to cultivate a suitable family atmosphere, Sachi becomes concerned by the lack of a close relationship between the two and Suzu's reluctance to speak candidly about her feelings regarding her deceased parents. Towards the film's climax, the pair walk up a hill overlooking the town. At the summit, taking advantage of their seclusion, Sachi begins to yell loudly and invites Suzu to join her. Sachi yells 'father is an idiot!', after which Suzu suddenly yells 'mother is an idiot!'. Following this outburst, Suzu finally emotionally connects with Sachi and they embrace (see Figure 2.2). Sachi's earlier attempts to bond with Suzu were based upon a more hierarchal relationship between parent and child, but she was unable to connect to the same degree as her sisters. The climactic scene on the hill represents Sachi's ability to relate to Suzu on a similarly horizontal hierarchy, and their shouting activity, childlike in nature, consolidates their mutual positions as siblings.



Figure 2.2: Suzu (L, Hirose Suzu) and Sachi, standing on a hill overlooking Kamakura, share their emotions regarding their parents (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

The sibling relationship is, therefore, felt to be most suitable for Suzu's upbringing and Sachi's persuasion. Concurrent social discourses through Womenomics champion new potentials for women in the workplace, but only in accordance with their ability to fulfil their function as mothers, hence an ongoing pressure to succumb to maternal expectations. Sachi, keen to embody a maternal presence for Suzu, initially fits within this discursive mould. However, the scene on the hill makes her realise her role as a sister is more beneficial.

A similar process occurs when the sisters' mother Miyako appears halfway through the narrative to attend a commemorative event for her mother (the sisters' grandmother). Sachi is initially ambivalent to the appearance of Miyako, for whom she still holds resentment following Miyako's abandonment of the family 14 years previously, and the two argue over this historical event. However, it is Sachi who eventually chooses to forgive, and she offers Miyako the last of her late grandmother's plum wine before she leaves Kamakura, seemingly as a symbol of her renewed position in the family. As Miyako leaves, Sachi asks her to visit again soon, to which her mother responds that Sachi should come to her instead, suggesting the two now share the same responsibility to maintain their relationship. Although her position as 'mother' was compromised by her desertion, Sachi chooses to forgive Miyako as a family member without condition, foreshadowing her comparable bond with Suzu near the film's climax.

Sachi's ability to bond with both her mother and Suzu is, therefore, based on her ability to forgo maternal expectations within her mother or herself and respect a sense of autonomy or fluidity within familial roles. Consequently, Koreeda presents his characters with an ability to transcend the conservative expectations of motherhood in women yet still retain a

strong sense of family. Sachi scorned her mother for betraying her maternal role but accepts her as an autonomous adult, and Suzu similarly bonds with Sachi on a more equal axis. In fact, *Our Little Sister* does not feature mothers who live up to traditional (i.e. 'good wife, wise mother') maternal behaviour. Suzu's stepmother Yoko is similarly ill-suited to the task, as demonstrated by her apparent absence during the final days of her husband (the sisters' father), or her attempt to encourage Suzu to perform the eulogy at the funeral since she claims she is too upset to do so herself. Like Miyako, Yoko fails as a reliable maternal figure. Miyako even explains to Suzu that Sachi 'grew up' instead of her, suggesting even in childhood Sachi was better suited to motherhood. Consequently, the traditional mother is absent from *Our Little Sister*, suggesting it is a role model that has become an unreasonable or impossible expectation. Instead, alternative female identities (for example, elder sisters) are better placed to act as female role models that can perform a less inhibited range of maternal, kinship and working responsibilities.

Just as the mothers are shown to neglect maternal roles, alternative characters without children (like Sachi) take on inter-familial maternal responsibilities. Ageing local café owner Sachiko who has no children of her own helped care for the sisters following their parents' exodus, and thus holds an elevated place in the sisters' emotions. Sachiko becomes terminally ill over the course of the narrative and the film ends with her funeral. Yoshino and Chika cry as they reminisce about her final days, tears that had not been shed at the funeral for their own father. The parental/maternal role here is, therefore, not set or defined by specific family position, but instead it is a fluctuating concept that, when freed from expectation, allows autonomy and is performed according to the desires and needs of the individual. Sachi - the central protagonist - develops insofar as she gains a realisation

that women, including herself, need not necessarily fulfil specific social (maternal) expectations.

Sachi's development is underscored by a reduced necessity for the defined maternal role. Suzu calling her mother an 'idiot' on the hill further emphasises a discourse disempowering the necessity of an archetypal maternal presence. Koreeda uses Sachi's narrative to question, therefore, the need for women to realise a specific familial function whether part of a normative reproductive family or not. *Our Little Sister* is quiet activism, in this context, favouring a discursive reappraisal of motherhood as a fixed and ordained signifier of femininity.

In response to discourses elicited by *Womenomics*, *Our Little Sister* suggests women can balance careers and motherhood if they are freed from the restrictive positions in which they are still held by pre-war and post-war (nuclear family) female role expectations.

Koreeda's depiction sees women as being more than capable of balancing a range of role responsibilities including motherhood even outside the normative reproductive family. The answer here is to extend the boundaries of families so that maternal roles are provided by a collective, thus not restricting individuals solely to motherhood as dictated by 'good wife...' principles. The roles played by Sachi and her sisters cross boundaries between maternal, sibling and friendship, and extra-familial characters like Sachiko fulfil similar roles. The film gently encourages a loosening of gendered family structuring so that families, such as the one in focus here, can operate as a more open network of individuals with overlapping responsibilities. The protagonists are not restricted by opposing lifestyles adhering to either the workplace or the home, and thus find their own identities via a plurality of responsibilities which traverse traditionally masculine and feminine roles. This gives them

much more choice in their futures: the final shot of the film has the sisters slowly walking as a collective down a wide open beach at dusk. Their path is a vast plateau along which they amble at varying paces, occasionally breaking off from one another before regrouping, a signal of the non-linear paths their lives may take which will direct them towards many places without separating them as a group (see Figure 2.3). Social attitudes and feminist discourse regarding the position of women in contemporary society highlight the distance that must still be trodden before Japan sufficiently exorcises itself from traditional gender expectations, but *Our Little Sister* treats its contemporary moment as one where young women, working together, can now choose from a plurality of lifepaths where the mutual gendered co-dependence of the nuclear family is no longer a necessity.

Insofar as *Our Little Sister* engages ideological contestations of femininity, it clearly supports emerging identities over solely maternal identities. There are no female characters who live up to the standards of the 'good wife, wise mother', and Sachi, who initially aspires to fulfil these expectations, eventually chooses to become ensconced in her career – an emergent form of feminine identity that Japan is uneasily adjusting to through contentious initiatives such as Womenomics. This section has argued how the film responds to the maternal side of debates related to female labour participation. *Our Little Sister* also responds to the issues connected to patriarchal hierarchies, and for this Koreeda relies on the Kamakura setting; a setting which, in strong contrast to the hyper-modern lifestyles of the characters, is firmly rooted in historical specificity.



Figure 2.3: The closing shot of the film features the sisters walking as a group down an open beach, signifying the openness of their lives ahead if they remain a collective (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

***Furusato* and the reframing of gendered hierarchies**

Kamakura, located on the coast to the south of Tokyo, is a very popular travel destination for domestic and international tourists, with an estimated 18 million visiting in 2004 (Furutani and Fujita 2005: 2157). Home to many traditional temples, shrines and buildings, the area is firmly embedded within national imagination as a bastion of traditional cultural Japaneseness in a similar capacity to larger cities Kyoto and Nara (Eades and Cooper 2008). For many Japanese, traditional locations such as Kamakura offer a site of cultural relief from urbanised and highly westernised cities such as Tokyo, and the nostalgia felt for these locations is something tourism and advertising firms have exploited (Creighton 1997). Domestic viewers of *Our Little Sister* will almost certainly have some fore-knowledge of Kamakura and its cultural significance; a large percentage are likely to have visited at some point in their lives. Koreeda exploits this connection through an idealised representation

which, similar to other cultural texts and post-war initiatives, harkens back nostalgically to a pre-modern Japan. Utilising this setting and aesthetic, *Our Little Sister* presents a cultural haven whereby the protagonists can escape the patriarchal structures that have shaped and undermined incentives like Womenomics. It is through this depiction that Koreeda discreetly criticises the urban industrialised centres that have failed to wrench themselves from post-war discursive conditioning.

Japan reached enormous fiscal heights on the world stage following the 'economic miracle' era starting in the 1960s, but this was enabled by rapid industrial expansion, mass urban migration, and a loss of cultural specificity through the steady decline of rural communities. As a result, many Japanese during the 1970s and 80s began to develop feelings of 'homelessness', or a sense that there was increasingly little about the nation which felt culturally 'Japanese' in the urbanised, globalised landscape (Rea 2000). This gradual loss of national identity motivated politicians to resurrect the term *furusato* as a means of 'cultural administration' from the 1970s (2000: 642). *Furusato* literally means 'old village' but more accurate translations would be 'home' or 'native place' (Robertson 1988: 494) and refers to traditional rural communities as 'spiritual location[s] of safety and security' (Greene 2016: 336). Rural communities signified a culturally unspoiled version of Japan that the cities were unable to replicate. Under the banner of *furusato zukuri* ('old village making'), politicians from the 1970s sought to 'socially reproduce' feelings invoked from *furusato* to regain cultural identity within rural locations and even cities (Robertson 1991: 14). Among various policies rolled out which attempted to recreate feelings of *furusato* in urban areas, this led to a boom in tourism to rural towns and villages. Experiences were advertised which brought a sense of 'travelling home' for the Japanese which, compared with the urban

westernised lifestyle, offered ‘a “real Japan”, which in the collective nostalgic imagination implies the return to a pre-western, pre-industrialised, and non-urban past’ (Creighton 1997: 239).

Furusato is comparable in some ways to *kyokodai* as discussed in the previous chapter insofar as it is a culturally situated resistance to Westernisation and urbanisation. However, *furusato* has far more recent origins and has been linked more to aesthetic symbols of ‘old Japan’ rather than necessarily its social and historical structures. In many cases, *furusato* is used to encourage tourism to sites that promise an old or forgotten Japan (Creighton 1997). Academics have studied the term *furusato* in relation to political discourse, tourism and media, and in most cases the term is connected to a sense of ‘nostalgia’ for what the nation believes it is rapidly losing; a nostalgia which, according to Okuno Takeo, contrasts ‘uncertainties and anxieties of the present with presumed verities and comforts of the[...] past’ (in Robertson 1988: 504). For Jennifer Robertson, *furusato* ‘constitutes a synthesis of nativism and nationalism’ (1988: 504). Common visual signifiers include rural landscapes, old shrines, and ‘remote anonymous train stations’ (Creighton 1997: 244), while more emotive signifiers include ‘nostalgia, compassion, camaraderie, motherly love, [and] enriching lifestyle’ (Robertson 1988: 502). Millie Creighton believes the term signals a ‘belongingness developed in a context of rural, community-based social life [...] where subsistence was based on co-operative work efforts’ (1997: 242). *Furusato zukuri* initiatives were created to regain a sense of cultural ‘homeness’ and provide spaces that resisted urbanised Westernised encroachment. In Koreeda’s narrative, *furusato* provide spaces where women are absolved from the contradictory (urban) pressures of Womenomics and can lead lives free from the burden of expectation.



Figure 2.4: *Furusato* feelings - yukatas and fireworks in the garden (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

Kamakura is far larger and more touristic than the dilapidated rural locations traditionally addressed in *furusato* discourse and tourism. However, the city is known for vast, natural scenery, old temples and traditional buildings that are usually associated with nostalgic feelings of *furusato*. Koreeda exploits these through various visual signifiers denoting tradition or an 'old Japan' in *Our Little Sister*. Each family member is frequently seen praying before a family altar, and the sisters preserve a traditional custom of harvesting plums from a tree in their garden to make wine. A more elaborate shot comes as the sisters celebrate an annual fireworks festival by donning yukata and lighting sparklers in their garden (see Figure 2.4). The characters visit old shrines and temples, amble across traditional bridges and idle at quaint, peaceful train stations. Koreeda also romanticises natural *furusato* motifs in his Kamakura depiction, such as the deep greens of the leaves during the summer or their brown and yellow hues in the autumn, or an extended slow-motion shot of Suzu riding on the back of a friend's bicycle through a 'tunnel' of cherry blossoms hanging over a quiet

road, closing her eyes and smiling as the falling petals brush across her face (see Figure 2.5). Many of these scenes add little to the story but emphasise the romanticised aesthetics (natural or man-made) of the locations or events.

Further feelings of *furusato* are evoked through references to camaraderie in the traditional village community, particularly with regards to shared work responsibility. Creighton believes 'images of a symbolically mediated past agrarian existence have come to represent not just the ideal of community but also the good life, wholesomeness, and the moral values of Japan' (1997: 242). This feeling of community is reflected by Sachi's position in the terminal care ward, which allows her to care for Sachiko during her final days of illness, a repayment of sorts for the care Sachiko provided through her café during the sisters' youth. Similarly, Yoshino's job as a financial advisor allows her to help failing local businesses, including Sachiko's. Chika's store provides sports equipment to the local soccer team, and the team is coached by another doctor from Sachi's hospital. Because of their jobs, the sisters are each instrumental in maintaining the community. Even Suzu takes part in supporting local businesses, as she and some friends assist the preparation of whitebait for a small fishing company utilising traditional preparation methods and equipment (see Figure 2.5). Therefore, their prioritisation of work over families serves a larger network of communal relationships.



Figure 2.5: Suzu and friends ride through cherry blossoms (left) and prepare whitebait (right) (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

The strong romanticism by which Koreeda presents Kamakura is also relatable to *furusato*-invoking programmes and texts. Many researchers believe the contemporary emphasis on rural locations and lifestyles are similarly exaggerated since, in many cases, mass urbanisation and westernisation has caused much of the supposedly ‘traditional’ way of life to be more or less eradicated in the present day. The cultural experience promoted in *furusato* tourism advertising has been seen, therefore, as an ‘invented tradition’ (Creighton 1997: 248). Robertson notes that many villages create an ‘invented nostalgia’ for city tourists (1988), as was found by D.P. Martinez (1990) in her study of Ama diving tourism in Kuzaki or Barbara Greene’s (2016) investigation of pilgrimage tours in Sakaiminato based on *furusato*-invoking manga series *Ge Ge No Kitaro*. The scene of Suzu and friends preparing whitebait is reminiscent of such kinds of tourist experiences. Some films during the 1980s also utilised an exaggerated, nostalgic representation of traditional rural locations, popular Studio Ghibli animation *My Neighbour Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*, Miyazaki Hayao, 1989) being a key example. *Our Little Sister* is similarly founded on an ‘invented’ depiction of Kamakura, not least since the film is suspiciously free of the heavy throng of tourists one

may readily associate with the location. Furthermore, many of the popular sights and areas of Kamakura are neglected in the film, which makes the lesser-known locations we do see appear more 'unspoiled' by modern society.

Although Koreeda's film is an example of invented nostalgia, the progressive lifestyles of the sisters remove it somewhat from the usual conservative leanings associated with *furusato* texts. Robertson develops social critic Matsumoto Ken'nichi's observation, which identifies strong links between *furusato* and traditional images of motherhood (1988). According to Robertson, *furusato zukuri* discourse during the 1980s invoked the image of the mother who dedicates her whole attention to the success of her children as a reaction to the steadily increasing numbers of women in employment. In this manner, *furusato zukuri* 'calls for the realignment of the female sex and the 'female' gender role of the "good wife, wise mother"' (1991: 21). It is possible, therefore, to consider recent initiatives such as Womenomics as a further antithesis to *furusato*, and the urban-focused Abenomics has indeed been considered largely detrimental to the development of rural communities (Hijino 2016).

With an emphasis on maternity, *furusato* can be regarded as a further means to culturally target and promote a supposedly 'national' performance of gender specificity. However, *Our Little Sister* does not fit within this bracket of traditional gender appropriation. As discussed earlier, the sisters manage to craft their own feminine identities balancing maternal and sisterly bonds alongside work responsibilities with ease, much in defiance to the more conservative and contradictory expectations of Womenomics. That they do this within the parameters of a *furusato*-styled setting offers a variation on traditional, politicised invocations of the rural myth. Here, rather than a site which indulges the strictly maternal aspect of feminine expectation, Koreeda presents Kamakura as a haven where the sisters

can live with relative autonomy. The lifestyles of the protagonists are thus exceptional insofar as they support the nostalgic cultural desires of *furusato* precisely through the rejection of predetermined female roles related to the 'good wife, wise mother'. Therefore, the film represents a significant divergence from *furusato zukuri* discourse of the 80s described by Robertson. Koreeda breaks traditional links between traditional communities and motherhood by suggesting such highly romanticised spaces can foster more progressive gender politics. This is how the *furusato*-inspired depiction of Kamakura feeds into the film as quiet activism: by reframing *furusato*-maternal discourses through the single, working sisters, Koreeda distorts the mythologised roles of women and advocates for a fluid conception of feminine identity.

In many respects, the small village *furusato* community has been flipped along ideological parameters and is here presented as a space where new roles for women thrive unabated whilst the penetrating, post-war urbanised setting encourages hegemonic and (increasingly) undesirable gender expectations. Indeed, it is only from outsiders that criticism appears to stem: such as their visiting great aunt who initially views the 'adoption' of Suzu as a further blight on Sachi's chances of marriage; or, their mother (from Sapporo) who, upon arrival, expresses a desire to sell the sisters' house. Even Sachi's lover (who lives in an apartment at a nearby unnamed built-up area) expresses disapproval over both the adoption and Sachi's job offer at the terminal care ward. During their secret rendezvous at his apartment, Sachi is frequently seen in the kitchen preparing meals or cleaning, implying the likely domestic role she would assume should their relationship develop fully. Koreeda films these scenes from the apartment lounge, the tiny kitchen itself wedged between large white walls and Sachi

tightly enclosed within, far removed from the more open setting of the Kamakura home and a symbol of the restriction the urban domestic lifestyle promises (see Figure 2.6).



Figure 2.6: Sachi washes dishes during a meeting with her lover. The tight framing symbolises the restrictions she will face as a housewife should their relationship develop fully (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

Based on the ideological differences between those who dwell within Kamakura and those who don't, the traditional, idealised setting is not merely a haven set apart from restrictive urbanised influences, it is a space which cultivates new lifepaths for young women who demonstrate an ability to work, support communities and foster positive family environments. Koreeda's representation of the sisters' lifestyles through the lens of the *furusato* offers a cultural specificity to their progressive lifestyle choices. In many ways, *Our Little Sister* fulfils objectives of *furusato*-invoking texts or *furusato zukuri* initiatives insofar as it utilises a traditional community location to present a de-urbanised and de-westernised socially desired existence, only here the performance of femininity is modified. This contemporary 'modification' of tradition is visualised quite literally in a brief sequence of

the sisters collectively mending an old screen door, but rather than using traditional plain white paper, they decorate their own pieces with various patterns, flowers and slogans, thus respecting and repurposing tradition in a way that satisfies their desires (see Figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7: 'Repurposing tradition' - the sisters mend a screen door (Toho/GAGA corporation/Fuji Television Network/Shogakukan/TV Man Union 2015).

***Furusato* as the 'answer' to Womenomics**

Our Little Sister rewrites dominant conceptions of feminine identities in both contemporary female labour participation contexts and the more traditional associations of *furusato*.

However, there is an added dimension to the depiction of Kamakura that reimagines the hierarchal relationships between men and women in the workplace; this is a measure by which Koreeda addresses issues that have limited the successes of Womenomics. As mythologised gendered aspects of *furusato* are erased from *Our Little Sister*, new egalitarian

gender structures are imagined instead. There is little sense of gendered power struggle within the community dwellers; all operate, much as Sachi eventually learns to within her family group, along a horizontal axis. Koreeda elaborates this theme through the business relationships between male and female characters. Café owner Sachiko has a close, partially romantic but never fully elaborated relationship with Senichi who owns a separate café nearby. Senichi is often seen in Sachiko's café and provides emotional support later in the narrative after she is diagnosed with a serious illness and suffers financial extortion from her estranged brother (another negative 'outside' influence). Chika's relationship with her sports-store manager is also separated from traditional employment hierarchies. This is demonstrated by his casual visit to the sisters' home for lunch, the pair attending Suzu's soccer games together, and Chika offering him support for a mountain climbing accident that forced him to give up the hobby. The other sisters briefly deliberate how the two may be romantically involved, but Koreeda chooses not to develop this with any certainty and, similarly to Sachiko and Senichi, the pair appear to enjoy a close yet platonic relationship that traverses social and professional spaces. These relationships demonstrate an ability for men and women to combine professionalism and kinship relations in a manner which transcends traditional expectations of romance and/or marriage; furthermore, they develop without the restrictive 'maternal' gender hierarchies which govern idealised depictions of women symbolised in *furusato*, or the gendered power struggles in the workplace which remain relatively unchallenged during Womenomics.

While *furusato* initiatives exist in the public imagination as an opportunity to return 'home' to a nostalgic, pre-modern Japan, Koreeda reinvents these spaces as settings by which traditional gender roles need not be followed. The siblings in *Our Little Sister* are liberated

from the urban pressures to assume maternal 'responsibilities' and they instead elect working lifestyles free from the patriarchal hierarchies that have exposed the weaknesses of Womenomics. Therefore, Koreeda reframes social debates on female labour participation by defining the concept of gender roles as an urban issue. There is a subtle suggestion here that the best means of overcoming the obstacles that have prevented women from leading lifestyles they so desire is through an undoing of the political and employment structures that have led to the contradictory discursive principles of Womenomics. If *furusato* is, as Robertson suggests, 'an increasingly cogent means of simultaneously fostering we-feelings and inside-ness at local and national levels' (1988: 494), returning 'home' in this context also means a collective liberation from preordained gender responsibilities. In *Our Little Sister*, the abolishment of traditional female roles functions as part of the *furusato* desires for a 'real Japan' (Creighton 1997: 239).

The community and lifestyles of the sisters are presented through a nostalgic and romanticised lens, a technique which naturalises, nationalises and idealises the horizontal axis upon which the men and women organise social structuring amongst themselves. However, while the setting is fetishized, it is also dying. Koreeda emphasises numerous aspects which depict the community, much like social consensus of the *furusato*, as a fading utopia. This is indicated by Sachi's promotion into the terminal care ward, or the numerous failing businesses Yoshino aids in her new job role. Although the sisters are instrumental in the preservation of the community through their work, it is in a state of degeneration nonetheless. The narrative itself is bookended by funerals – for the sisters' father at the start and Sachiko's at the end - and the commemorative event for their grandmother occurs near the middle. Even the plum tree in their garden is dying. The film carries a somewhat

bittersweet tone insofar as Koreeda presents us with a Japanese community that is both visually ravishing and nostalgic, but through constant reminders of hardship and death. The opposing voices – the sisters’ mother, great aunt, Sachi’s lover – who dwell outside of the *furusato* setting each have motivations which would displace the sisters and further damage the already dwindling community.

Despite the bleak outlook for the small-town community, Koreeda maintains a cheerful tone through the structuring of the narrative. As the Japanese title *Umimachi Diary* suggests, the film is bound in contexts of temporal cycles. Whether these cycles are of life and death, the passing of seasons or personal relationships that come and go, the film separates the temporary and the permanent. The open-ended, year-long narrative of *Our Little Sister* is ultimately supportive of the film’s emphasis on the routineness of the activities of the sisters and the community. The camera is always stable yet always moving, sometimes almost imperceptibly, and this consistent movement encourages a feeling of normality and flow, that everything occurring is part of a natural cycle of events that happen again and again through the passage of time. As such, the socially ‘alternative’ lifestyles of the sisters are given a sense of naturalisation. The disruptive behaviour of the sisters’ family, the constant presence and reminder of death and the increasingly neglected conditions of the small-town may provoke an air of despondency, but Koreeda weaves these themes into a visual and narrational prose of continuation and change. While the specific social structures and moral obligations within *furusato* communities such as these are in a continual process of fluctuation, the motifs of traditional culture – the plum wine, the communal relationships, the seasonal leaves, the celebration of annual festivals and customs – remain prevalent across generations. Hence, though their environment may be finite, the sibling

protagonists of *Our Little Sister* carry on the plight of Japanese tradition whilst crafting new, culturally-bound, feminine quiet activism.

Conclusion

Our Little Sister presents a politically radical feminist discourse that engages issues raised by Womenomics and suggests women in the contemporary era would be benefitted by a liberation from normative reproductive roles. In this film, Koreeda defines careers as being a more desirable adult pathway than the domestic functions with which women have long been expected to perform as a hegemonic role. Family and maternal networks are not erased in this process, but rather expanded across a number of inter, intra and extra-family members. To support this discourse, the Kamakura setting is related to the nostalgic appeals of *furusato*, and Koreeda presents this romanticised location as a space where women escape the urban pressures of hegemonic expectations. This depiction reframes traditional 'maternal' associations between women and 'old Japan' and suggests pre-modern communities could foster more progressive gender politics. Working hierarchies between men and women are abolished in these spaces, and Koreeda relates conservative dissent of the sisters' lifestyles to the urban centres where gendered role distribution continues to thrive.

The kinship relations between members of nostalgic rural communities negates the necessity of individualised maternal roles. The previous chapter made comparable arguments in connection to *I Wish*, where divorced or non-standard families are similarly compared with traditional rural communities. However, whereas in *I Wish* these

comparisons justify the multitude of household structures in post-bubble Japan by an association with the pre-modern, here the *furusato* rendering makes a stronger connection between industrialised settings and the constraints on gender identities. Compared with other family narratives, the gender politics on display here are more radical and advocate lifestyles by which women elect communal families over reproductive families. This strongly opposes the dominant links between women and childrearing which continue to inform newer discourses such as Womenomics, and it is perhaps for this reason Koreeda utilises such a romanticised aesthetic to narrate the story. In terms of quiet activism, *Our Little Sister* could be seen as the most discreet in conveying its highly progressive gender politics. The *furusato* invocation, therefore, plays a dual role in enhancing (though at the same time masking) radical gender politics as well as presenting a case against the gendered structures of urban industrialised cities.

By its attention to lush seasonal colours, slow pace, orchestral soundtrack and extended shots of everyday pleasures related to food and the beauty of its Kamakura setting, *Our Little Sister* embodies an unassumingly cheerful nature and whimsical aesthetic. However, it is also a potent attack on normalised gender roles and hierarchies. Koreeda associates restrictive gender ideologies with the very urban centres that gradually devour the nostalgic utopias which, in this film, are the grounds upon which contemporary gender anxieties may actually be solved. For this reason, and given the constant reminders of death, *Our Little Sister* is radical yet profoundly melancholic. The cities, perhaps more commonly associated with the here, now and future, represent a step backwards in time. Given the inability of politicians to make substantial changes to post-war family policy in the 21st century (as personified by the problematic rollout of Womenomics) and the encroaching demographic

crisis that has followed this failure, Koreeda's suggestion here is almost to reverse the wheels of progress and return to a pre-modern state. However, as personified by the diminishing *furusato* community, it appears more likely that the unstoppable pursuit of an economic prosperity akin to what Japan experienced during the post-war era will overwhelm any chance of palpable change. That these themes are concealed behind such an outwardly romanticised and predominantly cheerful diegesis make *Our Little Sister* possibly the most notable of Koreeda's family narratives as an example of quiet activism.

Chapter 3

21st Century Fatherhood: Modernising the Salaryman in *Like Father, Like Son*

One of the more enduring representative figures of post-war Japan has been the salaryman: white-collar ‘corporate warriors’ whose influence has spread globally (Dasgupta 2003). Emerging from the ashes of the post-war recovery and credited with facilitating Japan’s incredible financial success in the period of high growth, the salaryman has endured a variety of positive and negative discourses across dramatic social shifts. The salaryman once enjoyed a privileged position at the apex of Japanese masculine pride, embodying hegemonic constructions of the archetypical worker, husband, and father (Dasgupta 2000, 2003, 2011; Gill 2003; Roberson and Suzuki 2003; Hidaka 2010, 2011), but his reign would be short-lived.

The collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and growing demands for gender equality in the public and private spheres have caused the legitimacy of the salaryman to become socially criticised in recent times. In his wake, a range of alternative, competing masculinities have emerged (Mathews 2004; Chen 2012; Charlebois 2017b; Mizukoshi et al. 2016). Among these is a new paternal role model that has risen in political and media discourse, capable of balancing more instrumental engagement with his children alongside work demands (Charlebois 2017b). A term associated with this paternal image that has had particular social resonance is *ikumen* – denoting fathers who perform stronger parental engagement with their children. *Ikumen* discourses, promoting a stronger ‘presence’ of fathers at home, have clashed with salaryman ideologies and caused anxieties among working fathers regarding their paternal responsibilities (Mizukoshi et al. 2016; Ishii-Kuntz 2019). This development provides a contextual focus for interrogating Koreeda’s 2013

domestic hit *Like Father, Like Son* (*Soshite Chichi ni Naru*). Depicting two fathers of opposing salaryman and *ikumen* paternity, Koreeda imagines how the salaryman can renegotiate his outdated ideologies and become more like his contemporary *ikumen* rival.

Social attitudes towards fatherhood have developed in many nations, and cinematic representations of fathers have correspondingly changed. Hannah Hamad (2013) has argued the frequency with which parentally engaged fathers appear in recent Hollywood cinema signals a new hegemonic masculinity. These cinematic role models, termed 'postfeminist fatherhood' by Hamad, are perceived to be a response to the cultural shifts instigated by postfeminist movements that challenged traditional ideologies denoting childrearing as an exclusively feminine realm. According to Hamad, the 'dominant iterations' of postfeminist fatherhood in US cinema

tend toward a model of fatherhood that is (or becomes) emotionally articulate, domestically competent, skilled in managing the quotidian practicalities of parenthood and adept at negotiating a balance and/or discursive confluence of private sphere fatherhood and public sphere paternalism. (2013: 2)

Hamad's research of US cinema resonates strongly with social developments in Japan and Koreeda's treatment of these discourses in *Like Father, Like Son*. In Japan, fathers have faced similar pressures to increase their parental engagement with children, and *Like Father, Like Son* can be interpreted as a response to these pressures. For this reason, Hamad's work provides a discursive template for this and the following chapters, which consider in turn the representations of fathers and mothers in the same film. In *Like Father, Like Son*, central protagonist Ryo is forced to realise his domestic ineptitude as a father and undergoes a process of becoming more 'emotionally articulate' and 'domestically

competent' as a father figure. As Hamad states of US cinema, the 'task' for Ryo is to retain his 'legibility' through a successful amalgamation of traditional and emerging masculine traits (2013: 2).

Though Hamad convincingly argues that postfeminist fatherhood has become the new hegemonic masculinity in the US, the situation is more complicated in Japan. 'Hegemonic masculinity' refers to masculine roles that are considered to be socially or institutionally the most desirable even if these do not comprise the statistical majority of masculine identities (Connell 1995: 77). In Japan, the salaryman has been considered the hegemonic masculinity since the post-war period (Dasgupta 2003; Ishii-Kuntz 2003; Hidaka 2010) and has been referred to as 'the masculine stereotype in, of and for Japan' (Roberson and Suzuki 2003: 1). Paternal discourses like *ikumen* have challenged the salaryman by establishing new 'desirable' masculine roles, however, these discourses have yet to significantly change the behaviours of many fathers. Official discourses have promoted *ikumen* since 2010 as it is believed that more egalitarian parenting roles in the home will make parenthood more attractive (especially for women) and reverse the struggling birth-rates (Mizukoshi et al. 2016). Many women have welcomed *ikumen* discourse as a means to reduce the burden of their domestic roles. However, official intervention of *ikumen* discourse contradicts ongoing corporate ideologies that continue to treat domestic roles as specifically feminine (North 2014; Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017). This has meant fathers have expressed anxiety and uncertainty regarding their 'masculine' roles in the home (Charlebois 2017b). By representing fathers of opposing masculine positions, *Like Father, Like Son* reflects the divisions and uncertainties of contemporary paternal responsibilities. The central question

Koreeda seeks to address is, how can the salaryman overcome his corporate conditioning and become a more socially desired (*ikumen*) father?

Existing depictions of the salaryman in recent Japanese media have varied, with some studies noting a negative trend. For example, Timothy Iles has argued 'in contemporary cinema..., extending the opinions of the popular news media, many works critical of the family focus their attention and blame on the father as "salaryman" [...], presenting him as neglectful, irresponsible, or even absent' (2008b: 189); this is a dramatic shift from the father as a 'paragon or source of moral education' which was more typical in films of the immediate post-war period (2008b: 194). Adverse depictions have also been observed across other media, where the salaryman has been seen as a 'weak, spineless creature' (Dasgupta 2000: 1999). Romit Dasgupta made such observations in connection to Kurosawa Kiyoshi's international festival hit *Tokyo Sonata* (2008), where the 'loss of masculine authority' is reflected by contemporary sociological observations (2011: 375). These studies paint a bleak picture of cultural interpretations of the salaryman father in recent Japanese media, yet it is wrong to assume this is the only portrayal. Although not always specifically representing white-collar employees, many domestically popular Japanese films and franchises in the 21st century, such as action franchise *Umizaru* (Hasumi Eiichiro, 2004-2012) and nostalgic drama *Always: Sunset on Third Street (Always Sanchome no Yuhi)* (Yamazaki Takashi, 2005-2012), have continued to champion the role of hard-working, absent fathers. *Like Father, Like Son* could be positioned between these approaches: the outdated, patriarchal ideologies of the salaryman are criticised primarily for his absence from parental duties, but he is not helpless. Koreeda instead seeks to identify the structures that have shaped the salaryman's beliefs, and how he can be liberated from them.

Like Father, Like Son reframes discursive debates on fatherhood in Japan by suggesting *ikumen* paternity is a natural-yet-constrained masculine identity. Traditional masculinity (the salaryman) is associated here with corporate environments, and these environments are judged to have victimised working fathers who are prevented from balancing work with parental engagement. While portraying *ikumen* masculinity as the new paternal role model, the film also redirects blame away from working (salaryman) fathers who struggle to meet *ikumen* pressures, and onto the corporate systems that have constrained them. To this extent, the representation of fatherhood in *Like Father, Like Son* is quiet activism in favour of corporate reform and better avenues for work-life-balance for salaryman fathers. Furthermore, Koreeda builds an added subtext that mythologises fathers as being fathers simply through presence, whether physically or through blood. Reflecting an era beset by paternal uncertainty where perhaps there is no longer a 'hegemonic' masculinity, *Like Father, Like Son* contends that fathers should not be defined by specific role, but merely by state of being.

Hegemonic masculinity in transition

The salaryman rose as a hegemonic masculinity in the years following the legislation of the nuclear family. This structure would become the foundation upon which divisions between the roles of husbands and wives developed as the nation rose to soaring economic success during the 1960s (Jolivet 1997; Dasgupta 2000; Hidaka 2010). Amid efforts to rebuild the nation after the War defeat, family and national prosperity became entwined in institutional and social discourses: the adult husband/father was expected to work and earn, his efforts supporting both his family and, on the wider scale, national recovery (Dasgupta 2000, 2003;

Ishii-Kuntz 2003); the wife/mother was associated with domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning and child-rearing, thus alleviating husbands from domestic tasks (Jolivet 1997; Ishii-Kuntz 2015; Shultz-Lee et al. 2010).

The gendered division of labour within the home allowed working husbands to dedicate long hours to the workplace, and this gave impetus to Japan's unprecedented post-war financial recovery (Garon 1997). Soon, strong ideological foundations developed in support of binary gendered roles between husband and wife. The salaryman became the nationally revered hegemonic masculinity: a heterosexual, middle-class archetype characterised by his dedication to his company and ability to financially support his family (Dasgupta 2000; Hidaka 2010). His absence from the home and neglect of domestic interaction was tolerated and supported due to his dedication to the company, and it was against this archetype that other masculinities would be less favourably compared (Roberson 2003); that masculinity became increasingly measured on hours spent at work was of great benefit to the prosperity of private corporations and the national economy.

Such was his level of company loyalty, the home became almost a foreign space for most salaryman fathers (Jolivet 1997; Ishii-Kuntz 2003, 2015). The strong drive to work hard became so ideologically reinforced that domestic activities were widely regarded in salaryman discourses as a weakness, and family-based interaction and activities were often disparagingly referred to as 'family service' (*kazoku sabisu*) (Jolivet 1997: 63). During this period, Japan was sometimes even referred to as a 'fatherless' society (Wagatsuma 1977; Sodei 1985). However, with social, institutional and self-propagated discourses championing the male on being 'healthy and out of the home' (Ishii-Kuntz 2003: 199), Japanese masculine identity in the post-war era became synonymous with work, earning and domestic absence.

After the financial crash in the early 1990s, recessionary hit companies started to rely much more on flexible working contracts, which meant the 'lifetime employment' enjoyed by previous employees were increasingly unavailable to newer staff (Matanle and Lusing 2006). Many companies reduced their staff numbers, and this saw a large number of salaryman employees, particularly those in middle age, lose their jobs. Those retaining their positions were less likely to receive the company benefits, seniority-based promotions or steadily increasing salaries they had previously gained (Mathews 2004). For this reason, increasing numbers of salarymen could no longer be relied upon as a sole breadwinner supporting a family, and this caused more women to enter the labour market (Holloway 2010). With increasing numbers of households operating under dual breadwinners, the strict gender divisions of the post-war became more fluid and attitudes towards household responsibilities began to change; a more even distribution of household labour has become a growing expectation (Ishii-Kuntz 2003; Charlebois 2017b).¹⁰ This has meant salarymen, even those who are family breadwinners, are now under increasing pressure to expand their domestic roles (Hidaka 2011; Charlebois 2017b).

In the present day, the ideologies of the post-war salaryman have been opposed by a number of factors: social discourses that have shifted and recognised the growing numbers of women in careers, a keener interest in work-life balance, and increasing roles of fathers in the home. Justin Charlebois has even suggested the difficulty in achieving the salaryman role in post-bubble Japan means alternative masculinities may amass enough numbers to become the new hegemonic norm (2017b: 59).

¹⁰ Furthermore, rising social problems in Japan such as bullying and teenage suicide have been connected to the absence of fathers in the home, thus increasing demands for greater work-life-balance for salarymen (Nakatani 2006).

The public scrutiny directed at the salaryman in the post-bubble era has facilitated the rise of 'nurturing fathers' in social debates (Nakatani 2006; Nakazawa and Shwalb 2013). *Ikumen* discourse has been at the apex of these debates and characterises the kinds of men that are now perceived to be ideal husbands and fathers (Mizukoshi et al. 2016; North 2014; Charlebois 2017b). *Ikumen* translates literally to 'raise man' and denotes men more actively engaged with childrearing, but the word also bears similarity to the terms *ikemen* (handsome man) and *iketeru* (cool), thereby suggesting 'cool, handsome' men help to raise children (Charlebois 2017b: 60). While initially a buzzword used in advertising, *ikumen* grew into a significant discourse in public imagination in 2010. Following the initial attention, tv specials, feature magazines, guidebooks and even two '*ikumen* of the year' contests have surfaced (Mizukoshi et al. 2016: 213). *Like Father, Like Son*, having been released in 2013, was developed and released during the time when the word had particularly strong social resonance.

Though the term is more directly connected to engaged parenting, it has also been used to encourage men to increase their domestic roles more generally (North 2014; Ishii-Kuntz 2019). Before *ikumen* discourse began, an international survey found that Japanese husbands did roughly 2.5 hours of housework a week, which was by far the lowest of the 35 countries studied (Knudsen and Wariness 2008). Official discourses seeking to address gender imbalances in the home have supported the term *ikumen*. In 2010, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare launched the '*Ikumen Project*' and sought to encourage men to increase their domestic role and relieve the pressures on women – a move they hoped would make parenthood more appealing to adults (especially women) and consequently reverse the birth deficit (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017: 149). The initiative has

organised various community events and talks promoting paternal engagement, and has setup a website that lists testimonials from fathers who discuss their positive experiences as engaged parents.

The *Ikumen* Project has followed a range of strategies since 1999 that aimed to increase the domestic roles of fathers.¹¹ *Ikumen* discourse can be seen to exist in direct contrast to the post-war masculine ideologies, and has been considered an antithesis to the ‘family service’ discourses of the salaryman (Mizukoshi et al. 2016). Like Womenomics (see chapter two), *Ikumen* Project initiatives have been constructed at the government level and have tried to modify corporate practices. Measures taken have included asking companies to reduce working hours, increase vacation leave for employees, and, perhaps most importantly, provide better flexibility options for paternity leave (Ishii-Kuntz 2019). While the salaryman’s masculinity has been defined by his *absence*, the expectations of *ikumen* require fathers to increase their *presence* in the home. The rising social strength of *ikumen* has occurred as the hard-working salaryman has been increasingly derided, thus suggesting hegemonic masculine identity has become contested, or may be undergoing a state of transition.

***Like Father, Like Son* – competing masculinities**

In *Like Father, Like Son*, Koreeda elaborates the distinctions between traditional salarymen and emerging *ikumen* discourses through the depiction of the two fathers involved in the

¹¹ Scott North’s chapter ‘Hiding Fatherhood in Corporate Japan’ in the edited volume *Globalised Fatherhood* (Navarro et al. 2014) contains a thorough overview of significant initiatives promoting better domestic interaction from fathers that emerged after the collapse of the bubble economy.

narrative. As is the case with their social counterparts, the two fathers are characterised by their *absence* (salaryman) and *presence* (*ikumen*) in the lives of their children. Our perspective is shared with Ryo, the central protagonist of the film (played by Fukuyama Masaharu). Both aesthetically and ideologically, Ryo is an archetypical example of a post-war salaryman. Dasgupta terms the salaryman as

salaried white-collar male employees of private-sector organisations, typically characterised by such features as life-time employment, seniority-based salary indexing and promotions, and a generally paternalistic concern for the employee on the part of the company in return for steady, diligent loyalty to the organisation (2000: 192).

Likewise, Ryo works at a private architectural firm where he has a mid-management position. He is subordinate to an older boss (*senpai*) with whom he shares a paternal relationship; he dresses in expensive business clothing at most work and social occasions. His commitment to his job means his housewife Midori takes care of all domestic and childrearing tasks. We learn his long office hours are so intense that Midori, not wishing to be left alone in the hospital, made the decision to return to her hometown to give birth to their son so she could be near her mother. It is through Ryo that the events of the narrative predominantly unfold, and his masculinity and corresponding worldview are presented by Koreeda as problematic and in need of change.

In the opening scene, Ryo and the family are attending an interview at a potential elementary school for their six-year-old son Keita. The opening shot sees the three family members dressed in formal wear sitting facing the camera, our perspective being shared with the school staff members conducting the interview (see Figure 3.1). This shot relates

the family to a business, the slight distance between their seats and their gazes directed away from one another suggesting a lack of internal intimacy in favour of uniformity. That they are facing away from one another for assessment implies a concern with social appearances. Right away, therefore, we are led to believe that Ryo, who answers the majority of the interviewers' questions, has a business-like attitude towards his family that he proudly flaunts in public.

Like all salarymen, Ryo spends a large amount of time in the office, but he maintains an authoritative control over his family unit. Having worked at the office until late on a Saturday, Ryo returns home to Midori and Keita. The family live in a large apartment on the upper floor of a high-rise tower block, with soaring views over Tokyo. The flat is very clean and features modern décor and expensive furnishings. Given Ryo is the sole breadwinner, it is clear he commands a high salary and the family live in reasonable luxury. After he enters, Midori welcomes her husband home and offers to make him dinner. However, he is mildly frustrated to see Keita playing videogames rather than practising piano – a nightly ritual that Ryo has enforced. Lightly chastising Midori for permitting this truancy, Ryo insists she shepherd Keita to the piano for his nightly practice. Though this gendered organisation is rather old fashioned, the household seems to run harmoniously, and its members are content in their individual roles under Ryo's command. This harmoniousness is given an almost metric quality moments later when Ryo joins Keita on the piano, and the two duet a basic chord structure while Midori, smiling, rhythmically chops vegetables in the background.



Figure 3.1: Ryo (L, played by Fukuyama Masaharu), Keita (centre, Ninomiya Keita) and Midori (R, Ono Machiko) attend a school interview. In this opening scene of the film, Ryo's 'professional' attitude towards the family is established (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

The stability of Ryo's household is short-lived. A routine blood-test leads to the shocking revelation that Keita was switched at birth with another baby, meaning he is not biologically related to Ryo and Midori. The pair soon meet Yudai and Yukari Saiki - Keita's real parents and the parents who have been raising their birth-son, Ryusei. The two families meet several times and discuss how to manage their situation. From very early on, it is clear Yudai (Lily Franky) is a very different type of father to Ryo. The couples initially meet at an official gathering organised by the hospital staff, to which Yudai and Yukari arrive late. Flustered and looking dishevelled, Yudai apologises for their delay. The two fathers sit opposite one another and the differences are pronounced. Ryo sits straight and tall, wearing an expensive suit, speaking and gesturing very little (see Figure 3.2). Yudai sits more slouched, wears a tatty suit jacket and is prone to rambling nervously as the proceedings get underway (see Figure 3.3). Whereas Ryo is clean-cut and shaven, Yudai's hair is scruffier and he has facial

hair; he is evidently of a lower economic class and clearly does not work in the same corporate environment as Ryo. He also has less authority than his wife Yukari over his family. During their meeting, the hospital staff suggest exchanging the sons back to birthparents. Yudai retorts that children are not 'like pets', but Yukari sharply counters this statement saying she could equally not give up a pet. Yudai, comically shaken by his wife's resistance, quickly corrects his previous statement. This brief exchange stands in direct contrast to Ryo's stern overruling of Midori's mismanagement of Keita's piano schedule, or the fact that Midori speaks very little during these meetings. Yudai does not have this level of command, and authority instead comes from his wife.



Figure 3.2: Ryo and Midori attend the first meeting between couples and hospital staff. Ryo studies Yudai with contempt (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).



Figure 3.3: Yudai (R, Lily Franky) and Yukari (L, Maki Yoko) sit opposite Ryo and Midori (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./ GAGA Corporation 2013).

Ishii-Kuntz Masako, who has conducted extensive research on contemporary Japanese masculinity, has argued that being ‘truly masculine’ in Japan is ‘equated with competence and control over self and others, including women and children’ (2003: 199). Though Ryo lives up to this idea of ‘true’ masculinity by his tight control over Midori and Keita, Yudai has comparatively little control. This is one of several reasons for which Ryo takes a very condescending attitude towards Yudai throughout the film’s initial half. During the first meeting with hospital staff, Yudai raises the possibility of receiving compensation from the hospital for the incident. Ryo glares at Yudai disapprovingly after this request – the first of several critical glances. In a later scene, the two families meet privately at a shopping mall café and Ryo glares disapprovingly at the chewed drinks straws left by Yudai and Ryusei, and then again when Yudai brandishes a cheap fabric wallet to pay for refreshments. During another meeting with hospital staff, Yukari once again corrects her husband’s opinions on the situation, again inviting Ryo’s glare. Upon first visiting, Ryo scoffs at the ‘pathetic’ state

of Yudai's business - a dilapidated electronics store and workshop that is attached to his family's home. Believing himself to hold a superior position due to his wealth, Ryo even tries to convince his lawyer to fight for custody of both sons.

Though Yudai is less suited to professional settings and situations, he is far more comfortable with the children and is keen to establish his *presence* in Keita's life. He and Yukari have three children, of whom Ryusei is the eldest. When the families first meet, Ryo is content to sit and study Ryusei from afar, but Yudai interacts with Keita more playfully. Shortly after, Yudai enthusiastically joins in with his children (and Keita) in a soft play area, much to Ryo's bemusement. Later, he shows up unexpectedly at Ryo's home to support Keita on his first day of school, much to Ryo and Midori's irritation. Before long, the parents start exchanging sons on the weekend. This provides the audience the opportunity to see Yudai and Yukari's domestic lives from Keita's perspective. Since he works from home, Yudai is ubiquitous in his children's lives. He frequently invites them into his shop while he works, plays with them in his free time, and even bathes with them. He is more at ease interacting with his children and entrusts more formal matters to his wife's management. He is, therefore, a key proponent of the kind of fathers commended in *ikumen* discourse: a man ever-present in the lives of his children.

Eventually, Ryo pressures the families to exchange the sons permanently back to birthparents, following a more conservative belief in blood relation defining parenthood. But Yudai is not present for this conversation, he instead plays outside with the children and leaves the more pressing issue of the exchange to his wife. Though Ryo regards this as a weakness, Yudai appears content and unthreatened by his supposedly emasculating family role.

Ryo's self-belief begins to unravel when it becomes clear Yudai is the more popular father to both sons. After the family begin exchanging the sons on weekends, Keita quickly bonds with Yudai and his larger family. However, as usual, Ryo's office commitments mean he is seldom home for Ryusei's visits, meaning he is mostly left alone with Midori. Ryusei shows little interest in their expensive apartment and consumer goods – key symbols of Ryo's wealth and success. He spends a few moments gazing out of the window asking Midori to name local landmarks, but by the afternoon has grown bored and asks to be taken home. Keita, meanwhile, is more impressed by Yudai's knowledge of Spiderman and ability to fix electronic toys. After returning from his first visit, Keita asks Ryo if he can bring a broken robot toy to Yudai's house on his next visit. Sometime later, Ryo gazes in irritation at the now-functional robot moving across a table before him during another gathering between the families; his accusing glare directed earlier at Yudai now taking on a more self-reflective role as his former confidence in his paternal superiority deteriorates.

Ryo's undoing during the second half of the film is generated by a slow realisation that his financial worth is not, as it turns out, enough to warrant his claims to be a good father. This is clear on the first night of Ryusei's permanent residence in their home. Ryo has Ryusei read a list of rules and requirements that he must adhere to in his new home; one of which stating he must refer to his new parents as 'mum' and 'dad'. Ryusei, confused, repeatedly asks 'why' he must do so, and Ryo feebly struggles to articulate a reason that would make sense to a six-year old. Ryo only understands fatherhood through professionalism; the setup between the two looks like an interview, and the rules Ryusei reads are his family 'contract'. However, now it is Ryo and his claims to fatherhood that have been brought under scrutiny. He does not know how he can justify how he is a father, especially compared with Yudai

who has been so proactive and ever-present in the lives of both sons throughout the previous months (or, in the case of Ryusei, years). Before long, the two merely sit in silence staring at one another. Koreeda allows a mid-shot of Ryo facing Ryusei linger for an extended period of time to emphasise the awkwardness of the exchange. Though this situation has occurred due to extraordinary circumstances regarding the births of the two sons, this scene between Ryo and Ryusei encapsulates the film's central thesis and the question that has circulated in recent paternal discourse – how is fatherhood defined in the 21st century?

The behavioural opposition between the two fathers is generated by a dichotomy of *absence* and *presence* (see Figure 3.4). Ryo believes he is a superior father because, as a typical salaryman, he has earned lots of money and can provide a decent home and living for his family. However, this economic security has come at the cost of working very long hours and sacrificing time spent with his son. Therefore, his paternal role is defined by wealth and his *absence* from the home. Salaryman masculinity was defined during the post-war era by this absence and continues to be the reality for many fathers in the 21st century. This also encapsulates Ryo's dilemma: his discovery that his career, wealth, domestic nuclear family luxury – all the things residual post-war hegemonic ideologies deemed as symbols of paternal superiority - have made him an inferior father to a lower-class shopkeeper. Yudai, meanwhile, has a strong *presence* in his children's lives because he works from home, and this is complemented by his playful, non-authoritative temperament. The pair even have a conversation about their different attitudes to absence and presence. Yudai brazenly contends that he has spent more time with Keita in the months since the switch was revealed than Ryo ever has. He believes fatherhood is all about 'time' (spent

with children), since this is what children remember. Ryo counters Yudai's accusations by subtly asserting that his job role is more important (than Yudai's), and that his absence is necessitated by the importance of his work. This is the conflict Koreeda presents through Ryo and his gradual reassessment of salaryman masculinity – that fatherhood should be defined by time spent (or *presence*) with children rather than by achievement at work.



Figure 3.4: Ryo's family (L) and Yudai's family (R) take a photo together before permanently exchanging sons. The contrary behaviour of the fathers emphasises their professional *absent* (Ryo) and playful *present* (Yudai) paternal masculinities (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

Yudai, who spends most of his time at home in the presence of children, is an archetypal father promoted by *ikumén*. He gladly spends much of his free time entertaining his children, thus relieving his wife of the full burden of childcare. His devotion to his family is absolute; after Ryusei returns from his first weekend at Ryo's apartment, Yudai suggests the family sleep together, suggesting their temporary separation was emotionally traumatic. His unambiguous devotion to spending time with his children at the expense of any other

interest makes Yudai not only a stereotypical *ikumen* father, but almost a kind of spokesperson for the initiatives promoted through official discourses. By depicting Yudai in this manner, Koreeda advocates for similar attitudes towards fatherhood and a reduction of the conservative roles epitomised by Ryo. This is one of the measures by which *Like Father, Like Son* is an example of quiet activism in favour of the *presence* of fathers in the lives of their children.

It is important to note that Yudai is a supporting character and has much less screen-time than Ryo, about whom the film is much more centrally concerned. Yudai's life and background are not developed to the same degree as Ryo (and Midori) and our perspective of him occurs almost solely through Ryo or Keita's subjectivity. To this effect, he is a relatively unambiguous embodiment of *ikumen* masculinity, and his role in the film acts merely as a challenge to Ryo's more conservative salaryman ethics. Yudai undergoes no transformation himself and, therefore, he is positioned here as an 'ideal' paternal role model that stimulates Ryo's own eventual metamorphosis. Since his position is unchallenged, Koreeda idealises Yudai's *ikumen* paternity as a defining masculinity against which other paternal roles can be measured in contemporary Japan.

Yudai's strength lies in his ability to combine professional and domestic masculinity. His electronics shop is separated from the rest of the house by a glass door the children can see through. During one of Keita's visits, Yudai spots him looking through the glass and beckons him into his shop while he serves a customer. Furthermore, his skills with electronics can also be used for fixing the children's various broken toys; this makes his domestic and professional lives porous. This is strongly juxtaposed by Ryo, whose evasion of the home is more indicative of salaryman 'family service' ideology. Much of his time is spent working

outside the home, and his home office is closed off by a solid wooden door. Even Midori must ask before she is permitted entry. For Ryo, whose life is positioned so adamantly in work, fatherhood is run more as a business, hence the strict scheduling of Keita's piano practice and the 'contract' Ryusei must agree to when he moves into Ryo's home.

Meanwhile, Yudai's profession feeds into his parental role, which drives Keita's excitement to visit his house a second time so Yudai can fix his broken toy. Koreeda links *ikumen* masculinity to one's ability to commingle professional and domestic roles evenly. Yudai's profession compliments his domestic role; however, Ryo's domestic role is modelled on a strict division between home and work, with work privileged over the former even within the domestic space.

The two fathers are key representatives of post-war salaryman masculinity and contemporary *ikumen* discourses. By emphasising their differences, Koreeda acknowledges how recent expectations have contrasted wildly with the post-war roles men have still been expected to perform. Ryo is a successful father according to residual post-war beliefs (*absence*), but he develops self-doubt when he realises the expectations of fathers are changing, and that *presence* has become the new standard to which fathers are held. The setup here is a strong reflection of what has occurred socially, and the purpose of the narrative is to 'save' Ryo and make him a better father.

In many ways, unlike Koreeda's other family narratives, the film is surprisingly unnuanced about differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' fathers. This was a reason that British film critic Peter Bradshaw, usually a strong advocate for Koreeda's cinema, was more conflicted about *Like Father, Like Son*, judging the film to have 'a black-and-white assumption: [Ryo] is uptight and needs to go on an emotional journey, and easygoing, goofy Yudai is the life-

affirming good guy, the wonderful earth-father who plays with his kids' (2013). However, though seemingly simplistic, the exaggerated comparison between the fathers and the eventual transition of Ryo to Yudai's more 'easygoing' paternity serve more potent discursive interventions. It is through this comparison that Koreeda addresses the problematic relationships between working environments and fatherhood.

Corporate (de)constructions of fatherhood

The central question at the heart of *Like Father, Like Son* is 'how' Ryo can change his conservative salaryman ways and become a father like Yudai, and this is a question with social relevance. Ryo and Yudai may be on opposite poles of 'extreme' salaryman and *ikumen* discourse, but, in reality, social attitudes towards fatherhood have been more conflicted. Though there is an enthusiasm from fathers who wish to meet the expectations of *ikumen* discourse, this has not often been accommodated by Japan's corporate structures.

Fathers have increasingly expressed desires to boost their domestic roles. A survey in 2007 suggested only 29% of fathers still prioritised work over childrearing (Ito and Izumi-Taylor 2012: 1691) and Shwalb et al. (2010) have suggested that many newer fathers have aspired to be more engaged parents. There are also signs *ikumen* discourse has influenced the behaviour of Japanese fathers, albeit only slightly. For example, the numbers taking paternity leave have increased from 1.9 percent in 2012 to 7 percent in 2017 (Robson 2018). Men's contributions to childcare and housework have also slightly increased from roughly 1.07 hours a day in 2011 to 1.23 hours in 2016 (Ishii-Kuntz 2019: 184). These improvements

are only marginal, and this appear to stem from conservative counter-pressures in business environments.

As a government initiative, the *Ikumen* Project relies on companies to implement the necessary protocols to allow working fathers to improve their work-life balance (Schimkowsky and Kohlbacher 2017). This has meant the ability of fathers to increase their domestic roles has been subject to the discretion of employers who are willing to put 'flexible' options in place. Responses to these policies have varied, and some companies have been more compliant than others. The term '*ikubosu*' (*iku*-boss) has been used to describe work superiors who have been cooperative to the needs of working fathers and mothers (2017: 149), and evidence suggests that fathers are more likely to engage in childcare if they are employed by family-friendly companies (Ishii-Kuntz et al. 2004). However, not all companies have been compliant with the new demands and working fathers have been prevented from taking advantage of flexible leave policies.

A significant factor is that men have perceived domestic roles to be feminine. According to Christoph Schimkowsky and Florian Kohlbacher, 'the actualization of the *ikumen* ideal propagated by the media remains difficult for the majority of Japanese men due to the work culture and the continuous perception of child-rearing ultimately belonging to a female sphere of duties.' (2017: 151). This has meant many fathers are simply unwilling to increase their domestic roles, whilst for others it generates a form of peer pressure. Working fathers in Japan (as elsewhere) are dissuaded from taking time off work due to 'flexibility stigma' – the idea that workplace flexibility policies are feminine (Williams et al. 2013). Fathers that do take parental leave have experienced 'paternity harassment' from colleagues as well as family and friends (Ishii-Kuntz 2019: 182). There has even been evidence that fathers take

‘hidden care leave’ by using their annual leave just after their wives give birth or more generally to provide childcare. Therefore, although paternity leave is available to fathers in Japan, they are sometimes dissuaded from taking it due to the potential for adverse company scrutiny (North 2014: 71). Even though men may wish to increase their parental engagement with children, they must also contend with corporate discourses that have maintained a misogynistic attitude towards household roles.

Employment changes since the 1990s have further constrained the work-life balance of fathers. As part of post-bubble corporate restructuring, stronger competition between employees was implemented by a fusion of neoliberal strategies (such as performance-based wages) alongside existing expectations of extreme company loyalty and hierarchal obedience (Matanle and Lunsing 2006). This has decreased job security and increased the risks associated with taking parental leave, causing many to work even harder than before. For example, use of paid leave has dropped from 60 percent in the early 1980s to less than 50 percent in the early 21st century (North 2014: 57). Moreover, average working hours (per year) for men have increased from 2,625 in 1990 to 2,703 in 2000 (2014: 74-5). Due to the precarity of post-bubble corporate infrastructure, Scott North argues ‘proliferating temporary and other irregular, low-paid workers are constant reminders for men with children to be cautious. Because they have the most at stake, they often work the longest hours’ (2014: 72). Emerging calls for fathers to increase their time at home, therefore, has coincided with counter-pressures to spend more hours away from the home.

As this shows, men have recognised contemporary needs to improve their presence in the lives of their children, but these needs have not been accommodated by deregulated and highly patriarchal corporate structures. Due to contradictory social pressures, research has

identified a 'gap' between media use of *ikumen* and public identification with the term, and many individuals continue to express 'ambivalence and uncertainty toward a more equal distribution of household labour' (Charlebois 2017b: 67). The term '*ikumen* illness' has been used to describe the exhaustion and pressures of men who try to meet the demanding expectations at work and at home (Robson 2018). Therefore, the recent neoliberal shifts and increasing competition in the Japanese workplace have exaggerated previous problems around maintaining work-life balance. This has made parental engagement from working fathers more difficult in the contemporary era than it had been in previous years, thus increasing the gap between expectation and reality for changes in paternal behaviour.

The Japanese title for *Like Father, Like Son* translates to 'then to become a father' (*soshite chichi ni naru*) which critic Mark Schilling believes hints towards this cultural dilemma from the salaryman perspective: 'how do you become a father to your kids when, workaholic as you are, you hardly ever see them?' (2013). Just as the gaps between the new expectations for fathers and the additional neoliberal pressures in the workplace have swollen, the two fathers depicted here are exaggerated archetypes of positive (*ikumen*) and negative (salaryman) father figures. Koreeda acknowledges the corporate developments that have made work-life balance more problematic and presents solutions through the disparate working environments of his two fathers.

Since Yudai is a father Koreeda depicts as an 'ideal' (he undergoes no development or change), it is through him, or rather his working environment, that the film reveals how ideal masculinity can be constructed or achieved. Yudai evades the pressures between work and family by working outside of the corporate structure and situating himself in the domestic space as his own boss (see Figure 3.5). Though he commands a much lower salary

than Ryo, his work-life balance is healthier and has led him to become a more successful father according to *ikumen* discourse. Yudai embraces his compromised economic position and his embodiment of traditionally 'feminine' domestic activities. He is more than happy to foist responsibility for important family issues onto Yukari while he spends time with the children. Therefore, Yudai's working environment is dramatically contrasted to the traditional corporate environment and this supports his stronger parental engagement¹².

This is juxtaposed by Ryo whose overstated dedication to the workplace - a reflection of the growing pressures in post-bubble corporate settings - is the main reason Koreeda treats him as a negative paternal role model. This undermines the patriarchal discourses in corporate settings so it is Yudai's home presence that makes him the stronger paternal role model and Ryo weaker. Ryo's major crisis arrives when he realises that Yudai - the very epitome of the kind of man corporate discourses have conditioned him to reject - is the better father. The overstated differences between Yudai and Ryo in terms of appearance, behaviour and working lifestyle/environments reflect and critique the growing discord between corporate pressures and the needs and requirements of working fathers. This is how Koreeda's depiction signifies quiet activism in favour of different and more porous working/domestic lifestyles.

¹² As this describes, paternal interaction in *Like Father, Like Son* is generally centred around playful and 'fun' activities. The consequences this presents on the representation of mothers will be discussed in the following chapter.



Figure 3.5: Combining professional and domestic spaces - Yudai fixes toys in his workshop while Keita (L) and other children watch (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

It is only when Ryo is distanced from the corporate world that he eventually becomes a more idealised father. After the sons have been permanently switched back to their birthparents, Ryo's boss temporarily transfers him to a less demanding position in an engineering department – a job that will allow him to increase his time with his family. In many of the following scenes at home, Ryo dresses in more casual attire, emphasising his growing 'domestication'. The relationship between Ryusei and Ryo in the home does not start well. Unlike Keita, Ryusei is more independent and unruly, much like Ryo himself, and the two regularly clash due to Ryusei's boisterousness. Ryo disciplines Ryusei for noisily bashing keys on the piano, thereby taking on childcare responsibilities that Midori (who is absent for many of these scenes) would have previously fulfilled. Before long, Ryo also starts to miss Keita, and realises that blood relation is not the only measure by which fathers and their children are connected. After admonishing Ryusei, he lingers silently by the piano where he and Keita used to play together and finds part of a paper flower down the side of

the sofa that Keita once made for him. He begins to understand that, much as Yudai had instructed, the 'time' they spent together as father and son was worth more than biological connection. This realisation occurs principally through Ryo's increased presence at home and the time this has given him to reflect on his role as father.

As this demonstrates, Ryo needs to be 'given' time to spend in the home in order to understand the parental role he must perform. Before these scenes, Ryo understood fatherhood to be a role performed in *absence* and kept an emotional distance from the central dilemma between the sons. Having not spent adequate time at home, Ryo had no awareness of the importance of his parental role. Koreeda suggests, therefore, that more fathers need, like Ryo, to be given more time away from work to spend with families. Since it is Ryo's *senpai* who makes this decision, Koreeda subtly asserts that this needs to be a corporate intervention and that fathers must be 'freed' from working environments.

Ryo's full transformation is confirmed shortly after and occurs through a negotiation of domestic and professional space. Ryo, sitting in his office working from home, hears Ryusei and Midori playing in a mock gun battle outside of his door. Hearing them coming his way, he quickly looks for a suitable tool to join in. Koreeda then cuts to Ryusei's perspective as he opens the office door to find his father 'armed' with a guitar (see Figure 3.6). This marks the first occasion that Ryo suppresses his professional demeanour in favour of an *ikumēn*-style playfulness, and it is also the first occasion that either son infiltrates Ryo's professional space. It is an echo of the previous scene when Yudai beckons Keita through his glass shop door and Keita watches him serve a customer. As in this previous scene, the ability to combine professional and domestic lifestyles supports Ryo's *ikumēn*-style paternity. The ensuing 'gun-battle' scene in the office is then followed by a series of shots linked by quick,

upbeat music of the family childishly pretending to fish off their balcony and building a tent in their lounge. In previous scenes, several visiting characters compared the apartment to a hotel, a comparison further reflecting Ryo's professionalism and removal from familial domesticity. After Ryusei successfully breaks through his father's professionalism with the gun battle, the property quickly begins to look like a family home, especially after the three-person tent is erected in their living space.¹³



Figure 3.6: Combining professional and domestic space – In a POV shot, Ryusei opens Ryo's office door to find his father 'armed' (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

The transitional process occurring in the home suggests working fathers like Ryo are forbidden from attaining desired forms of *ikumēn* masculinity by corporate settings. Having spent more time in his home, Ryo not only manages to build a strong relationship with

¹³ Also, it is worth noting that actor Fukuyama is more commonly known in Japan as a multi-instrumentalist singer-songwriter, and his stern performance as Ryo is very much against type. Therefore, by using a guitar to signal his transition into a more 'positive' father, Ryo can be seen to have returned to 'normal'.

Ryusei, but he also finally understands the value of the bond he had with Keita. Yudai, who has (apparently) only worked away from the corporate industry already recognises these values without concern of how this ‘feminises’ his masculinity. This reframes the discursive debates regarding the roles of fathers in Japanese society by suggesting that fathers naturally embody the kinds of engaged parental roles that *ikumen* discourse treats as an adjustment; their inability to do so is not individually driven, but rather they are victimised by the corporate settings that suppress this behaviour. In other words, the negative discourses associated with *ikumen* masculinity (e.g. feminised) are facilitated by corporate environments, and Koreeda suggests working fathers are ‘good’ fathers by default. Ryo becomes a father like Yudai simply by being distanced from the corporate space. *Like Father, Like Son* suggests, therefore, that the salaryman is a false fabrication of masculine identity, and paternal masculinities are natural.

The principles by which Ryo’s masculine beliefs are shaped can be seen as generational, and they are similarly blamed on the influence of elder generations. In one scene, he visits his father for his birthday, who supports strong conservative principles of fatherhood. It is Ryo’s father who convinces him to switch the sons back, citing blood relation as the defining indicator of fatherhood; words Ryo later repeats while vying for the permanent exchange. Ryo’s boss (or *senpai*), with whom Ryo shares a common (salaryman) paternal relationship, has similar patriarchal beliefs. In an early scene when Ryo passes him on his way out of the office, his *senpai* sarcastically laments that Ryo’s hard work has freed up more of his own time for ‘family service’ (*‘kazoku sabisu’*) – a direct reference to older salaryman discourse. Ryo has, therefore, been influenced by two very old fashioned (and much older) father figures, both of whom are, therefore, key sources of Ryo’s undesirable paternal beliefs.

However, even Ryo's *senpai* does not fully support patriarchal corporate ethics. This is the same character who later transfers Ryo to a less intensive position so he can spend more time at home with his adjusted family, suggesting he is also an '*ikubosu*'. Here, he demonstrates support for better work-life-balance, leading us to believe his earlier complaint about his interactions with his wife as '*kazoku sabisu*' was made perhaps due to patriarchal corporate pressures rather than his own beliefs. In other words, Koreeda suggests the ideologies and stigma that pressure men not to take family care leave or work shorter hours may be left-overs from an earlier system and no longer reflect the true attitudes of the working majority, regardless of their seniority. The outdated corporate ideologies of the salaryman are linked, therefore, with the environment itself rather than individuals involved.

This means that Ryo, despite his economic success and strong household authority, is depicted by Koreeda as a victim. He has been victimised by the intensely patriarchal environments of his childhood home (raised by his father) and then later his job. Though we are led to dislike Ryo for much of the film's initial half, we soon learn that underneath his hardened exterior that has been shaped by these environments, he is capable of becoming a kind, caring and considerate father. Hamad has similarly described 'postfeminist fathers' in Hollywood cinema as 'victims', though in this case they have been victimised by the death, illness or absence of the mother (2013: 23). According to Hamad, fathers are victimised through cinema to invite sympathy for their (solo) parenting roles, and this reaffirms their hegemonic masculine position. In *Like Father, Like Son* the mothers are still present, but the fathers are instead victimised by a system that is unaccommodating to the ideal paternal roles (like Yudai) that are trying to break through. By victimising Ryo, Koreeda renegotiates

the social position of dominant or 'hegemonic' masculinity; the salaryman here, ignorant to how his paternal ideology has been shaped by his working environment, comes to the realisation that his understanding of fatherhood has been completely misguided. The (conservative) social image of fatherhood being based on hard work and sacrifice was a lie. The father he is conditioned to fear (Yudai), is the father he should have been all along.

Yudai is the model father Ryo aspires to, and this has its own connotations in relation to class. Common beliefs have maintained that men unable to command high salaries (especially as a sole breadwinner) are unsuitable for marriage and childrearing (Nemoto 2008), and Ryo's initial dismissive attitude towards Yudai stems fairly directly from the financial deficit between them. David H. Slater believes growing economic inequality in the post-bubble era has produced similar talk between 'winners' and 'losers' (2011), and these divisions tend to be based on the economic advantage of full-time employees over those languishing in more precarious employment (North 2014: 55). Yudai may be a 'loser' in this context but he is more capable of fatherhood than the rich salaryman simply by having evaded the corporate setting. Ishii-Kuntz has suggested firm size has been considered important in distinguishing class, with larger firm size denoting a higher class of employee (2009: 192). Yudai is self-employed and (apparently) works alone, but his evasion of large firms has allowed him to command an uncontested idealised paternity. This is relatable also to Charlebois' contention that that working-class fathers in modern Japan are perhaps better positioned to 'balance' childcare responsibilities with their spouses since the instability of their working environment means very often both parents are required to work (2017b: 62). Therefore, Yudai's supposedly compromised performance of masculinity suggests men who cannot or do not wish to enter highly competitive and highly patriarchal

salaryman-style employment, are better positioned to become good fathers. Koreeda reframes the discourses on 'winners' and 'losers' in an economic context by depicting Yudai as a 'winner' precisely for embodying all the factors that society deems him a lower-class 'loser'. Conversely, fathers who commit to hard work and economic success are here treated as 'losers' and are being left behind by a changing society. The act of reframing lower-class fathers in economically precarious situations as parental role models is another factor of *Like Father, Like Son's* quiet activism.

The conclusion favours Yudai's working-class household as the more suitable environment. Having realised his error in pushing ahead with the permanent exchange, Ryo reunites Ryusei with Yudai and Yukari, then finally reconciles with Keita following a bizarrely melodramatic pursuit between the two through the streets of Maebashi (during which Ryo admits to Keita he 'wasn't a very good father'). There is no explicit statement in the end as to what solution the families shall employ to solve their predicament, but the final shot of the two families, entwined together and entering Yudai's household as one group, suggests they will carry on as one large non-standard family. After they have entered the property together, the camera slowly pans up to show Yudai's house as just one among many others of similar size as the credits begin to roll. The household blends in with its surroundings, suggesting there is nothing extraordinary about Yudai's property, and the now-extended family group exists on an equal axis across the community. Ryo, meanwhile, had previously strived to position himself ahead of society through his commanding salary and hotel-like apartment. His obsession with success is what prevented him from being the father he was 'supposed' to be, but he now realises he and Yudai are equals simply as they are both

'fathers'. This last shot embodies how fatherhood should not be measured by wealth and success (gained through absence), but simply by presence.

What occurs, therefore, is a repositioning of paternal ideologies according to the environments with which they are associated. By encouraging men to spend more hours at home, social discourses have treated stronger paternal roles as a behavioural 'change' to which working fathers must adapt. *Like Father, Like Son*, rather, sees *ikumen*-style fathers as a natural paternal identity that contemporary fathers have been prevented from achieving by post-war corporate ideologies. Ryo does not so much 'adapt' to an *ikumen* father, he realises he has been indoctrinated by false masculine ideals from patriarchal work environments and individuals. This overturns his prior convictions about work, success, and social hierarchy, and rebuilds fatherhood as strictly based upon interaction with children. Crucially, it is not Ryo who is responsible for his own views, but rather the system that has indoctrinated him. Koreeda suggests that working fathers are not required themselves to change or adapt, but corporations and managers should be doing more to facilitate work-life balance among their employees. Therefore, though it seems the film acts solely to favour the more precariously employed *ikumen* father, it is also a film that resolves salaryman anxieties.

(Re)mythologising all fathers

Before finishing this chapter, it is worth exploring a further dimension to the discursive function of *Like Father, Like Son* that addresses fatherhood on a more generalised level than the employment contexts discussed. Due to the additional pressures on workers in post-

bubble corporate environments, many fathers in Japanese society have been unable to negotiate the counter-pressures of *ikumen* paternal discourse. This reality is acknowledged by Koreeda, and the film provides additional reassurance for fathers who continue to be absent from the home. The fantasy-like plot development of Ryo being 'given' more time off work implies a discourse of activism in favour of family-friendly corporate restructuring; however, the film also suggests that negotiations such as those undertaken by Ryo are unnecessary from the perspective of fatherhood. *Like Father, Like Son* provides a similar discourse to this effect and mythologises all fathers as 'fathers' simply by presence of being. Historically, fathers in Japan have been mythologised as *daikokubashira*, a metaphorical term describing the central wooden beam or pillar used to support the roof of traditional houses (Gill 2003). Described as one of the 'main tenets of idealised/ideologised masculinity in Japan' (Roberson 2003: 129), the meanings and associations of *daikokubashira* have changed across modernity as fathers have negotiated their 'presence' in developing domestic contexts. Pre-war *ie* households, which would be handed down through successive male lineage, associated *daikokubashira* with household permanence; as Tom Gill explains, 'the pillar is always there: male succession [...] make(s) the role of *daikokubashira* permanent even if the individual playing the role changes with the years' (2003: 145). Fatherhood in the Meiji context of *daikokubashira*, therefore, was strongly related to the father as an immovable 'presence' in the household and lives of his family. However, In the post-war era, when the salaryman father was largely absent from the home, the meaning of *daikokubashira* shifted to take on a more financial connotation (Gill 2003; Hidaka 2011: 126). Here, fatherhood was not so much mythologised by a physical presence, but rather his

domestic presence (or absence) was supplemented by the material evidence of his hard work.

More recently, as hegemonic roles have become more ambiguous, the term has lost its cultural strength. Younger generations recognise 'an incompatibility between the *daikokubashira* ideology and caring and affectionate fatherhood', which society has gradually started to crave (Hidaka 2011: 125). The idealised social image of the father has now 'softened' (2011: 127), and the *daikokubashira* could just so easily 'refer to husband, wife, mother, father, couple as unit', meaning it seems to have lost purely masculine connotations (Yamada 1993: 61). As contemporary beliefs are slowly skewing more towards a gender-equal distribution of household labour and work, the mythologised links between fathers and household authority have gradually weakened - reflected by contemporary anxieties regarding the indeterminate roles of fathers in the contemporary era. However, Koreeda's representation attempts to *re-mythologise* fathers through more universal terms related to their mere 'presence', whether physically within the lives of their children or otherwise.

Household authority and responsibility as a solely male enterprise is downplayed in *Like Father, Like Son*. In Yudai and Yukari's home, working responsibilities and domestic roles are shared. Yukari appears to take care of domestic responsibilities such as cooking and general decisions of the household, but Yudai is more proactive with childcare, especially since Yukari works outside the home. This is different from Ryo's household, whereby Ryo himself makes all the authoritative decisions and is a sole breadwinner. Midori's role is limited purely to domestic tasks. This organisation is not as harmonious as it had initially appeared. The decision to permanently switch sons is solely Ryo's; Midori objects due to her strong

bond with Keita, but these objections are ignored by Ryo. Following the permanent exchange, the couple's relationship is tested, leading the pair to frequently argue and Ryo is seen sleeping on the sofa. Meanwhile, Yudai and Yukari's relationship is harmonious and strong, even after the switch. At one stage, a dissatisfied Ryusei runs away and returns to Yudai and Yukari's home, and Ryo travels there alone to collect him. Having ascertained the arrangement is not favouring Ryusei (or Ryo) terribly well, Yukari suggests she and Yudai take care of both the sons themselves, boldly inverting Ryo's prior attempt to do the same. Koreeda cuts to a shot filmed between the large imposing shoulders of Yukari and Yudai in the foreground of Ryo, appearing short, helpless and squeezed into the background, as he struggles to reassert his competence as a parent (see Figure 3.7). This framing device was previously used when the parents all met for the first time, where respective couples were given equal prominence (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). Now, with Ryo isolated from Midori by his decision to instigate the exchange, he is denied reciprocal authority as an individual. Yudai and Yukari's collective authority supersedes Ryo's more patriarchal control over matters, and this is another situation whereby his conservative masculinity is undermined. The idea of fathers as an 'individual' (*daikokubashira*) authority is devalued in this context in favour of more gender-equal household organisation.



Figure 3.7: Couple as 'central pillar' - Koreeda shoots between Yukari and Yudai to make them appear stronger as a dual unit than Ryo as an individual authority (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

The film's optimistic climax is only facilitated once Ryo recognises his own shortcomings, but there is another suggestion that this transformation was never really required in the first instance. This occurs immediately before the families are reunited at the end. After his playful scenes with Ryusei, Ryo sits in the tent in his lounge looking at pictures on his digital camera from the night before. Flicking back through the photos, he finds some he took with Keita immediately before he was returned to Yudai. Flicking back further still, he finds photos of himself sleeping on the sofa, photos that must have been taken by Keita. Seeing these photos, he realises the important parental role he played in Keita's life, and how he betrayed this by sending him back to Yudai. He then begins to weep - the first strong emotional response we have seen from him - and this is what drives him to reunite the families shortly after. Ryo's true acceptance of Keita occurs only in the scenes after the pair have been separated. Before this point, and throughout Keita's residence, Ryo had

performed as an absent salaryman father; a masculine role Koreeda has emphasised throughout the film to have been inadequate. However, the photos Ryo finds were taken during this period, meaning Keita's love for him occurred irrespective of his paternal incompetence. Therefore, inasmuch as *Like Father, Like Son* advocates for stronger parental engagement, it also suggests that fathers who do not necessarily perform idealised (*ikumen*) paternal roles are fathers regardless.

This is significant given the kinds of anxieties detailed earlier. Working fathers have increasingly shown signs they are more interested in strengthening their paternal interactions with children, but these have been undermined by strong patriarchal undercurrents (e.g. 'family service') in corporate settings. Many employees are still required to work according to the demanding professional ideologies of the salaryman, and many fathers have been unable to enhance their domestic roles due to these pressures.

Therefore, the anxieties faced by working fathers have come from their perceived inability to become the kinds of fathers many social discourses have considered essential. These anxieties have predated *ikumen* discourse; in 1999, the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare famously commissioned a poster seeking to increase the domestic roles of men. On it, the husband of a famous popstar is photographed with the couple's son, along with the text 'A man who doesn't raise his children can't be called a father' (Mathews 2003: 115). Considered sensational at the time, this was one of many official initiatives undertaken to undermine (or shame) parentally unengaged fathers, which led more recently to *ikumen*. Therefore, Japanese men have been under pressure for some time to increase their parental engagement, and failure to do so drives anxieties that they are not proper fathers.

Ryo's unconditional paternal bond with Keita is significant as it implies that fathers who do not fulfil their parental duties are good fathers nonetheless; fathers retain their paternal roles even in physical absence. Other scenes establish how both Ryo and Yudai have established paternal connections while absent in Keita and Ryusei's early years. During the elementary school interview in the film's opening scene, the interview committee ask Keita what he did over the holidays; Keita responds that he and Ryo went camping together and played with kites. We soon learn this was a false answer that he was instructed to give by his pre-school teachers in order to, we are led to assume, portray Keita's home environment and relationship with his father in a more appealing means than the reality. We later learn that kites have had a strong relevance in Yudai's relationship with his father and his children. Before permanently exchanging the sons, Yudai implores Ryo to make kites with Ryusei, thus continuing this family tradition. Keita's prior interest in kites has, it is suggested, been inherited from Yudai, his birthfather – despite the two having been separated since birth. Symbolically, Ryo has neglected such activities with Keita, causing Keita to lie in the early interview scene: during their later conversation, Ryo muses to Yudai 'my father was not the sort to play with kites', consolidating his lack of influence over this aspect of Keita's personality. Other motifs symbolically associated with kites surface elsewhere in the narrative. In the scene immediately following the interview at the start, Keita takes part in a trial class with other children during which they create and play with paper lanterns. Using slow-motion and backed by upbeat piano music, Koreeda emphasises the happiness and joy of Keita playing with lanterns through close-ups of his face. The lanterns, a comparable aerial paper toy to kites, further establishes a strong connection between Keita and the kinds of outdoor activities passed down the paternal bloodline of Yudai's family.

Ryusei has also inherited some of Ryo's characteristics. After Ryusei temporarily runs away and returns to Yudai, Ryo recalls doing the same thing when he was young after his father remarried. Just as the sons (both) eventually accept their fathers regardless of whether or not they have performed a strong parental role during their upbringing, they also carry on their legacies simply through blood-relation. This is comparable to pre-war *daikokubashira* beliefs, insofar as paternal lineage is mythologised, but here it occurs even in physical absence. Kinship relations are still an important theme of fatherhood, as Keita and Ryusei's close relationships with their 'adoptive' fathers attests. However, and perhaps rendering *Like Father, Like Son* unique among Koreeda's family narratives, blood relation also plays a strong part and the fathers here justify their paternal roles simply by state of being, whether physically or not in the lives of their sons.

It is for these reasons that *Like Father, Like Son*, ultimately, re-mythologises all fathers. Ryo's transformation into *ikumēn*-style paternity facilitates the optimistic climax of the film, but this is just a further confirmation of what the film has already demonstrated – Ryo, just like Yudai, is the father of both Keita and Ryusei simply through his presence. Koreeda advocates fathers to perform stronger roles with their children and demonstrates how even the most conservative masculinity can become an idealised father once removed from the oppressive corporate settings that constrain them. However, it is also an optimistic reminder to fathers who fail to achieve this; even if they are physically absent from their children's lives due to work, distance or other factors, their mere presence within the life of a child, even if only through blood, is enough to warrant their position as 'father'.

Conclusion

Like Father, Like Son is a response to the conflicting discourses that have rendered the role of fathers in contemporary Japan unclear. Though the salaryman has endured as the hegemonic masculine role, it has been increasingly undermined by growing pressures for fathers to increase domestic responsibilities, as instigated by *ikumen* discourse. The film depicts this social struggle through the representation and conflict between two fathers on opposing ends of salaryman and *ikumen* parental engagement. Through his exposure to an *ikumen* father, a characterisation he initially derides, salaryman protagonist Ryo reassesses his largely 'absent' fatherhood and realises his conservative parental ideologies have been wrong.

By discreetly holding corporate environments as responsible for masculine parental anxieties (rather than Ryo himself), *Like Father, Like Son* is an example of quiet activism. Koreeda suggests working fathers caught up in this discursive conflict have become victims of the oppressive corporate structures that have slowed down changes in masculine identity. The fathers in this film either evade or overcome the patriarchal influences of outdated salaryman ideologies by distancing themselves from corporate environments. This reframes social debates on fatherhood so that fathers themselves are no longer complicit in the forces that have prevented them from achieving growing parental expectations. Effectively, while depicting *ikumen* fathers as the new social standard, Koreeda shows absent fathers like Ryo as having been moulded by factors beyond their control. This means there are no 'right' and 'wrong' fathers, only right and wrong working environments. *Like Father, Like Son* suggests, therefore, that working fathers who are marginalised by their jobs don't need to change, but corporate infrastructure does.

Koreeda's depiction suggests all fathers should be trying to become *ikumen* fathers, but they are absolved of responsibility for this change. The film is instead a call for a more systematic change to patriarchal corporate structures which, as represented here, are the places that have constrained attempts for more radical reforms of household gendered organisation. To this end, the fathers in *Like Father, Like Son* are exaggerated representations of domestic/corporate paternal archetypes yet both point to the same conclusion - they are performing strong parental roles irrespective of their physical position within their children's lives.

Of course, these questions are addressed purely on a masculine front; with very few exceptions, Koreeda has cast male children in central roles in all of his family narratives. Therefore, the questions the film asks regarding the 'legacies' passed down through generations between adults and children are only considered through a strictly male subjectivity. The absence of father-daughter relationships here suggests, much like the films English title, that *Like Father, Like Son* can only imagine paternal links developing through a more traditional sense of male lineage, suggesting older *ie* myths of *daikokubashira* have not been entirely circumvented in Koreeda's approach.

Hamad claims the dominant position of 'postfeminist fatherhood' in Hollywood cinema justifies its position as the new hegemonic masculinity. *Like Father, Like Son* depicts this as a more transitional process. *Ikumen* roles are positioned by Koreeda as a superior masculine identity to the salaryman. However, these roles are disputed in contemporary society and 'dominant' working masculinities, as represented by Ryo, have disconcertedly approached domestic roles. Therefore, while paternal masculinity has achieved significant dominance in Hollywood to warrant its claim to hegemonic status, *Like Father, Like Son* suggests

hegemonic masculinity is now a debated concept in Japan. Paternal masculinities like those Hamada discusses are certainly advocated as a new hegemonic identity, but the film is more concerned with addressing and perhaps reassuring fathers who fail in this role. By re-mythologising all fathers, regardless of the level of their physical 'presence' in their children's lives, Koreeda acknowledges the reality that fatherhood remains a disputed concept in contemporary Japan; at the same time, he is reassuring all fathers that a disputed (or lack) of hegemonic role does not prevent them from being fathers. On a broader level, therefore, while the narratives of hegemonic masculinity are unclear, *Like Father, Like Son* is quiet activism in favour of *all* fathers, irrespective of how they are variably celebrated or reviled in competing discourse.

This chapter has explored the complex negotiation of changing parental roles from the father's perspective, revealing a discourse that fathers 'naturally' embody emerging principles of fatherhood. The next chapter considers how the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* are positioned within this framework. Instead of harbouring emerging gender identities, the mothers, more problematically, consolidate the roles of the fathers through adherence to more traditional roles.

Chapter 4

Housewives of past and present: Mothers as Marginalised Demographic in *Like Father,*

Like Son

In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated how Koreeda's family narratives reframe discourses of changing family demographics and can be considered a form of 'quiet activism.' To this effect, I have argued that these narratives have called for an end to 'standardised' family and gender identities as continues to be encouraged in largely unaccommodating political and socio-economic structuring. However, for the final two chapters, I will turn my attention to representations that test the limits of quiet activism. Following on from the previous chapter, which discussed the negotiation of emerging paternal masculinities in *Like Father, Like Son*, I will now contrast these findings with how mothers are positioned within this same film. Though Koreeda empowers his fathers through a renegotiation of supposedly feminised notions of paternity alongside working or professional roles, this occurs largely through the marginalisation of maternal characters, both of whom remain attached to more conservative functions. Therefore, Koreeda's inability to reimagine how mothers may be benefitted from gendered behavioural shifts (such as *ikumen*) suggests the discursive function of these narratives are limited according to specific demographics. It is also indicative of a society that has largely failed to significantly address the changing attitudes and desires of women in Japan.

The previous chapter compared the positive depictions of male parental engagement in *Like Father, Like Son* to the paternal role models Hannah Hamad (2013) describes in Hollywood

cinema as 'postfeminist fatherhood'. In this chapter, I will discuss, like Hamad, how mothers have been overlooked or omitted in these debates. According to Hamad,

Notwithstanding its seductive appeal as an ostensibly feminist formation of masculinity, popular cinematic fatherhood nonetheless belies postfeminist culture's ideologically circuitous relationship to feminism. The recentralization of masculinity through postfeminist fatherhood is thus negotiated, offering little challenge to the status quo, while tacitly accounting for itself in disingenuously feminist terms. (2013: 11)

Hamad's argument suggests feminist movements have been appropriated to suit masculine subjectivities in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Because these films have focused on fathers, the roles of mothers have tended to be 'marginalised' or even 'absent'. For this reason, Hamad believes postfeminist fatherhood in cinema exists 'with troubling implications from a feminist viewpoint with regard to the representability (or lack thereof) of motherhood and to its discursive hegemony' (2013: 4). In *Like Father, Like Son*, a similar process occurs. The depiction of the mothers relies on far more traditional and, as shall be argued, mythologised principles of maternal femininity which means they are spared from the debates regarding the renegotiation of parenting roles within the home. Like Hamad's examples, the film can be seen as 'disingenuously feminist' by approaching shifting gender discourses within the home without recognising or addressing anxieties from a maternal perspective.

Hamad believes paternal masculinities are presented 'in the guise of a feminist ideal of masculinity' because they are a response to postfeminist movements (2013: 135). Of course, there are distinctions to be drawn between the histories of feminism in and outside

of Japan, which would have a significant impact on representation in Japanese cinema. Moreover, recent government initiatives such as Womenomics and The *Ikumen* Project were launched under a similar ‘guise’ of feminist intervention; although both are primarily driven by economic or political incentives, neither really address the ongoing (and highly restrictive) links between women and domesticity. For example, *ikumen* discourse has attempted to appeal to men through ‘intrinsically “fun” activities such as bathing or playing together with their children’ (such as those undertaken by Yudai in *Like Father, Like Son*) (Ishii-Kuntz 2019: 185); the less desirable domestic work – cooking, cleaning or ‘dirty’ tasks like feeding or changing nappies, for example – tends not to be addressed in *ikumen* promotional campaigns and continues to be associated with the female sphere of duties (2019). Therefore, just as certain developments like *ikumen* have seemed to appeal to a more egalitarian distribution of domestic responsibilities, they have yet to significantly affect traditional attitudes towards feminine roles.

The mothers in Koreeda’s cinema are mostly characterised through very traditional functions, and this can be traced to the ongoing social images of Japanese mothers. Amongst the wider changes in how different demographics have altered in terms of representation and cultural expectations in Japanese society, the constructed figure of the mother has, according to numerous studies, changed very little since the post-war era, or possibly even since the late 19th century (Koyama 2013). Like other demographics discussed through this thesis, Japanese mothers have sought to improve their ‘standardised’ roles. Research has uncovered widespread anxieties related to diminished autonomy or individualism (Rice 2001; Rosenberger 2001), the pressures of performing domestic tasks or raising children ‘correctly’ (Jolivet 1997; Ochiai 2008), a lack of support at home (Rice 2001;

Golovina 2018) and loneliness (Jolivet 1997). Amid the changing circumstances of contemporary society, which has seen a plurality of gender discourses displace the hegemonic epitomes of the 'standardised' nuclear family, Nancy Rosenburger suggests that Japanese mothers have felt torn between their independent 'selves' and 'virtuous selves caring for others' (2001: 2). However, Koreeda's mothers experience no such internal conflict and are dedicated to domesticity. Although there is some acknowledgement of the increasing doubts women harbour towards the maternal role, these are seldom fully explored or resolved in the manner Koreeda reserves for male protagonists, or women who have circumvented the reproductive maternal role entirely (see chapter two).

The function of this chapter is to explore mothers as an example of a 'neglected' demographic in Koreeda's narratives. Given the ongoing concerns of Japanese mothers who, like other family demographics, have struggled with the gaps between the expectations and reality of their roles, Koreeda fails to address them with the same level of assurance.

Therefore, this chapter discusses how the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* (and perhaps other narratives) are an example of where Koreeda's family narratives fail as an example of quiet activism. As the previous chapter explained, fathers Ryo and Yudai negotiate newer and seemingly egalitarian domestic roles that Koreeda depicts as superior replacements for gender-segregated post-war family ideologies. However, the roles of the mothers remain strongly contingent on their post-war functions, therefore undermining the potential for reciprocal avenues for development in the hegemonic roles of women. Since the mothers are a clear omission from Koreeda's broader discursive function (quiet activism), these representations offer clues to the methods by which mothers in Japanese society (as elsewhere) are defined and restricted by the mythologies of their role and function.

Koreeda's mothers

Mothers lack centrality in Koreeda's contemporary narratives. The only film in recent years fronted by a female protagonist is *Our Little Sister* (2015): a film focusing on women who neglect the maternal role. For the most part, mothers in Koreeda's cinema perform supporting roles, usually functioning to elaborate or justify the conflicted personas of male protagonists. These mothers often play the wife or ex-wife of the central protagonist, and very often their influence and authority over family matters are seemingly determined by their earning capabilities. For example, *After the Storm's* (2016) Kyoko is the working ex-wife of central protagonist Ryo, a man who gambles, steals, and struggles to pay rent and bills. She is clearly empowered by her financial superiority over her ex-husband, as demonstrated by her numerous attempts to restrict Ryo from seeing their son because he cannot keep up with regular child support payments. Similar authority is (initially) held by *Going my Home's* (2012) Sae whose high-profile catering job begins to challenge her husband's position as breadwinner, and the latter is suddenly required to increase his domestic role due to Sae's work commitments. An opposing example of this archetype is *Still Walking's* (2008) Yukari, a more passive character who appears not to work. Much of the narrative is spent at the home of her new husband Ryo's parents, where she is forced to politely endure numerous disparaging comments from her new parents-in-law regarding her status as a widowed mother. Koreeda also employs a kind of 'stock' mother character for tertiary roles; these characters are often mothers to adolescent children who are defined more by their relationship with their ageing mothers than with their children. The sister

characters in each of the Abe Hiroshi-starring narratives fulfil this archetype (*Still Walking*, *Going my Home*, *After the Storm*) as does *I Wish's* (2011) Nozomi.

Koreeda struggles to separate his mothers from familial responsibilities, and this is contradictorily personified as a positive and a negative. For example, Nozomi struggles to find meaning or happiness away from her responsibility as a mother following her divorce. Her cohabiting son Koichi is rarely home and appears to be reaching a level of independence, whilst her younger son lives far away with her ex-husband. Her function as 'mother' seemingly over, she eventually enters the 'next' stage of her life by joining her mother's social group of elderly community members; she and her mother even wear matching clothing to their group functions. Nozomi's 'retirement' as a mother is framed as a positive, but the same cannot be said for many of Koreeda's elderly mothers, who often appear in smaller roles. Comparatively, these characters (usually played by Kiki Kirin) have led lives of diminished ends and disappointment due to earlier expectations having never been fulfilled. For example, *Still Walking's* Toshiko resents the untimely death of her eldest son, who was expected to move in with his parents after their retirement. She eventually dies having not had her desire to live with either of her adult sons satisfied. Similarly, *After the Storm's* Yoshiko has been forced to reside in the same squalid apartment for over forty years due to her (recently deceased) husband's poor financial management: a trait inherited by her similarly unreliable adult son. For these mothers, a lifetime of dedication to the family has brought only disappointment and resentment. Therefore, Koreeda has personified the family as both the singular priority and source of hindrance for his mother characters.

While each of the mothers mentioned here would be ripe for further investigation, this chapter focuses on the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son*: housewife Midori and working mother Yukari (see Figure 4.1). Side by side, these characters provide intriguing commentary on the differing roles of mothers and how employment challenges the traditionally held view of motherhood as a full-time (domestic) role. Koreeda champions the role of working mother Yukari and presents her situation as the more favourable, however, this representation relies strongly on Yukari's continued ability to fulfil traditional maternal functions. At the same time, Midori is simultaneously positioned as oppressed due to her purely domestic function. This is paradoxical in the sense that Koreeda represents domestic roles as both validating and constraining his characters. It also ignores the growing dissatisfaction from contemporary working mothers who have felt overburdened by their growing duties.

This chapter will suggest that the discursive reframing of changing family identities, employed as an empowering concept in preceding chapters, can also act as a constraining device for certain characters and demographics throughout Koreeda's narratives. For Japanese mothers, the principles governing their responsibilities in childrearing have remained strongly influenced by 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryosai kenbo*) ideology from the late 19th century - a role that emphasised strong connections between mother and child but restricted the autonomy women had in domestic environments (Uno 1991, 1993; Niwa and Tomiko 1993; Koyama 2013). 'Good wife...' is not seen to have substantially changed over the last 100 years and Japanese women are still expected to conform strongly to the same principles as their Meiji forbearers. Subsequently, while Koreeda's use of traditional symbolism as explored in other chapters provides a means to frame emerging ideological

changes within a traditionally invoked cultural consensus, evoking principles of ‘good wife...’ seems only to reaffirm the status quo. In the case of *Like Father, Like Son*, it further limits the progression of women from hegemonic functions and can be seen to act in opposition to quiet activism.



Figure 4.1: Working mother Yukari (L - played by Maki Yoko) and full-time housewife Midori (R - Ono Machiko) converse during a private outing between the families (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

The housewife in context

Midori and Yukari are the two mothers on opposing sides of the ‘switched babies’ narrative that provides the central concern of *Like Father, Like Son*. Midori is the housewife of a wealthy nuclear family headed by successful ‘salaryman’ husband Ryo in a luxurious apartment in central Tokyo, while Yukari is a working mother married to shopkeeper Yudai in a family living in more modest conditions on the city outskirts. In chapter three, I discussed how Ryo’s professionally influenced authoritative control over his family is used to

criticise post-war standardised gender roles. Conversely, Yukari and Yudai's more egalitarian distribution of fiscal and domestic responsibility demarcates theirs as a more worthy household. In the film's climax, Ryo proves his paternal worth by his realisation that he must perform a more nurturing role to his son, as had previously been performed solely by Midori. To negate repetition, this chapter compares these two mothers against the conclusions I reached in chapter three. In this manner, Midori is the mother in an 'outdated' and 'undesirable' family unit that undergoes 'corrective' organisation of gender responsibility to facilitate the film's optimistic climax. Yukari, meanwhile, is the contemporary archetype against whom Midori is compared and whose lifestyle is endorsed across the narrative.

Midori (played by Ono Machiko) is a housewife in her late twenties married to slightly older salaryman Ryo. She has a calm, caring nature that contrasts with her husband's strict and competitive temperament. Her voice is quietly soft, emphasising a passive and nurturing personality. Her vocal interactions with her son or other adults are contrasted by Ryo's louder and sterner voice. She dresses in muted colours, which de-emphasises her presence compared to her husband, and dutifully performs all domestic tasks for her family.

Throughout the narrative, she is mostly defined by her interactions with Keita and conversations with her husband (based mostly on Keita). She works in the purely domestic role full-time and is only seen outside the family's large apartment when accompanied by her husband and/or son. Much of her time is dedicated to Keita with whom she shares a warm and affectionate relationship. Keita appears to adopt the same nurturing personality as his mother, much to Ryo's disappointment. Her relationship with her husband is less affectionate but stable, and Midori is usually happy to follow Ryo's decisions regarding

Keita's upbringing and general household management. She seldom makes any decisions for the family or speaks up during the numerous official meetings regarding Keita's fate, leaving this responsibility to Ryo. After the switch is revealed, Midori finds herself more and more emotionally distanced from Ryo as it becomes clear he is prepared to lose Keita so he can be reunited with his biological son Ryusei. However, despite her protestations, Midori is mostly ineffectual in influencing the outcome of the narrative. Audiences are led to sympathise with Midori's plight, which is opposed to her husband's emotional coldness. The manner by which Midori's character is established suggests she is victimised by Ryo's conservatism and her marginalised family position.

Yukari (played by Maki Yoko) is a working mother also in her late twenties and again married to an older husband. She works in a local takeaway food shop serving *obento* (small packed meals or lunchboxes) thus making a modest income that consolidates the similarly moderate-income of Yudai's business: a dilapidated electrical goods store/workshop that doubles as the family home. Yukari and her family live in modest conditions and often dress in clothes that are cheaper but considerably brighter than those favoured by Midori's family; the similarities between Yukari and her husband's clothes reflect their shared household authority, and the more relaxed and playful nature of their environment. Yukari has three children in total, Ryusei being the eldest. In her initial scenes, Yukari is seen to have significant authority over her family. She frequently corrects her husband's statements during official meetings held between both couples and officials to discuss the switch dilemma and disciplines her children during private outings between the families (see Figure 4.2). Her voice is confidently stern and forceful; this is often contrasted with that of her husband who stutters and speaks more nervously during the legal discussions. She is also

strongly contrasted to Midori who is either silent or speaks much more softly and adopts a reserved body language. Later scenes within the home reveal Yukari to perform a friendlier and more nurturing role with her children that seems hidden from public view. In these scenes she smiles, sings and plays with the children. Although Yukari and her family are in fewer scenes than Midori's family, her marriage with Yudai is harmonious and the pair seem to meet difficult decisions mutually. The impression given by her character is positive; she is confident yet not overpowering and is empathetic about the severity of the central issue and its effects on other characters.



Figure 4.2: Yudai (Lily Franky) looks to Yukari to do the talking at a lunch meeting between the couples and hospital staff (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

Koreeda separates his mothers by employment, agency and responsibility, yet they are united through shared principles of motherhood. Midori and Yukari are representative of temporally separated notions of maternal femininity and the changing status of the housewife (*shufu*). During the period of modernisation, Japan, like most industrialised

nations, underwent a process of what Ochiai Emiko refers to as ‘housewifisation’, which describes ‘the gender division of labour between the “breadwinning” husband who laboured in the public sphere and the housewife who specialised in housekeeping and childrearing in the domestic sphere’ (2008: 4). Gender segregation continued in the post-war legislation of the nuclear family, and the roles of women continued largely as they had previously. Housewives duties were to oversee all domestic and childrearing activities within the home, thus freeing salaryman husbands to dedicate their time and efforts to work and rebuilding the national economy (Dasgupta 2003; Takeda 2005). Though their roles were considered essential in the successful rebuilding and, later, the economic success of the nation, they were also fundamentally based on notions of ‘support’ (of the husband) and domesticity. The housewife was politically and socially inscribed as the ideal femininity that generations of young Japanese women aspired to become in adulthood, thus establishing its position as the hegemonic female identity (Ochiai 2008; Holloway 2010; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012).

Following Second Wave feminist movements, which rallied against the strict division of gendered labour (particularly in the workplace), the housewife role began to lose its former social strength. More women started entering the employment market to resist purely domestic roles (Ochiai 1997; Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Nakano 2014). Official discourse, wary of the potential effect on already-declining birth-rates, continued to encourage the housewife image and largely denounce opposing forms of femininity. In 2003, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshio suggested that women who didn’t perform their civic duty of having children should not get a pension (Frederick 2003) and went on to suggest that the problem of low birth-rates could be attributed to women being too highly educated (French 2003).

Some conservative politicians even considered revoking Article 24 of the Civil Code which gives women the right to own property and register for divorce (Beech 2005). This misogynistic political opposition demonstrates how Japanese women have struggled to ascertain autonomous adult roles or separate themselves from conservative images of (domestic) femininity.

Despite the steady numbers of women in Japan rejecting domestic roles, social attitudes towards gender responsibility have not significantly changed since the post-war era (Nemoto 2008; Macnaughton 2015). Ochiai believes Japan is behind Western nations which have seen a 'de-housewifisation' through increased employment opportunities for women since the post-war period; a development that has not been reproduced in Japan and other Asian nations (2008: 2). In many ways, mothers in Japanese society have become both the most heavily promoted yet most invisible form of femininity. Successive governments have tried to circumvent the nation's population crisis by promoting motherhood. However, those who do choose to become mothers and follow common trajectories into purely domestic roles have often found themselves trapped in restrictive lifestyles - lifestyles that have become the basis of why many women have neglected motherhood in the first place.

While strong links between women and domesticity have been maintained in the 21st century, the full-time 'professional housewife' (*sengyo shufu*) has been in decline since the 1980s. Joy Hendry notes that more than half of married Japanese women were in employment at the start of the 1990s, although many still tried to 'give all their attention to their home', especially in the early years of a child's life (1993: 224). The collapse of the bubble economy in 1991 resulted in job insecurity for many breadwinning husbands thus causing more housewives to enter employment to sustain the household economy (Mirza

2016). It has become commonplace for mothers to work in part-time positions after their children start school. However, expectations for women to fulfil their side of the 'gender contract' (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 38) have continued and women mostly fill part-time or marginal positions so that they can continue performing domestic duties to the same extent as their 'professional' predecessors (Broadbent 2003; Lee and Lee 2014). Due to social pressures that continue to place childrearing and domestic responsibilities solely on the mother, the balancing act working mothers must perform between work both inside and outside of the home has been considered a source of further stress and anxiety (Iwama 2005; Golovina 2018).

From this context, we can read Midori and Yukari as representatives of separate normative eras of Japanese mothers since the start of the post-war era: Midori, a full-time housewife, is typical of the post-war gender-segregated nuclear family; Yukari, a working mother, represents many of her demographic since the economic downturn. The families themselves are broadly representational of the eras also, with Midori and Ryo's financial success harkening back to the post-war economic miracle period and Yukari and Yudai's modest, dual-income household reflecting the hardships many families have faced since. In terms of parenting, Koreeda favours the latter family as the more nurturing. However, when compared with the ideological treatment of mothers in broader society tasked with the same responsibilities as Midori and Yukari, some noteworthy similarities and differences challenge social conceptions of idealised motherhood.

The contemporary 'professional housewife'

According to Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni (2012), the idealised media image of domestic femininity in Japan has changed since the post-war 'professional housewife' to the more contemporary, glamorous 'charisma housewife (*karisuma shufu*) and 'hot mama' (2012: 210). The housewife was 'professionalised', says Goldstein-Gidoni, through discursive associations between domestic responsibilities and (national) economic sustainability. In this manner, wives' dedication in the domestic sphere supported the hard work of salaryman husbands, thus fulfilling the women's side of the "gender contract" that characterises post-war Japan' (2012: 38). Despite the film's contemporary setting, Midori can be situated closely within the 'professional housewife' archetype rather than more contemporary images.¹⁴ Her behaviour and appearance are more consistent with 'modest' and 'frugal' principles of the post-war era (Ochiai 1997; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), despite the family's wealth. She is not even comparable to the 'new woman' identified by Anne Imamura in the 1980s who 'believes that she should also be able to engage in activities unrelated to the homemaker role' (1987: 14) since she expresses no interest or intention within the narrative to perform any task other than her domestic function. Koreeda's presentation of Midori is, therefore, bound to modest post-war representations.

The post-war 'professional housewife' role consisted of 'being a wife to the husband, taking charge of the housekeeping tasks, and bearing the main responsibility for childcare' (Imamura 1987: 12). Midori similarly maintains a full-time position in the home whilst relying on the income of her successful, albeit mostly absent, husband. The environments

¹⁴ Whereas the 'professional' housewives in the past were represented through their modesty and frugality, contemporary renderings such as the 'hot mama' are comparatively sexualised and demarcated by increased consumer behaviour (Ochiai 1997; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 2017; Osaka 2017).

for Midori and her husband are sharply divided and ‘very little overlap occurs between the two worlds of home and work’ (Imamura 1987: 13). Scenes featuring the family in the home frequently position her in the kitchen. She will often prepare food for her husband upon his return from work and relieves him of almost all childcare responsibilities (see Figure 4.3). Midori is restricted, therefore, into the same ‘supportive’ function as her social counterparts.



Figure 4.3: ‘Professional housewife’ Midori happily prepares food for her husband (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

While conforming to hegemonic gender identities, Koreeda’s representation of Midori and Ryo’s living arrangement could, by post-war standards, also be considered overly oppressive from Midori’s perspective. Susanne Vogel (2013), reflecting on her ethnographic work in the late 1950s, remarks that, although the Japanese housewife was expected to ‘obey a man throughout her life’, she found that the strict separation between the roles of husbands and wives permitted the women a level of independence in household management that

rivalled counterparts in the US: 'they made their own decisions. Their status was secure, and they did not worry about approval from their husbands' (2013: 7). Joy Hendry reached similar conclusions to Vogel, declaring Japanese housewives 'have a good deal of control over their lives' (1993: 234). Due to her husband's authoritarian position, such observations do not apply to Midori. This is evident during the first scene set in their apartment when Ryo lightly chastises Midori for allowing Keita to skip a daily routine of piano practice to play video games. Without arguing, Midori quickly instructs Keita to fulfil his father's wishes. The arrangement concerning the exchange of sons is also organised solely by Ryo; he arranges a lawyer, suggests the initial plan to exchange the boys on weekends, and instigates the eventual permanent exchange. Midori is powerless in the progression of these events and, given her devotion to her non-biological son Keita, these develop against her will. Midori does not, therefore, perform a household management role that has been seen to provide housewives with some form of autonomy, and she is a more oppressed example of a 'professional' housewife.

Of course, Midori's experience is not one that is perceived to conform with or oppose some form of 'universal' maternal social archetype, but there is evidence that Koreeda exaggerates the more discouraging social conditions of her demographic. For example, Japanese housewives will often form social groups in local areas based on shared domestic and childrearing lifestyles (Vogel 2013; Hendry 1993). At the same time, many also experience feelings of loneliness due to their dedication to the domestic space and the absence of other family members (Jolivet 1997). In *Like Father, Like Son*, no such social support groups are evident and both mothers are only seen to interact with family within their specific communities. Midori usually only appears on screen with other members of

her family (Ryo, Keita or Ryusei). The one brief scene in which she does appear alone only seems to emphasise her social isolation. This occurs during a late scene after the sons are permanently switched back and an unsatisfied Ryusei escapes from the apartment and travels back to his original family while Midori is sleeping. Sometime later, we see a panicked Midori searching the local area, including a park, to find him. These shots are notably free of other people, and Midori has no local social or support group to whom she can turn in this time of crisis. Hendry found professional housewives 'try to maintain good relations with their neighbours' but Midori lacks this conditioning (1993: 225-6). Conversely, Muriel Jolivet found a preponderance of young mothers in urban areas who experienced 'isolation' (1997: 10). These women often 'find themselves far from their close family, without any ties or contacts with the outside world' (1997: 11). Midori is similarly disconnected from her hometown; we learn she had returned there for her son's birth since Ryo was always working and she didn't know anyone else in their local area. Though Jolivet's research does not appear to speak for the experiences of all mothers, as Hendry and Vogel's work attests, this is another example of Koreeda endowing his housewife protagonist with only the more negative characteristics of the social role. Midori can be understood therefore as a particularly subjugated example of the Japanese housewife: characterised with the aesthetics, responsibilities and ideologies of the post-war 'professional' archetype but with no agency, authority or social network through which to ameliorate her role.

The working housewife – overcoming resistance

The oppressive apparatus that constrains Midori's position does not appear to affect Yukari in the same manner. Since Yukari works, she is omitted from the 'professional' moniker as described by analysts. Hers is instead a separate type of mother role that has increased in recent years yet has historically *and* contemporaneously been considered undesirable to generations of young Japanese women. Even though the ideological strength supporting the full-time housewife was eroding from the late 1970s, the prospect of dedicating oneself to the domestic role in support of working husbands has continued. A 2014 poll showed 40% of respondents aged between 20-49 agreeing that women should remain at home whilst men worked (in Macnaughton 2015), and the expectations from men and women observed in contemporary methods of matchmaking (such as online dating services) are still firmly embedded within traditional gender norms (Dalton and Dales 2016). The reasons for this attitude vary: for example, many women have felt that career options for them are so limited they are usually coerced into 'retiring' after marriage, making employment an unstable option for mothers (Nemoto 2013; Nakano 2014; Dalton 2017). At the same time, social discourses have continued to position nuclear families operating under a sole (male) breadwinner as the most desirable and economically secure household structure, thus making 'professional' housewives a symbol of domestic security (Goldstein-Gidoni 2017: 294). Yukari's role has been considered less desirable and undertaken only by women who 'unfortunately failed to become full-time housewives' (Ueno 2009: 50).

Yukari is by no means personified as a 'career' woman, and the exact circumstances of her job are not revealed or dwelled upon. Her job in the food shop appears to be supplementary and is only revealed in a single short scene during which she is briefly visited at work by her children. Since Yudai's business would appear to offer a marginal income, Yukari's job likely

functions to sustain household costs; much in the same way many of her social counterparts have taken up during the recessionary years. Yukari has thus, to borrow Ueno's term, 'failed' insofar as she cannot perform the full-time domestic role, neither has she been able to ascend to wealthier heights as a career woman. Koreeda instead portrays her in possibly the most socially undesired form of adult femininity; or what Ochiai refers to rather unenthusiastically as 'housewifisation-with-a-job' (in Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 40).

Though her role might be socially regarded as undesirable, Yukari has far more agency in the narrative than Midori. We are introduced to Yukari and Yudai when both couples first meet with hospital staff to discuss the birth switch. Responding to a suggestion of switching the sons back, Yudai quips 'they're not like pets' to which Yukari firmly responds that she would be similarly opposed to switching a pet. Following this stern rebuttal, Yudai sheepishly changes his prior statement to reflect that of his wife. In a later scene featuring another meeting between the couples, hospital staff and legal figures, the staff attempt to press the couples into a making a decision about the fate of their sons. Yudai, unable to provide any clear answer, hesitantly responds that such decisions could be prolonged since the meetings are 'fun', but Yukari interrupts and expresses a desire to reach a solution, following which, just as before, Yudai suddenly reverses his opinion ('I'm not sure I like this'). Unlike Midori, Yukari's authority supersedes that of her husband and she makes the important decisions in the formal meetings regarding the sons. In the final scene between the parents that occurs before permanently switching back to biological sons, it is Yukari, not Yudai, who discusses the situation and terms with Ryo. Yukari's commanding presence within the family occurs despite her marginalised status as a 'housewife-with-a-job', and she enjoys the authoritative benefits withheld from 'professional' Midori.

Yukari's employment conflicts with cultural beliefs that have connected mothers with an educational responsibility, especially since her children are still infants. One of the reasons many Japanese mothers are reluctant to work, especially during their child's early years, is due to social pressures to perform a strong educator role to their children; a role for which they have been recognised internationally and frequently termed 'education mothers' (*kyoiku mama*) (Allison 1991; Holloway 2010: 148). Susan Holloway has argued the 'unpaid labour' of mothers provides an 'important underpinning' for the successful education of children (2010: 149). Mothers are expected to take part in their child's educational development from a young age, and those that work are felt to potentially neglect part of their social function (Imamura 1987: 20; Holloway 2010: 149). Yukari's obligation to work excuses her from the 'educational mother' position traditionally ascribed through social norms, but it is partially retained by her job in the *obento* takeaway.

Obento, lovingly created lunchboxes traditionally made every day at home by housewives for their young children (and husbands), are described by Anne Allison (1991) in Althusserian terms as 'ideological state apparatus' that strengthen the social ties between Japanese mothers and their 'educational mother' role. According to Allison, 'motherhood [...] is institutionalised through the child's school and such routines as making the *obento* as a full-time, kept-at-home job' (1991: 203) Therefore, Allison continues, through the preparation of *obento*, 'a woman is ensconcing herself in the ritualization and subjectivity (subjection) of being a mother in Japan' (1991: 203). In the brief scene featuring Yukari working at the *obento* counter, she is visited by her three children (including Keita). She gives them some food and sends them back home (see Figure 4.4). Though this food may be less personal than a homemade *obento*, the scene demonstrates that Yukari maintains her

domestic (maternal) function. Scenes such as this illustrate that, despite the gendered segregation that defines the separate environments of home (female) and work (male), these barriers can be made fluid yet still retain specificity to feminine roles. Yukari's job is feminised in this manner by its relation to specifically maternal ideological tropes.

Therefore, Koreeda circumvents the polemical nature of Yukari's employment through maternal conditioning that is evoked through the symbolism of the *obento* and her ability to maintain some of her responsibilities as an 'education mama.'

Koreeda further elaborates the 'completion' of Yukari's maternal entitlement through her interaction with Keita. As the children leave the *obento* shop, she winks at Keita, who smiles and winks back. This completes an opening from a previous scene within Yukari's home during which she winks at Keita whilst playing with her other children. This prior scene was the first of Keita's visits to his biological parents' home, and the first time we (or Keita) had seen her nurturing temperament; she had previously only been seen enacting a more authoritative presence whilst leaving nurturing tasks to her husband. Figuratively, she had not proven herself as 'mother' at this earlier moment due to her more 'masculine' position within the family, hence Keita fails to return her first wink. By providing the *obento* food, Yukari consolidates her ability to conform to expected maternal principles, and this is verified by Keita's return of her wink - a symbol of the growing bond between them. In response to anxieties regarding the diminished presence of mothers in the home due to increasing employment necessity, Koreeda defines his working mother as one who continues a full-time domestic role even within employment.



Figure 4.4: 'Housewife-with-a-job' Yukari provides *obento* food for her children, thus continuing her role as an 'education mama' from the workplace (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

Consequently, when compared to the roles, behaviours and modern anxieties of mothers in the separate social categorisations represented by Midori and Yukari, Koreeda switches the desirability for either role. Yukari, the lower-class housewife-with-a-job, represents the mothers who have 'failed' to have accomplished the most desired living conditions for their demographic, but still commands authority over her husband, children and home whilst preserving an ability to perform her maternal functions even from outside the home.

Midori, the 'professional housewife', fails to establish this same authority, or 'autonomy' as described by Vogel, despite this being the very characteristic that sociologists have used to defend the role of her off-screen counterparts. She encounters many of the anxieties observed in her demographic but never fulfils the agency or authority that defines her part of the 'gender-contract'. Vogel suggests numbers of professional housewives declined sharply in more recent times due in part to economic stagnation that has caused more

women to enter the workforce (2013: 5). Midori is spared the necessity of work due to the financial accomplishments of her husband, though she lacks agency as a result. However, Yukari's balance of domestic authority and work suggests women forced into work may have in fact benefitted from Japan's ongoing economic turmoil.

By positioning Yukari's socially marginalised role as the stronger, this comparison could be seen as an example of quiet activism. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that just as Yukari can be perceived as a progressive archetype for the professional housewife, this portrayal is only sustained by the relative suppression of Midori. Contrasting Yukari's stronger sense of agency over Midori, whose purely domestic role is depicted as oppressive, Koreeda optimises the experiences of contemporary working mothers. However, the authority and autonomy over household that Yukari maintains is not a new 'advantage' but rather it is one housewives have historically been seen to already hold. Therefore, it is not so much that Yukari has 'extra' control over her circumstances than normal, but rather Midori has less, and this gives the somewhat false impression that Yukari is in an especially advantageous position. Furthermore, Yukari successfully and competently balances the heavy load of family management, childrearing and employment. In reality, however, working mothers have reportedly struggled to balance jobs alongside domestic tasks, much of which they are expected to manage singlehandedly (Fujita 1989; Matsui et al. 1995; Boling 2007). Though Yukari's life is burdened by increased responsibilities and financial hardship, Koreeda overlooks these issues and maintains she is in the better position due to her authority. This reverses more common discursive perceptions so that now the professional housewife is a more disadvantaged maternal femininity than employed mothers. However, this has occurred by repeatedly emphasising how Midori is in a worse

position rather than how Yukari's position addresses the problems encountered by her demographic.

This follows a similar representation as the fathers, whereby Yudai's emerging masculine identity is favourably compared to Ryo's conservative salaryman archetype. However, the salaryman role as personified by Ryo has been rejected by more recent social discourses, and Koreeda provides a negative depiction of his masculine position. Mothers, meanwhile, have been overburdened by dual responsibilities of work and domesticity, especially in the post-bubble era. Here, Koreeda relies on an exaggeratedly oppressed depiction of the professional (post-war) housewife to justify the unfavourable conditions working mothers like Yukari have been increasingly required to undertake.

As this evidence suggests, the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* are not presented through an optimistic hope for change in their circumstances, but rather a validation for the continuance of the status quo. This is a complicated failure of quiet activism insofar as Koreeda attempts to discursively empower marginalised demographics such as those represented by Yukari, but this is achieved by making professional housewife Midori *more* oppressed, and by overlooking and even glamorising the extra burdens undertaken by working housewives. Neither character can really be seen to be in a socially desirable position and both are expected to fulfil all the tasks with which mothers, whether working or not, have been tasked for generations; this is despite increasing social resistance from women who do not wish to be tied into such restrictive (married) lifestyles (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Mirza 2016). However, the purpose of this representation is to specifically prioritise their maternal roles. Koreeda's interest in this context is to 'prove' Yukari can still provide traditionally maternal functions such as 'education mama' despite the burden of

employment. What appears to be an attempt at quiet activism is constrained, therefore, by an underlying discourse based in maternal mythologies. As shall be discussed in the next section, it is because of the cultural power of these mythologies that Midori and Yukari are ultimately limited in their abilities to transcend their traditional family role.

Maternal myth as validation and constraint

The mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* may perform competing notions of (marital) authority and autonomy, but they are connected by maternal conditioning. Childrearing has been one of the key components of domestic responsibility that Japanese women have undertaken throughout modernity. In the Meiji era, women were formally taught to embody strong maternal roles through the appropriation of 'good wife, wise mother' ideologies (Uno 1991, 1993; Koyama 2013). These ideologies have been seen as the template upon which post-war constructions of domestic femininity, or the 'housewifisation', have endured as a dominant role for women. Childrearing has been seen as an exclusively feminine realm, not only for reproductive reasons but also based on fundamental assumptions about women's perceived 'gifts' for educational and nurturing roles (Uno 1998: 297). Koreeda's mothers are easily configured into this discourse, which can be considered a durable 'myth' of feminine identity (Niwa and Tomiko 1993). However, these connections are simultaneously, and somewhat contradictorily, both a validation and a constraint for both Midori and Yukari. 'Good wife, wise mother' has had national connotations as 'a woman who serves the state by attending to her husband well and raising her child wisely' and that women are 'naturally' best suited to domestic work (Niwa and Tomiko 1993: 75). In *Like Father, Like*

Son, as discussed above, Koreeda similarly depicts or validates the mothers through their maternal roles. These principles unite the mothers: during their first private meeting regarding the fate of their sons, Yukari gives a note to Midori on which she has written 'you can count on me', which establishes that, despite their social differences, the mothers are connected by their maternal responsibility. Later in the narrative, Ryo returns home at night to find Midori on the phone with Yukari. The flat is completely dark, suggesting their conversation started during the daytime and continued long into the evening. Ryo cautions her against developing a relationship with their parental rivals, but Midori responds, 'as mothers we need to share, not that you would understand,' which further supports maternal roles as universal and, crucially, specific to women only. In the scene during which Ryo, Yukari and Midori discuss the final decision of permanently switching back the sons, the two mothers stand on one side of the room and Ryo on the other. Koreeda frames the two mothers together as Yukari speaks while Ryo is framed alone, suggesting the mothers are linked on the issue more tightly than Midori and her own husband (see Figure 4.5). Furthermore, whereas the fathers are visually distinct, Midori and Yukari are a similar age, height and build. While the fathers adopt variable shapes, sizes and beliefs, Midori and Yukari's visual and ideological uniformity complement their shared understanding of maternal principles; principles that suggest maternal femininity, much like 'good wife...', is a collective and uncontested gender identity. Though fatherhood is up for debate in *Like Father*, *Like Son*, motherhood is not, and both characters unconditionally embody identical beliefs regarding their parental roles.



Figure 4.5: United by maternal principles - Midori and Yukari are framed together (away from Ryo) as they discuss the final decision to permanently exchange their sons (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

Motherhood is, therefore, presented as a norm in *Like Father, Like Son*. When considered in the construction of the mothers individually, *Like Father, Like Son's* reliance on social principles of 'good wife...' has positive and negative connotations. Though it can validate notions of contemporary maternal identity, it also acts as an unconscious principle of constraint for those who adhere to the 'professional' domestic role.

For Yukari, traditional 'good wife...' femininity is revealed to lie beneath the authoritative exterior she is otherwise seen to maintain. After his first extended stay with Yukari, Keita explains to Midori, 'I was scared at first, but she's kind', implying Yukari's authoritative presence is merely a public façade covering a normative maternal identity performed in domestic spaces (her action of writing the note to Midori further emphasises her traditional adherence as a hidden one). Hence, she manages to embody separate notions of feminine identity according to the spaces she inhabits. At home, she accomplishes the personality

and actions befitting the 'good wife...'. Scenes taking place here show her playing with her children, hugging Keita when he seems despondent during his first visit, and even fulfilling domestic tasks such as cooking. This is contrasted to her public appearances, such as the separate private meetings between the families at a shopping mall play area, where she is comparably commanding and largely performs a disciplinarian role with her children.

Though Yukari and Yudai represent a variation on traditional gender balance within the Japanese family, Koreeda validates Yukari through her covert adherence to the 'good wife...' myth. The evocation of traditional maternity fulfils a similar function here as her domestic grounding in the *obento* shop; hers is an ideology that contrasts with what many would denote as normative femininity, but her domestic character reveals a more culturally rooted archetype. She is a suggestion that even within contemporary gender fluctuations within the family unit (such as female labour participation) that appear on the surface, women shall privately retain the same 'correct' maternal role instilled in cultural consensus.

As a full-time housewife who persistently dotes upon her son, Midori's relation to 'good wife...' appears self-evident. However, since her maternal capability does not require the same authentication as Yukari, it also becomes a further source of her constraint.

Interestingly, Koreeda draws attention to and even appears to sympathise with Midori's subordination as a mother in her circumstances, but this is ultimately unresolved. Midori's separation from Keita becomes the source of much emotional stress that burdens her and, eventually, her marriage. In an early scene following the revelation of the switch, Midori watches Keita during a piano lesson from an adjacent room. The two are separated by glass and as he plays, Midori suddenly breaks down in tears. Koreeda films the moment from Keita's side of the glass so that we can hear the piano but not the sounds of her anguish.

This marks the first instance of Midori's emotional response to the potential of losing her son, and her silencing by the piano indicates her own emotions as a mother are ultimately secondary to the development of her child. Midori's silenced tears are another sign of her lack of agency over the fate of her son, something proven by Ryo's eventual decision to give Keita back to his biological parents.

In a later scene after Keita has spent extended time with Yukari, Midori worries further about their impending separation and suggests the two run away together. Keita asks, 'what about dad,' to which Midori responds 'daddy has his work... .' This reveals that Midori not only understands her lack of power, but she also feels powerless to influence her predicament whilst part of a standard family unit. The conversation occurs on a sparsely-occupied train; Koreeda films the pair from a short distance at first, but throughout their conversation, the camera slowly zooms in, until it is focused only on the pair, with the window appearing on the screen-left (see Figure 4.6). Just as Midori utters these final words, the train goes through a tunnel and stops for a station, shrouding the pair in temporary darkness and filling the air with the echoing shrieks of the braking train. The scene reveals that Midori would be willing to separate from her husband and break up the family unit if it meant not losing her son. However, once again her inner emotions are silenced when they make a public appearance. We cannot even see her face as she says these words due to the darkness of the tunnel, meaning it could just as easily be an internal dialogue rather than an uttered statement. Here, the 'good wife...' conditioning of Midori is channelled into her oppressed position as the professional housewife, and her lack of authority over her circumstances relegate her maternal conditioning, in this circumstance, to an emotional burden.



Figure 4.6: 'Wise mother' - Midori considers running away with Keita (Fuji Television Network Inc./Amuse Inc./GAGA Corporation 2013).

Despite the sympathy Koreeda awards in these scenes, Midori's role as the 'good wife...' is ultimately used as a principle to support her husband's transformation. She is barely seen after the permanent exchange of the sons, Koreeda instead uses this section to explore Ryo's renegotiation of his paternal role. However, despite the clear emotional impact the experience has on her, Midori's protestations are never enough to swing the narrative events in her favour. Ryo's decision to reunite the families comes not from a new understanding of his wife's commitment to Keita, but rather through his realisation of his own bond between himself and Keita. This is fully realised when he finds photos of himself sleeping on his digital camera, photos that were taken by Keita before the exchange. Midori, having found her husband in tears following his discovery of the photographs, offers a subtle, reassuring smile and softly asks 'how about breakfast?'. Though her smile indicates her satisfaction at Ryo's eventual accordance with her feelings, there is no recognition on

Ryo's behalf of her plight and emotional burden. She instead calmly maintains her half of the gender contract and tends to his needs.

Studies commonly find Japanese wives, especially housewives, encounter anxiety due to the failure of husbands to understand the nature of their role and the hardships they face (Jolivet 1997; Rice 2001; Golovina 2018). Such anxieties go unaddressed in *Like Father, Like Son* as Ryo's introduction to contemporary models of masculinity is not met with any form of empathy for Midori's position or emotional desires. Despite Ryo's new ideological position as an 'engaged' father, which opposes hegemonic discourse, Midori is expected to continue according to traditional principles. Koreeda's unveiling of an emerging form of masculinity in an ultra-conservative protagonist is reinforced by the quiet support of his wife who maintains her position as the 'good wife...' and provides food, thus validating his social modification with the quiet promise that she will dutifully continue the same function she always has.

The principles of her position are considered self-evident to the extent that Midori is not even allowed to be seen reconciling with Keita during the final scene. For this, Ryo, Midori and Ryusei all travel to Yukari's home to reunite the large family unit. While Ryo's reunion with Keita follows a melodramatic chase through the city streets climaxing with a consolidating hug between father-and-son, Midori is spared such closure. Following their reunion, Ryo and Keita return to Yukari and Yudai's home. Before their arrival, Koreeda films Midori, Yukari, Yudai, and the other children in the front of the house awaiting Ryo and Keita's return. Ryusei sees them returning off-screen and tells everyone. Midori then runs out of the frame towards them and her reunion with Keita occurs off-screen before the trio re-enters the frame together in front of the house. The scene acts in paradox to previous

scenes that more critically depict Midori's subdued silence. Though Koreeda acknowledges the powerlessness of women in the same social position as Midori, the climactic scene that censors her reunion with Keita strengthens the conviction that the mother's bond with a child is a banal concept within wider social debates of contemporary parenting.

Much in the same manner as with Yukari's social position as a 'housewife-with-a-job', Koreeda addresses Midori's powerlessness in the nuclear family setting in a way that initially suggests quiet activism in favour of better roles for women. However, once again, the issues at stake are not sufficiently addressed for this discursive function to hold. Midori's maternal role and function is not an aspect that Koreeda reaffirms or justifies. It is instead an axiom that presides over her anxiety and lack of agency for much of the narrative but is then forbidden a visible emotional reconciliation at the end. Consequently, her adherence to the role of the 'good wife...' is a constraint that requires no modification and merely acts as a supporting component to whichever guise of 'correct' paternal masculinity is developed in her husband.

Conclusion

The discursive function in Koreeda's depiction of mothers is thus one that performs a dual function: mothers who defy the conditioning of the passive, domestic housewife are grounded in a consensual notion of 'correct' maternal femininity whereas, for those who retain the domestic role, the 'good wife...' is a constraint that hampers their ability to transcend cultural conditioning. These mothers are merely supporting characters who remain in a subordinated position whilst those around them manage to progress into more

desired personalities. *Like Father, Like Son* advocates a possibility of 'change' in the male/father protagonists that the mothers have no opportunity to replicate. For this reason, and despite addressing gender inequalities in the home, quiet activism does not extend to the mothers.

Compared with Koreeda's treatment of social demographics in previous chapters, the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* are exceptional. Other demographics (including the fathers in this film) are provided contemporary role models or encounter new lifestyles who successfully complement the changing social landscape and generational desires of post-bubble Japan. However, the mothers here are relatively steadfast in the same roles they have maintained since the period of modernisation. The two mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* are representative of different temporal demographics, but both are ultimately defined by conservative femininity. For the mothers, this is not so much a case of celebrating the possibility of a plurality of familial roles and structures as it is an encouragement to appreciate the conditions with which many women feel unduly burdened. Koreeda's mothers do not embody the function of opposing or resisting the conservative gendered identities, but rather they fulfil a role closer to that of state apparatus reinforcing the hegemonic links between women, domesticity and child-rearing.

Though Koreeda addresses the marginalised roles of mothers like Midori in *Like Father, Like Son*, the film does not present any solutions to these anxieties. Instead, the film suggests mythologised domestic femininities must continue in order to supplement the new roles of fathers. Therefore, from a feminine perspective, the film fails as an example of quiet activism. The demographics discussed in previous chapters (including the fathers in the same film) are empowered through Koreeda's discursive gaze because they find ways to

coalesce their emerging-yet-marginalised social identities with the unaccommodating post-bubble social landscape. The mothers in *Like Father, Like Son*, however, fail to transcend dominant expectations. In this respect, and as Hamad argues, the film can be considered ‘disingenuously feminist’ since it appropriates the shift of gender roles in a way that maintains patriarchal control. The fathers in this film achieve a supposedly ‘feminist’ paternity that advocates a more egalitarian construction of household roles, but by this process, the mothers are not reciprocated by any positive change of their own. Paternal masculinity, in US cinema and Koreeda’s, is constructed through the continued marginalisation of mothers.

As observed previously, mothers have lacked centrality in Koreeda’s cinema which may be a reason they have been spared from the same progressive treatment as other demographics. These narratives may only be discursively constructed for the benefit of the central protagonists rather than supporting characters. This raises the possibility that quiet activism in Koreeda’s cinema may also only extend to the central protagonists and discursive issues related to their demographics. Of course, as discussed at the start of the chapter, Koreeda has depicted a variety of mothers in supporting roles and some portrayals, especially the elderly mothers, tend to acknowledge a diminished and largely unrewarding social position. But this is not the same positivistic activism we can see in the representations of other demographics so we may assume that mothers, having been relegated to supporting roles so often in the family narratives and Koreeda’s other cinema, have perhaps been spared from Koreeda’s activist gaze simply as they have yet to be centralised.¹⁵ However, it is possible to read this more broadly in terms of how women have been demonstrably treated

¹⁵ To date, *Maborosi* is Koreeda’s only narrative featuring a mother as the central protagonist. Although, perhaps tellingly, her character is defined more by her relationship with her deceased husband than her son.

in contemporary society. Tokuhiro Yoko has suggested the nation's shrinking birthrate could be seen as 'a rebellion of Japanese women against motherhood' (2009: 38). In the wake of the looming population crisis Japan has yet to find an answer for, and from which we can presume a continued lack of social enthusiasm for childrearing, the depictions of motherhood in *Like Father, Like Son* may be comprehended as part of the ongoing socio-political failure to ascertain the contemporary attitudes of women. In this respect, the film can be seen as an antithesis of quiet activism insofar as the very clear social dissatisfaction with hegemonic feminine roles has been largely ignored.

Chapter 5

'I'm not who I want to be yet': Abe Hiroshi, comedy and generational masculine anxieties in *Going my Home* and *After the Storm*

Koreeda has reused various actors across his family narratives in supporting roles. For example, veteran actress Kiki Kirin has often featured playing the elderly mother of one of the central characters. Other actors, such as 1970s action icon Harada Yoshio, former pop star YOU and child comedian Maeda Oshiro, have also appeared frequently in supporting roles. However, an actor Koreeda has used several times for central roles is popular TV and movie star Abe Hiroshi. Abe was born in 1964, just two years after Koreeda himself, and starred in *Still Walking* (*Aruitemo, Aruitemo*, 2008), *After the Storm* (*Umi Yori mo Mada Fukaku*, 2016), and single-season television drama *Going My Home* (*Goingu mai Homu*, 2012). Though narratively disconnected from one another, Abe always portrays a character named Ryota (or 'Ryo' for short) who negotiates his masculine position in his family and employment. The Abe narratives are linked to one another through similar character traits, social (masculine) contexts and tonal style. Importantly, Ryo is a character who is consistently defined by shame and embarrassment. In each narrative, his inability to live up to the demands and expectations of his masculine position provide key narrative contexts.

The two narratives I will discuss in this chapter are *Going my Home* and *After the Storm*.

Through both narratives, Ryo negotiates a variety of anxieties related to family and work; in this chapter, I will focus specifically on Ryo's role or potential role as a husband and father in the nuclear family. In *Going my Home*, Ryo plays a moderately wealthy TV commercial

producer who lives in Tokyo with his wife and daughter – a standard nuclear family. His wife has recently found flourishing success as a celebrity caterer and her increasingly busy schedule leaves her less time for domestic activities and childcare. Resultingly, Ryo is required to increase his domestic role with his daughter, who has suddenly developed a baffling rebellious streak. Ryo struggles to adapt to his new responsibilities in the home and his inefficiency causes him embarrassment. Furthermore, he is frequently mocked and belittled by members of his family and staff in his job for his behaviour, fashion and lifestyle. Therefore, Ryo is continually undermined and embarrassed in both domestic and professional spaces. In *After the Storm*, Ryo is a divorced father who wishes to reunite with his family. His wife had instigated the divorce previously due to his poor financial management and immature attitude towards work and family. Ryo aspires to become a famous writer and wishes to build on the minor success he had with a novel several years previously. However, these dreams have meant he is unable to hold down a secure career and has drifted between smaller jobs throughout his adult life. Ryo's refusal to commit to a steady job is reflected by his morally dubious behaviour: he is a gambling addict, extorts money from his clients, frequently loots his mother's apartment for goods to pawn, and attempts to dishonestly use his son to facilitate a reunion with his ex-wife. Through such behaviour, Koreeda depicts Ryo as an adult male with only adolescent maturity, and his youthful conduct is made both embarrassing and funny.

The Abe narratives are tonally separated from Koreeda's other family narratives by a stronger sense of comedy, particularly in the representation of Ryo's character. The comedy is often generated by Ryo's embarrassing failure to conform with the expected traits of mature masculinity typically associated with the salaryman. As spectators, we are

encouraged to laugh at Ryo's shame, his embarrassment, his social incongruities, and even his physical distinction. At 1.89 meters, Abe is significantly taller than the average Japanese adult male (1.70 meters (Bents et al. 2018)) and his characters tend to tower over anyone else sharing the screen. This appearance feeds into the humour and alienation of his characters – men who struggle to fit into society.

Koreeda has said he was attracted to working with Abe due to his comedic potential. Part of the genesis of Abe's *After the Storm* persona was 'finding a balance between the serious and the funny' and that during scriptwriting he would ask himself: 'what can Abe do to make people laugh?' (Macfarlane 2017). Neither narrative is generically an out-an-out comedy; a degree of seriousness is undeniably present in the construction of Ryo's character, and the narratives tend to explore certain themes with added solemnity. For example, anxieties related to filial concepts and elder generations tend to be more earnestly approached, which would explain why *Still Walking*, a film almost solely constructed around issues of filial obligation, is comparably far more serious than *Going my Home* and *After the Storm*. However, most other aspects to do with Ryo's problematic identity, especially in the construction of his relation to the nuclear family, are almost solely depicted through humour.

Comedy separates the Abe narratives tonally from Koreeda's other family narratives; it also distinguishes how social anxieties are dealt with. Whereas the films discussed in previous chapters follow the progress of characters who adapt to their 'non-standard' lifestyles, the comedy in the Abe narratives is dependent on the protagonists' inability to comply with dominant masculine identity. It is worth relating this once again to the 'gap' that Sarah Harwood describes 'between lived experience and cultural forms' in relation to social

conceptions of the family in the UK and the US during the 1980s (1997: 55). As discussed in the introduction, Koreeda's family representations fit into a similar 'gap' that has opened in contemporary Japan. Like the protagonists in Koreeda's other family narratives, the Ryo characters' behaviour and lifestyles do not match the 'cultural forms' promoted in mainstream discourses (i.e. idealised forms of hegemonic masculinity). However, whereas the protagonists in films such as *Our Little Sister* and *I Wish* eventually recognise the value of their socially marginalised positions on the 'lived experience' side of the gap, Ryo's development is more complicated. *Going my Home* and *After the Storm* generate humour from Ryo's failure at performing as a mature, confident and professional husband, father and employee; the comedic pleasure in these films is derived from Ryo's marginalised position. Therefore, comedy makes the Abe narratives more reliant on his masculine anxieties continuing unabated rather than resolving them.

The use of comedy complicates the Abe narratives as an example of quiet activism. Rather than empowering the demographics who defy the culturally idealised side of the 'gap', the Abe narratives satirise the unrealistic expectations on Japanese men in contemporary discourse. Ryo's struggle to adapt to a masculine identity that satisfies everyone (including himself) relates to the confluence of competing expectations that have befallen middle-aged men in his social position. Like other family narratives, this can be considered a form of quiet activism since they highlight the difficulties by which men perform their roles in contemporary discursive contexts. However, the resolutions to these narratives see Ryo's only escape from his anxieties as a return to standardised masculinity. This is a significant deviation from the other family narratives, which all favour diverse family roles; the more conservative leanings of the Abe narratives test their activist function.

Recognising this duality, this chapter asks - to what extent does comedy work for or against quiet activism in Koreeda's family narratives? To help answer this question, my analysis draws upon the functions of comedy and embarrassment by Steven Shaviro (1993) and Tarja Laine (2001). Using these studies, Ryo will be positioned as a 'distorted image' of competing masculine expectations as they have developed in post-bubble Japan. Analysis of the films will reveal Ryo to be caught *between* conservative and emerging masculine discourses. This is partially contextualised by Ryo's association with the *shinjinrui* ('new breed'), a generation who were perceived to usher in developing attitudes towards family and employment (Herbig and Borstoff 1995; Charlebois 2017a). However, since the *shinjinrui* came of age in the 1980s, the social landscape of Japan changed farther than it already had, positioning their generation *between* temporal eras of generational social ideologies.

In *Going my Home*, Ryo repeatedly fails to live up to his role as a salaryman and domestic roles of husband/father simultaneously; his embarrassment is generated by an incompatibility between the professional expectations of salaryman males alongside newer images that favour more stylish or domesticised roles that seem to stand in opposition to what Ryo is supposed to be. In *After the Storm*, Koreeda satirises the social codes through which men are deemed to be 'mature' through career and family. In this film, Ryo has failed to find stable employment and his working attitudes are closer to 'freeters' (*furitā*) – a term that describes (mostly) younger generations who work in part-time or temporary jobs rather than full-time careers (Mathews 2004; Cook 2013, 2014, 2016). Reflecting this youthful association, Ryo's behaviour is very immature, and comedy is derived from his contradictory mature/immature persona. Though Koreeda satirises the conflicting and seemingly

unrealistic expectations of men in contemporary discourse, ultimately, the 'answers' the narratives appear to suggest are that the only way out for men is the reestablishment of post-war masculinity. In this manner, the Abe narratives are characterised by contradictory forces that pull them between different levels of discursive critique.

Functions of comedy and embarrassment

Comedy in the Abe narratives relies on social satire of changing masculine expectations. Gregory Barrett considers satire to comprise 'the best of Japanese film comedy' because it is more serious than standard comedy insofar as 'it ridicules, castigates, and uses laughter to attack human foibles, stupidity, and hypocrisy' (1992: 212). The 'comic targets' one usually finds in satire can vary, according to Barrett, between class, institutions, social and political ideas and 'even society at large' (1992: 212). Like the film comedies favoured by Barrett, the Abe narratives (though one is a TV series) satirise the expectations of men in the contemporary Japanese family. Ryo is either embarrassed or embarrassing precisely because he fails to live up to the dominant expectations of men his age – expectations that, in some cases, have become impossible to fulfil.

In most cases, the humour generated in the Abe narratives based on embarrassment and/or shame. This embarrassment is either felt by Ryo after having engaged in some form of shameful behaviour (*Going my Home*), or he is shamelessly ignorant of his embarrassing behaviour (*After the Storm*). In both narratives, Ryo is a character who wishes to live up to social expectations as a husband and father, but his behaviour prevents him from doing so. His experiences mirror Sueda Kiyoko and Richard Wiseman's definition of embarrassment

insofar as it 'takes place when one fails to achieve one's expected role and there is a loss of one's own and/or others' face' (1992: 159). In *Going my Home*, Ryo incites his own 'loss of face', whereas in *After the Storm* his behaviour tends to embarrass others around him.

Philosopher Peter Hacker groups Japan (alongside China and the UK) in what he identifies as a 'shame-culture' insofar as the 'dominant norms' of society 'determine what one ought to be. The most forceful motivation is the quest for honour and the avoidance of shame before one's peers' (2017: 202). Ryo's behaviour attests to this level of shame, of turning against responsibility and shunning what he *ought to be*.

Existing research on this form of comedy gives us clues to how Ryo's shamefulness relates to social contexts. The relationship between comedy performance and embarrassing behaviour was explored by Steven Shaviro (1993) who found comedy actors variably demonstrate conformity or resistance to social boundaries. For Shaviro, 'the comedian achieves a kind of self-redemption by turning the tables on his tormentors, or simply by violating and overturning social taboos' (1993: 107). Although, he argues American performer Jerry Lewis resists this generalisation by achieving comedy through an anxious, failed emulation of conservatism rather than social resistance. In this manner 'the social order is never *directly* disrupted by Lewis's actions; rather, he provokes its self-destruction, precisely as a result of taking it too seriously, too much at its word' (1993: 109). The social order is parodied in such an interpretation since strict social conformity ultimately leads to chaos. Comedy can, therefore, be performed according to cultural expectations of behaviour and demeanour, and this can be facilitated onscreen through either strong conformity to social rules, or a rebellion. Ryo's comedy is similarly split between conformity and rebellion - his

embarrassment generated by a failed conformity to masculine expectation in *Going my Home*, and a rebellion against mature masculinity in *After the Storm*.

Tarja Laine (2001) develops Shaviro's ideas and likens the spectator experience of comedy (actor Jim Carrey in her example) to Jack Katz's research on the magic mirrors in a carnival funhouse. Laine believes both the funhouse and comic performer present the spectator with a 'distorted image' of reality - the mirror via a perverted reflection of the subject and the comedy performer through an outlandish representation of social behaviour. For Laine, comedians such as Carrey are 'sociologically provocative because [his] comic art is based on shame and embarrassment created by a tension in social interaction' (2001: 51). By providing humour based upon failed attempts to live up to what he *ought to be* in social scenarios, Ryo is similarly defined by this tension. His embarrassing behaviour or embarrassment comes as a result of misarticulations of social interactions or by 'standing out' from normative expectations of appearance or behaviour.

Ryo is a 'distorted image' insofar as he is physically displaced from his surroundings and embodies an embarrassed or embarrassing personification of masculine identity. He continually fails to fulfil expectations as a father and husband, and in both examples the spectator is invited to laugh at his failure or incongruity. What limits Shaviro and Laine's analyses is a failure to identify exactly the perceived 'social taboos' that comedic actors like Lewis and Carrey are supposedly addressing, suggesting cultural anxieties expressed in American cinema are somehow universal and axiomatic. Were we to attempt to understand the social discourses from which these kinds of comedic situations arise in Koreeda's cinema, we can begin to understand the processes which shape Abe's presence and how the embarrassment motivated by his actions onscreen address concurrent anxieties. Koreeda's

more subtle form of comedy through Abe may seldom reach the slapstick absurdity of Shaviro and Laine's examples, but it can still be understood along the same parameters of social behaviour and embarrassment. Having ascertained that comedy is built upon Ryo's embarrassing performance of masculine identity, the task will be to consider how masculine identity has affected men of a similar generation, and how Ryo in both *Going my Home* and *After the Storm* varyingly distorts social expectations.

Competing masculinities and generations in post-bubble Japan

Abe's characters are relatable through both narratives, yet in each role he channels different social contexts. For example, in *Going my Home*, Ryo's anxieties are related to changing social images and expectations of the salaryman, whilst in *After the Storm* Ryo addresses those in irregular employment.¹⁶ The anxieties Ryo faces in both narratives concern his position *between* masculine expectations. Abe and Koreeda's generation – the *shinjinrui* – has also been considered a generation whose beliefs regarding work and family sit *between* shifting social attitudes.

The term *shinjinrui* or 'the new breed' was coined in the 1980s to describe the wealthy youth that emerged during that decade (White 1994). Japan was experiencing its hyperinflation bubble economy, particularly during the latter half of the 1980s, which aided the lifestyles of the predominantly middle-class population. The youth of this time, having

¹⁶ In the Japanese context, irregular employment defines those who do not work in full-time careers (Goka 1999). Typically, salarymen (especially during the post-war era) are employed on 'lifetime employment' contracts and usually work for the same company for their whole career (Hidaka 2010). Those on irregular (i.e. part-time or temporary) contracts are more likely to move between jobs and companies and are frequently criticised for doing so (Mathews 2004; Cook 2013, 2014).

been raised in relative affluence to previous generations, developed strong interests in brands, fashion and style that made them 'pioneers of an urban consumptive lifestyle' (Kotani 2004: 38). The consumer habits of the *shinjinrui* were thought to foster a much stronger sense of individualism and style which affected their approach to employment and family (Anderson and Wadkins 1991; Osajima et al. 2010); this made them the targets of negative discourse.

The *shinjinrui* knew little of the hardships the nation had undergone during the post-war recovery. In preceding years, citizens had been mobilised under a common national goal of rebuilding the nation's economy, even at great personal sacrifice (Vogel 2013). This was the discourse by which salarymen had dedicated themselves to their jobs and women to domestic roles and motherhood to educate the next generations of strong workers. For much of the immediate post-war era, idealised images of families, men and women had been underscored by frugality and modesty (Vogel 2013; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). However, the *shinjinrui* were seen to have ushered in more materialist and individualised values that undermined the sacrifices of older generations, who in turn deplored the young for their 'disavowal of the values of hard work and thrift that had fuelled Japan's engine of post-war economic success' (White 2002: 82). The *shinjinrui* have been accused of facilitating a 'nation of individuals, each engaged in the pursuit of his or her own personal goals' (Herbig and Borstorff 1995: 53). Therefore, they are perceived as instigators for developing individualist attitudes that contested post-war values (Elliott et al. 2012).

The urban consumption lifestyles of male *shinjinrui* had effects on salaryman discourses once they started entering the workplace. They are seen as responsible for shifts from 'hard work' and 'group harmony' to 'self-responsibility, individual ability, and the formation of a

competitive society' (Charlebois 2017b: 58). These attitudes stand in opposition to earlier company employees, whose dedication to the company above all else (including their families) was expected (Dasgupta 2003). *Shinjinrui* employees, rather, feel less connected to their companies and are more interested in the money. Paul Herbig and Pat Borstorff compared the more relaxed work ethic of the *shinjinrui* to older generations, arguing 'in 1940, 20 year olds wanted above all to "lead a temperate and honest life to work for the good of society"; in the 1980s onwards, young people believe that the main aim in life is personal pleasure' (1995: 53). Hegemonic images changed, therefore, with the *shinjinrui* salaryman, and a stronger sense of selfhood and individual fulfilment defined their image. The affluence the *shinjinrui* experienced in youth came to an end during their early adult years with the collapse of the bubble economy. For adult *shinjinrui* with families of their own, life has not been as easy as it was for their parents and they have struggled to reach the same financial security (Hatchmann 2008). Therefore, the lifestyles the *shinjinrui* enjoyed in younger ages have been less transferable to the more precarious financial climate of post-bubble Japan. Newer generations born after the *shinjinrui* have adapted (through choice or necessity) to the changes that have taken place through lifestyles that have veered even further from post-war ideologies. For example, the *ikumen* 'family man' (as discussed in chapter three) grew in response to rising dual-breadwinner households and desires for shared domestic responsibilities. Other identities sought to challenge the salaryman role more directly. For example, the 'herbivorous man' (*sōshoku-kei danshi*) was coined in the early 21st century to describe a growing class of young men characterised by a reduced interest in professional success and the rampant consumerism of typical salaryman masculinity (Chen 2012; Morioka 2013; Nihei 2013; Charlebois 2017a). 'Freeters', another

group seen to stand in opposition to the salaryman by neglecting full-time careers, are often derided by elder generations for shunning standard employment (Mathews 2004; Pilz et al. 2015; Cook 2014). These social groups have grown in numbers since the start of the 21st century, and, like the *shinjinrui* before them, media discourses have accused them of acting against national interests (Mathews 2004; Inui 2005; Cook 2013).

While the *shinjinrui* seeded the discursive shifts that paved the way to these more rebellious social identities, their lifestyles were, by comparison, still embedded in more conservative expectations. For example, Justin Charlebois (2017a) has suggested the more individualist lifestyles of *shinjinrui* salarymen are relatable to the herbivorous man, but they should still be considered distinct: 'regardless of personal attitudes towards careerism, *shinjinrui* salarymen who aspire to marry, or are married, are expected to serve as primary family breadwinners' (2017a: 171). This contrasts with herbivorous masculinities, who often defy standardised careers (and sometimes relationships or marriage) in favour of individual fulfilment (Chen 2012; Charlebois 2017a).¹⁷ Contemporary freeters, whether consciously choosing their lifestyles or not, are similarly opposed to the work-dedicated ethos of the salaryman. While emerging social demographics such as these have actively challenged the professionalism of hegemonic salaryman masculinity, Charlebois' research suggests the youthful, individual desires of *shinjinrui* men are not necessarily matched by the more standardised adulthoods in which they ended up. Furthermore, the corporate restructuring that took place following Japan's recession has been seen to affect younger generations more than the *shinjinrui*, many of whom were able to enter careers while 'lifetime

¹⁷ Although, Charlebois also identifies a 'toxic' form of herbivore masculinity who 'still subscribe to an ideology of male superiority and female inferiority, and they engage in social practices that sustain and legitimate a hierarchical position between men and women, masculinity and femininity' (2017a: 177)

employment' contracts were still common (Mathews 2004).¹⁸ *Shinjinrui* men may have favoured individualised and fashionable lifestyles but grew up expecting the same standard of living in adulthood to that they enjoyed in youth. Though socially rebellious at the time, by the standards of later generations the *shinjinrui* could be seen as highly conservative. Therefore, they can be seen to sit between the more conservative expectations of previous generations, and the more individualised lifestyles of their successors.

This is significant in the context of Abe's characters as his expression of masculine identity is awkwardly *between* generations. The Ryo characters endure competing pressures of conservative salaryman expectations on the one side, and the more individualised emerging masculinities on the other. In *Going my Home*, this is depicted by Ryo's self-conscious attempts to satisfy the more professional expectations of his career role with the growing demand for his domestic role. Trying to live up to the conflicting pressures of traditional and emerging salaryman discourses and consistently failing in the process, Ryo's embarrassment and anxiety are generated by an inability to balance his changing family role. In *After the Storm*, Ryo's character and attitude is a problematic embodiment of mature and immature masculinities. His embarrassing behaviour in this narrative is unconscious and satirises the confluence of competing elder and younger masculine influences and their effects on a middle-aged man. In both narratives, Ryo is a 'distorted image' existing on a precipice between conservative and progressive masculinities, attempting to fulfil both and either failing (*Going my Home*) or appearing ridiculous (*After the Storm*) in the process.

¹⁸ Though corporate restructuring took place from 1997 to 1999, the 'death of lifetime employment' was reported in the Japanese press when the Matsushita company started offering voluntary retirement in 2001 (Mathews 2004: 123)

***Going my Home* – The domestic salaryman**

Airing on Fuji TV near the end of 2012, *Going my Home* is the only TV drama so far undertaken by Koreeda. Since it has never been aired in the West, it has been academically overlooked. Comprised of an initial two-hour episode followed by nine one-hour instalments, the narrative is full of numerous plot strands featuring various characters. The series is comparable to Koreeda's films insofar as the dramatic focus is on a multi-generational family, although there is also a stronger emphasis on the workplace setting.

Katja Valaskivi (1999) discusses similar primetime Japanese television as 'home drama' (*homu dorama*), a genre beginning on TV in the late 1950s. Home dramas feature families who typically reflect the values and gendered power constraints of their respective eras. For example, earlier series tended to be focused on the family patriarch and their control of the family, whilst dramas from the mid-1960s emphasised the mothers, who at the same time were gaining social prestige as housewives (1999: 29-32). Though sensitive to social developments, these dramas tended to be very conservative in their depiction of the family. *Going my Home* can be understood in similar contexts: the starring family, following hegemonic discourses, are a heteronormative middle-class nuclear family living in the city suburbs. However, recognising the shifting household responsibilities between spouses that have occurred over recent years, *Going my Home's* drama, and comedy, is partially based on the negotiation of work and domestic responsibilities between Ryo and his wife. The focus on a standard nuclear family separates *Going my Home* from Koreeda's cinema, which is strongly based on non-standard families. However, the series is more aligned with the conventions of Japanese home drama, and this has effects on how the family drama develops.

Much of the drama follows Ryo at home with his family or at work supervising various advertising projects. The central plot concerns his terminally ill father's mysterious relationship with a young lady and her son; both of whom are residents of a diminishing rural town in Nagano for which, at his father's request, Ryo eventually endeavours to organise sponsorship for a local event. A further story element concerns the mythology of a gnome-like species of people known as '*kuna*' who supposedly inhabit the endangered forests of the Nagano town, whose existence is never comprehensively revealed or denied throughout the narrative. Despite the number of characters and general light-hearted tone of the drama, the comedy is based almost entirely on Ryo.

Ryo's character in *Going my Home* draws upon similar cultural contexts to *Like Father, Like Son*: the contradictory pressures between salaryman and 'family man' domestic expectations. For this reason, the social contexts regarding the conflicting pressures between domestic and professional spaces I detailed in chapter three are also relevant for discussing *Going my Home*. As a white-collar family breadwinner for a nuclear family, Ryo is a fairly typical example of a salaryman. His wife Sae, formally a full-time housewife, has gained a growing reputation for her expert culinary skills and is suddenly in high demand for TV shows, photoshoots and various on-location catering contracts. Her fame is comparable to that of the 'charisma housewife' (*karisuma shufu*) – a title given to female 'idols' of housekeeping who populate women's magazines and daytime television shows in Japan (Goldstein-Gidoni 2017: 288). Sae's growing reputation means she has less time for domestic tasks of her own, and Ryo is required to help more within the home to offset his wife's absence. Much of the humour stems from Ryo's inability to live up to the new domestic demands expected of him alongside his commitments to work. His character is a

variation, therefore, on the two fathers in *Like Father, Like Son*, both of whom (initially) represent either side of the professional/domestic masculine dichotomy. Ryo, rather, is someone who humorously fails at both because nobody takes him seriously in either environment.

The pre-title opening scene of *Going my Home's* first episode introduces Ryo's comedic anxieties in the home. The scene takes place at his apartment in the morning and features Ryo, Sae and their daughter Moe. Sae is busy preparing food and asks Ryo to talk with Moe regarding her recent behaviour reported by her school; she has been found regularly conversing with an imaginary friend. Ryo hesitates but soon sits with her and initiates a discussion about the implausibility of supernatural beings. For every rational argument he constructs, he is bested by inquisitive responses from his daughter. Furthermore, Ryo conducts the conversation dressed in his pyjamas and unbrushed hair, which is contrasted by Moe's smart school uniform and tidy hair. Her confident arguments and professional appearance enhance her cognitive skills over her shabby, struggling father. Sensing his defeat, Ryo eventually tries to escape the discussion by asking his wife to bring him coffee, but she refuses since she is preoccupied with work tasks.

Soon after, Moe leaves for school and Sae responds to a strange rhythmic noise coming from an adjacent room. She enters to find Ryo in a state of motion, which is framed so that we can only see Ryo's gyrating back and shoulders in the foreground of the screen while Sae enters from the background. The framing implies that Ryo is engaged in some kind of sexual act, yet when Koreeda cuts to a long shot, Ryo is revealed to be innocently using an arm exerciser. Nonetheless, Ryo meets Sae's glance in a state of embarrassment as if he were caught performing some humiliating task (see Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1: (left) Sae (played by Yamaguchi Tomoko) looks despondently at Ryo as he exercises; (right) Ryo (Abe Hiroshi) looks embarrassed in response (Fuji Television Network 2012).

This scene, reflecting the changing social attitudes towards household gender roles, creates comedy out of Ryo's domestic incompetence. Since Sae has increasing work commitments, Ryo's must engage in parental activities and prepare his own coffee. His daughter's ability to undermine his authority with ease and his inability to perform a paternal function reveals his parental shortcomings, and Koreeda dwells on his comedically bewildered reaction. Unlike both his daughter and wife, Ryo struggles to maintain a confident presence in the house and is further ridiculed shortly after when his wife looks despondently on as he exercises. Moreover, both Sae and Moe are well-dressed and presented whilst Ryo wanders the apartment in his pyjamas: this further undermines Ryo's position as the family breadwinner as his wife and daughter are established early on as the more professional (see Figure 5.2). These moments determine the humour with which Ryo is portrayed in the home; personal embarrassment based upon either an inability to fit into his environment or an undermined (masculine) authority.



Figure 5.2: Unlike Moe (L - Makita Aju) and Sae (centre), Ryo comes to breakfast in pyjamas and ruffled hair, characterising him as less professional or respectable within the home (Fuji Television Network 2012).

Ryo struggles to live up to the more 'progressive' figureheads on which *shinjinrui* discourse was initially based. When his generation originally entered employment, they were perceived to be aesthetically distinct from the traditional salaryman. For example, while image, style and appearance used to be secondary concerns for earlier salarymen, *Shinjinrui* salarymen, conversely, were more 'bodily conscious' and fitter than their elders (Charlebois 2017a: 170). Media images and discourses changed when the *shinjinrui* entered employment, and ideal images of salarymen were well-groomed, took part in sports, showed refined tastes and had a more 'international' outlook (Dasgupta 2010; Bardsley 2011). However, Ryo struggles to live up this image. Throughout the series, his fashion and style are embarrassing or criticised. For example, during the first episode, Ryo travels to a hospital where his critically-ill father has just been admitted, but he is still wearing the same

dark suit he wore for an earlier meeting. At the hospital, several family members liken the suit to funeral attire and comment on its inappropriateness which Ryo repeatedly, and comically, tries to deflect. In a later episode, Ryo goes jogging with his subordinate and a company CEO but does so in ludicrously short running shorts (see Figure 5.3). Unlike other characters, particularly those younger than him, Ryo fails to live up to the fashionable standards to which the salaryman is now held. The comedy, in these scenes, is generated by how much he stands out from conventional expectations of style.



Figure 5.3: Ryo (L) wears revealing sportswear whilst discussing business with his subordinate (centre) and a company CEO (R) (Fuji Television Network 2012).

Ryo's comedy is based on his poor attempts to incorporate contemporary and stylish masculine traits with his conservative salaryman identity. Koreeda has tried to describe his attraction to casting Abe through a similar juxtaposition - 'it's difficult to explain, but he has a humour about him[...] he looks cool, but there's something about him that's uncool. That's his appeal' (Koreeda 2016). 'Cool' and 'uncool' are terms that have also been used by Romit Dasgupta (2010) to describe the changing depictions of the salaryman in contemporary

media. According to media images, ideal or 'cool' salarymen exercise regularly, are stylish and well-groomed, are self-motivated and have better domestic skills such as cooking and childrearing. This stands in contrast to the highly work-focused, unstylish and domestically inept 'uncool' salarymen of the previous generation (2010). Charlebois has similarly argued 'cool' salaryman images set the *shinjinrui* generation apart from their 'overweight, unstylish' predecessors (2017a: 170). *Going my Home's* Ryo is, reflecting Koreeda's remarks, cool and uncool in this context since he attempts to live up to newer masculine images but embarrassingly fails at all. Hence, his wife ridicules his attempts to exercise, his family deride his fashion choices, and Ryo himself is highly anxious about his greater responsibilities in the home. Though he tries to live up to the 'cool' masculine expectations of the current generation, his domestic abilities and presentation reflect a more conservative and 'uncool' masculinity.

At the same time, Ryo has no control over the aspects of his behaviour that make him uncool. His job requires him to produce frivolous novelty TV commercials and jingles, hence his creative process appears inane. In a later scene, Ryo is in the lounge and starts singing the proposed music for a commercial he is producing. His singing becomes louder and he begins to dance. Suddenly, Moe enters the room and frowns belittlingly at her father, who in turn freezes and looks ashamed. In a similar manner to the hand exerciser scene, Ryo feels embarrassment due to his failure to ascertain a respectable presence in the home. However, though the dancing act ridiculed by his daughter is visually immature, it is arguably necessary for his job. Likewise, his exercising may look ridiculous, but it is also important for his health and image, especially according to more recent images of salaryman masculinity. While his activities are embarrassing, they are also necessary for his

fitness, the creative process of his work, and, ergo, his continued association with the professional and 'cool' salaryman identity. Therefore, the comedy in these instances identifies the contradictions that emerge when attempting to live up to idealised masculine images.

A central issue for Ryo is his age and how his age affects his attempts to embody 'cool' salaryman masculinity. The comedy in these scenes satirises how he is almost archetypically 'wrong' in his problematic embodiment of new forms of masculinity expected in younger generations. His dancing is stereotypical of 'dad' dancing, just as his jogging shorts are old fashioned or what joggers 'used to' wear. These scenes satirise how living up to 'cool' masculinity is more difficult for men of Ryo's age simply as they will be ridiculed for attempting to meet youthful expectations in contemporary salaryman discourse. Koreeda exposes the gap here between expectation and reality of masculine identity and builds comedy out of Ryo's inability to bridge the two. Therefore, Ryo is an embarrassing and 'uncool' father simply because his position and age force him to be so. Just as he is a distorted image of contemporary salaryman expectations, he is also a reflection of the difficulties men of his demographic face when trying to live up to their developing social image.

***After the Storm* – Immature adulthood**

Whilst in *Going my Home*, Ryo self-consciously attempts and fails to live up to the expectations of his generation, in *After the Storm* he defies them. By Shaviro and Laine's reasoning, the rebelliousness of Ryo in *After the Storm* is more relatable to traditional

anarchic comic performers insofar as he resists conformity to the social conventions of his cohort. Although he is sympathetically presented, this Ryo drinks, gambles, steals, extorts money and spends much of his free time spying on his ex-wife and her new partner. The loose narrative concerns Ryo's struggles to re-energise his writing aspirations, his relationship with his elderly widowed mother and his attempts to reunite with his ex-wife Kyoko and son Shingo. The second half of the film becomes a chamber piece between Ryo, his mother, Kyoko and Shingo as the group are all trapped in his mother's flat overnight during a typhoon. Ryo subtly orchestrates this situation as an opportunity to win back Kyoko's affections, though he is ultimately unsuccessful. Stranded together, the group are given time to articulate their feelings, thoughts and disappointments about life and with one another.

Ryo's professional history resists the standard pathway of the salaryman. In his early adulthood, he wrote a novel which had some success and has endeavoured to write a follow-up ever since. This has led him to work at a variety of jobs and at the time of the film's narrative, he has been working for several years at a corrupt private detective firm. He had initially taken the job as a means of research for his next novel, but as time wears on he struggles to find inspiration and much of his writing activity consists of scribbling quotes he hears from clients on small post-it notes; these notes are kept supposedly as an inspiration, although they could quite easily describe his personal reality ('why did my life turn out like this?'). Ryo has little interest in career stability and endeavours to be something bigger. His inability to hold down a stable, honest job contrasts with the traditional career goals of the salaryman and was a key reason Kyoko pursued the divorce.

Drifting between job roles and following increasingly unlikely dreams (as a writer), Ryo's adulthood has more in common with contemporary freeters – a demographic who stand in opposition to the kinds of career maturity as represented by the salaryman. Freeters emerged in response to corporate restructuring and recession during Japan's post-bubble 'lost decade' (Genda 2005). Companies started offering fewer full-time careers which meant most of the only available jobs were part-time or temporary contracts (Honda 2004, 2005). Moreover, over time many younger generations have become jaded by the restrictive and demanding lifestyles in standard salaryman employment. Irregular employment is more attractive for these workers as it gives them more time to pursue hobbies or dream careers (Cook 2013). In this regard, freeters are seen to have more 'freedom' than the salaryman (Mathews 2004: 128). Ryo's life has followed a similar trajectory - he has evaded standard employment to follow his (increasingly unlikely) dream of becoming a writer. Even when his boss offers him a more substantial role at the detective firm, Ryo turns it down to dedicate more time to writing. His professional attitude is strongly correlated to that of the freeter, though what separates Ryo from more common perceptions of this demographic is his age.

Freeter is a term generally used to describe workers in irregular employment between the ages of 15 and 34 (Cook 2014: 36). Irregular employment went up from 18.8% to 38.2% between 1990 and 2012 (2014: 36),¹⁹ which reflects the difficulties many now face finding full-time jobs. For this reason, freeters have been seen as victims in some debates (Honda 2004, 2006; Genda 2005; Inui 2005). However, others believe they have 'shirked' responsibility to the nation (Cook 2014: 37). Media discourse has tended to label them as

¹⁹ Emma E. Cook also notes that most employees in irregular employment are female; 22.1% in 2012 were male. However, this gap is still 'large', especially given how men have generally been expected to have full-time careers in order to be considered suitable for marriage (2014).

'parasitic, ambitionless, irresponsible, plagued with little perseverance, and lacking a work ethic' (2013: 30). Gordon Mathews believes freeters:

violate the cardinal social expectation of Japanese middle-class adult society that young people – particularly men – should embark on a stable career in a large organisation; freeters threaten the post-war Japanese social order, since they belong to neither company, nor family (having no families of their own) (Mathews 2004: 131)

However, Ryo is not 'young' in the physical sense since he has pursued irregular employment into middle age. Also, he has been married and fathered a son whilst chasing his dreams as a writer. Ryo does not, therefore, comply with the social images of freeters according to common discourse, but his behaviour is a satirical reflection of younger demographics and this is what makes him a distorted image.

Koreeda depicts Ryo with the immaturity of adolescence and this is played for comedy. In many cases, his immaturity is linked to his poor financial management. For example, in the opening scenes, Ryo arrives at his mother's apartment while she is away and immediately starts looting the property for goods and money to steal. Later, in the same location, he sneaks past his sleeping mother and glares at her with an absurd intensity to assess whether she will awaken if he rummages for more items. Other scenes rely on Ryo's performative irresponsibility. For example, Ryo awakens after midday in his filthy apartment to a knock at the door. Fearing it is a bill collector, he remains sheepishly motionless and is relieved when it turns out to be his colleague (see Figure 5.4). In many scenes during which his sister or mother criticise his lifestyle, Ryo will stand slouched to one side, lip-curved and scoffing like a teenager. Ryo's behaviour reflects the way media discourses have spoken about freeters,

and the comedy stems from the spectacle of a middle-aged man acting like an irresponsible adolescent.

His behaviour towards Kyoko and Shingo is similarly immature. Whilst sheepishly asking Kyoko's about her new relationship, Ryo asks if they've 'done "it"' ('we're not teenagers', she replies) (see Figure 5.5). Shortly after, he clumsily attempts to seduce her by stroking her leg, and she punches him. Many of the interactions between Ryo and his son are also like those between adolescents. When they first meet onscreen, Ryo follows his son into a public restroom and boisterously compliments him on the size of his genitals. During a scheduled fortnightly visit between the two, Ryo takes him to buy lottery tickets, after which they go to a fast-food restaurant where Ryo probes him for gossip about his mother's relationship. These scenes are designed to be funny because Ryo fails to behave within normal expectations of (ex-)husbands or fathers. Instead, he behaves in the manner social discourses have described the freeter, which appears ridiculous coming from a man of Ryo's age and supposed maturity.



Figure 5.4: Ryo, sleeping until the afternoon, cowers in his messy apartment from a suspected bill collector at the door (Fuji Television Network/Bandai Visua/Aoi Pro Inc./GAGA Corporation 2016).



Figure 5.5: Ryo clumsily attempts to rekindle his relationship with Kyoko (Maki Yoko) whilst stranded overnight in his mother's apartment (Fuji Television Network/Bandai Visua/Aoi Pro Inc./GAGA Corporation 2016).

Ryo distorts social images of freeters and similar youthful demographics because he represents conflicting notions of maturity. Cultural beliefs have maintained that individuals entering mature adulthood transition from student (*gakusei*) to *shakaijin*, ('social person' or 'social being') (Herbig and Borstorff 1995; Roberson 1995; Cook 2018). Women supposedly become *shakaijin* upon marriage, whereas for men it occurs when starting careers (Herbig and Borstorff 1995: 95). In this sense, men are seen to become *shakaijin* by working *for society* rather than for themselves (Roberson 1995). This separates Ryo (like freeter demographics) since he flaunts standard employment in favour of his writing dreams.

However, failure to reach career maturity and, by extension, *shakaijin* maturity, has had major consequences on those in irregular employment.

In Japan, conservative beliefs have held that men are only marriageable if they can provide economic security through standard employment; this has meant freeters struggle to find relationships or marriage due to their economic insecurity (Bumpass et al. 2009; Cook 2013). Though younger generations, particularly those in precarious employment, have shown more compromising attitudes towards marriage and family, society continues to cater to the post-war family model. For example, many companies still pressure women to quit work upon marriage or childbirth (Cook 2014). This means men are often forced to continue acting as breadwinner, which is extremely difficult for those in irregular employment. This is the main reason Ryo was divorced by Kyoko, and why she maintains her decision towards the end ('Ryo isn't cut out to have a family', she muses to his mother).

Rather than trust traditional routes to maturity, Ryo hopes that an unlikely future will materialise from his writing career, much like he puts his hope into gambling; he explains to Shingo that lottery tickets are like 'dreams', which emphasises how he hopes his troubles will be solved by improbable fortune. Despite this, he tries to live up to the financial expectations of his family role, but then comedically undercuts these attempts. For example, on his scheduled visit with his son, he offers to buy him expensive sports shoes as a present but then scuffs them on the way to the cash register so he can claim a discount. He secretly loots his mother's apartment for goods to pawn, but then moments later gives her some spending money. Ryo wants to prove his economic maturity and stability to his family, but at the same time he loses a lot of money gambling – another 'dream' he hopes will solve his financial insecurity. He even struggles to pay his monthly child support because

he frequently gambles his earnings away. Ryo is distinct, therefore, because he has already been married and had a son before he was able to demonstrate a level of economic maturity. This has meant his economic maturity is now comedically caught between a youthful pursuit of dreamlike fortunes in writing (or gambling) and a mature comprehension that he should be a reliable provider for his family.

In this context, Ryo is a distorted image of conflicting 'mature' and 'immature' social demographics. He has reached one level of maturity by marrying and fathering a son, but at the same time, he never reached career maturity and therefore has no financial responsibility. He is stuck between competing embodiments of maturity and responsibility, and Koreeda satirises this conflicting personality by characterising Ryo, a middle-aged father, like an immature rebellious teenager with a lack of financial independence. He is embarrassing due to the audience's awareness that he *ought to be* acting in a fashion more becoming of his age and position, but here he acts in accordance with the negative discourses surrounding freeter and youthful ideologies. However, while Ryo is a satire of men in his social position, he is also a satire of the social codes by which masculine maturity is measured.

As explained earlier, the negative treatment of freeters is nothing new. Herbig and Borstorff connected social immaturity to the *shinjinrui*, suggesting 'a critical mass of the *shinjinrui* are resisting becoming *shakaijin* and remaining *shinjinrui*. This Japan will be more consumerist, and individualist' (1995: 60). This assessment was a response to the 'youthful' attitudes that had developed across younger and older demographics. For example, the 1980s was a popular decade for enduring consumer subcultures such as *kawaii* ('cute') and *otaku* (a term used to describe strong fans of anime/manga), both of which have been seen on some level

as a resistance to adult socialisation and responsibility (Kinsella 1995, 1998; Azuma 2009). Ryo can be seen as a distorted image of this kind of resistance that began with his generation that has now progressed to middle age. Freeters, a social group that has been associated more with later generations, have been socially reviled like the *shinjinrui* before them. However, Ryo is a reminder that the generation that started the social 'rebellion' against adulthood are now in middle age and, ergo, constitute a much large proportion of Japanese adults. For this reason, Koreeda suggests the social protocols that denote masculine 'maturity' may no longer reflect the reality for an increasing majority of the adult population.

It is by this distorted image that Koreeda criticises (through satire) the contemporary expectations of adult men. Whether having chosen their lifestyles or not, freeters and similar demographics are badly treated in common discourses for being selfish and immature, and maturity is deemed essential for men to become marriageable *shakaijin*. However, traditional 'lifetime employment' careers associated with hegemonic salaryman discourse have become less common in Japan's post-bubble recessionary environment, and this has made career 'maturity' far less achievable for younger generations. Though freeters have generally been described as young, Ryo is the ridiculous personification of how these groups are socially perceived once they grow up and have a family. He is funny precisely because the audience knows that it is uncommon and unlikely that men his age would behave in this manner. Therefore, he underscores the problems in treating these demographics as irresponsible and immature. As the corporate environment in Japan has shown little signs of improvement, it is highly likely many will grow up to become Ryo's age without having had standard (salaryman) careers of their own. Ryo's comedic behaviour is,

therefore, a satirical reflection of the unreasonable expectations persisting in the nation's post-bubble employment sphere: how can men be considered good husbands and fathers if many of the available work options are considered youthful? In this manner, the comedy can be perceived as a form of quiet activism because it subtly identifies the flaws in cultural constructions of masculine maturity given the unaccommodating social landscape.

Comedy working for and against quiet activism

As this analysis suggests, comedy can be seen to function in favour of quiet activism in *Going my Home* and *After the Storm*. Ryo's character is funny because of his inability to conform with conflicting and unrealistic expectations of masculinity as they have circulated in contemporary discourses. Like his generation, he is awkwardly positioned *between* older and largely outdated masculine expectations alongside the social realities in which adult men negotiate their family roles. In *Going my Home*, Ryo is supposed to be stylish, domestically competent, fit and respectable but he is undermined in the domestic space and his professional role makes these expectations unachievable. In *After the Storm*, he works in irregular 'freeter' employment and wants to be taken seriously as a good husband and father, but social discourses have declared that he must be considered immature because he has not found a full-time career; accordingly, Ryo's behaviour is spectacularly and embarrassingly immature. In both roles, Koreeda acknowledges the contradictory discourses that constrain men of his social position into roles and expectations that are difficult to achieve. Comedy is used to imply how the social images of men like Ryo are unrealistic and unachievable (*Going my Home*) or based on hyperbolic generalisations that have increasingly less bearing on social reality (*After the Storm*). As satire, therefore, both

narratives target not only the anxieties of middle-aged men but more broadly they also target society at large and the redundant ways through which masculinity is measured.

Ryo's crisis in these narratives is based on his attempts to fit in with dominant images of masculinity and comedically failing. This is emphasised further by actor Abe's distinct appearance and physicality. Koreeda utilises Abe's height and features – described by critic Mark Schilling as 'un-Japanese' (2012) – to further distance him from his environment.²⁰ In *Going my Home*, several scenes occur at a bus stop near Ryo's apartment where he converses with a much shorter neighbour. The scene is filmed in long shot, exaggerating Abe's significant height over his neighbour and the other waiting patrons (see Figure 5.6). Another scene has Ryo sitting between his far shorter mother and sister, with the latter pair talking across him below his headline seemingly oblivious to his presence, displacing him physically and socially. In *After the Storm*, Ryo struggles to negotiate his mother's tiny, cramped apartment, his head frequently obscured in shots by doorframes and objects while the other characters move about with comparative ease (see Figure 5.7). Koreeda often frames Ryo with the top of his head missing or obscured in this way as if, unlike other characters, he just doesn't 'fit in' with his environment. This feeds into his behavioural displacement and makes him a character who, try as he might, cannot physically comply with contemporary society.

²⁰ Koreeda has also said he was attracted to Abe because of his 'foreign looks and height' (Koreeda 2016).



Figure 5.6: 'Out-of-place' - Ryo towers over fellow patrons at a bus stop in *Going my Home* (Fuji Television Network 2012).



Figure 5.7: Ryo struggles to fit through a doorway in his mother's apartment in *After the Storm* (Fuji Television Network/Bandai Visua/Aoi Pro Inc./GAGA Corporation 2016).

Along with the sight gags provoked by his physical displacement, Ryo's height is often a source of humour for other characters; his mother and sister (in both narratives) often joke

about his height being his only redeeming quality. The comedy that his physicality provides is another means by which the Abe narratives are socially critical; Ryo has no control over his physicality, but he provokes laughter from the spectator and other characters nonetheless. Like his behavioural incongruities, which have stemmed largely from unreasonable social expectations of ideal masculinity, Ryo's alienated physicality occurs irrespective of his own decision or intervention. Therefore, Ryo's inability to 'fit in' with his environment further underscores how contemporary expectations of masculinity are defined by means over which individuals have little control.

Comedy in the Ryo narratives is, therefore, a rebellion against social pressures to conform with a stable and idealised (albeit unobtainable) adult masculine image. Shaviro reaches similar conclusions regarding comedy based on a failure to conform with dominant roles;

Creating a socially sanctioned space of spectacle in which values are freely overturned may in fact be an effective way of co-opting any actual pressure for change and preserving hegemonic values from being threatened in other, more effective, ways. A kind of comic catharsis prevents social tensions from accumulating to a dangerous level; a symbolic challenge to the ruling values helps to defuse a real one (1993: 109).

From the perspective of activism, Shaviro's claim supports the role of comedy in providing a 'quiet' rebellion against 'hegemonic values'. However, by this reading, comedy 'co-opts' calling for real change, and laughter is a replacement for activism rather than an advocate for activism. Seen this way, the Abe narratives may address contemporary social anxieties similarly to Koreeda's other family narratives, but the criticism of dominant values in this instance is offset by comedy. Therefore, rather than tangibly challenge social injustices as he

has elsewhere, comedy in the Abe narratives could equally be seen as Koreeda 'laughing off' the masculine anxieties they address. This 'challenge' to the Abe narratives relationship with quiet activism is further complicated by their resolutions.

Going against the trend set by Koreeda's family narratives, *Going my Home* and *After the Storm* each conclude with the suggestion that a standardised and conservative masculine role might be each Ryo's best hope. For example, *Going my Home* ends with the reaffirmation of the post-war nuclear family. Having worried her busy workload is having an adverse effect on Moe, Sae eventually decides to vastly reduce her working schedule so that she may concentrate predominantly on her domestic role; an arrangement which has a positive effect on Moe's temperament. Meanwhile, Ryo's latest TV commercial is a huge success among investors and he finally gains newfound respect from his younger staff. With his professional position restored and his domestic responsibilities greatly reduced, Ryo recovers his patriarchal position as salaryman breadwinner in the family, and with this, his new confidence largely vanquishes his comedic potential. Sae's respect for Ryo also grows the more he focuses on work rather than domestic matters. In a scene occurring near the middle of the series, she returns home to find Ryo and his subordinate working into the late hours organising a local festival for which they recently secured funding. Koreeda films a close-up of Sae's face as she gazes respectfully at her husband as he busies himself with work. In the closing scene of the series, Ryo accidentally locks himself outside his apartment while fixing his balcony door in his pyjamas at night. Since the series occurs during the winter, he is exposed to freezing temperatures for some time until his wife comes to his rescue. Though there are echoes of humour to this light-hearted coda, rather than ridicule him as she had previously, Sae sympathetically cuddles her husband and hurriedly makes

him a hot vegetable broth. The final shot shows the two from behind sat at the dining table, Sae pampering her husband as eats the food she has prepared, consenting to her traditional position as the 'good wife, wise mother' and tenderly seeing to Ryo's domestic needs (see Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8: Sae pampers Ryo as he eats her food while the credits roll. Having proven his salaryman identity earlier in the narrative, this final shot in *Going my Home* establishes the restoration of traditional household roles (Fuji Television Network 2012).

This emphasis on conservative resolution sets *Going my Home* apart from Koreeda's narratives insofar as films like *I Wish* and *Like Father, Like Son* imagine conclusions which de-emphasise the need to return to post-war family structures in favour of emerging identities. Conversely, *Going my Home* suggests that men of Ryo's generation will not so easily adjust to changing masculine ideologies. It could even suggest such an adjustment is impossible, and that the only way these anxieties can be placated is through a return to the hegemony underscored by post-war salaryman masculinity.

The conclusion of *After the Storm* also advocates for a stable masculine identity. Having had his attempts at reconciliation with Kyoko comprehensively denied, Ryo recognises his incompatibility as a husband and father in his current state and vows (to himself) to work harder to become the man society wishes him to be. He desists trying to win back Kyoko's affections and gives his lottery tickets to his son, indicating that he will stop chasing improbable dreams. As the trio part company on a busy street, the final shot has Ryo in mid-shot smiling while watching his ex-wife and son walk away. He then turns and walks away from the camera towards a busy pavement. Having replaced his usual dark, frayed and distinctive clothing for a business-like plain white shirt, Ryo soon blends in with the general throng of pedestrians and becomes 'invisible' before the credits roll (see Figure 5.8). Though it is not confirmed, Ryo's assimilation with the similarly dressed masses suggests he will give up his writer aspirations and pursue a more general career path. Ryo ceases to be comedic during this climax, and his smile as he watches his ex-wife and son depart signals a more positive acceptance of his familial shortcomings. Much like his *Going my Home* counterpart, Ryo's ability to meet a singular masculine identity (in this case, adult maturity/responsibility) awards him respect and closure rather than ridicule.

After the Storm's conclusion reflects a similar narrative outcome as *Going my Home*, although this time the effects are more subtle; Ryo was unsuccessful at reuniting the nuclear family so his ability to fulfil hegemonic principles is incomplete. The path Koreeda sets for Ryo in this role is based on his ability to reach behavioural maturity that reflects his age, and comedy is utilised for the majority of the narrative to moderate this social deficiency. Ryo himself acknowledges his social inadequacy and the work he must do to become a mature, legitimised, paternal man near the film's climax as he confesses to his son

'I'm not who I want to be yet'. His lack of career-focus, his selfish individualism, his pursuit of personal aspirations - these are the traits Koreeda sees fit to 'correct' in Ryo, and these are traits one must supposedly overcome if one is to become *shakaijin* (Kotani 2004).



Figure 5.9: Ryo (centre) finally 'blends in' to his surroundings in the closing shot of *After the Storm*, suggesting he will adopt a 'standard' mature identity (Fuji Television Network/Bandai Visua/Aoi Pro Inc./GAGA Corporation 2016).

Both Ryo narratives rely on his character fulfilling a more conservative masculine role. The reasons for this disparity are possibly linked to genre. Tzachi Zamir believes that in most cases, comedy narratives are typified by an emphasis on positivity and an 'optimism arising from a fictional fulfilment of the hope that seemingly insurmountable tensions can be resolved, and that obstacles to happiness may be overcome' (2014: 176). This is a variation on Harwood's (1997) 'potential narrative outcome' since comedy resolutions are considered by Zamir to be unambiguously positive. Since the preceding comedy of the Ryo narratives relies on his failure to embody socially desired masculine characteristics, perhaps the only

measure by which positivity can be achieved is when he ceases to be embarrassing. For this to occur, Ryo must stop being funny, ergo he must conform to a stable masculinity.

The answer in these narratives is not to embrace non-standard family identities, but rather it is for individuals to succumb to the pressures of standardisation. The individuals responsible for this shift vary between texts - In *After the Storm*, the answer is that Ryo himself must change, though in *Going my Home*, change is more shared. The TV series' closure is secured by Ryo's capacity to win renewed respect from family and colleagues as a proficient salaryman, but this is strongly facilitated by Sae's decision to reduce her workload, which frees Ryo of his increased domestic responsibilities. Though they each undergo change, Sae must effectively sacrifice her career and resume a more traditional function herself so that Ryo can be liberated from his embarrassing inefficiency in the home. In both of the Ryo narratives, therefore, it is the affected individuals who must be 'modified' rather than social attitudes more generally.

Just as both narratives acknowledge the unaccommodating social landscape that has made compliance with a standardised family ideology problematic, the endings suggest conformity with hegemonic masculinity (and femininity, in the case of *Going my Home*) may be the only answer. For this reason, *Going my Home* and *After the Storm* may bear similarities with the other family narratives but fail to confidently project the same appeals for systematic change with which Koreeda can otherwise be discursively connected. Like the traditional 'social problem' narratives discussed and criticised by other academics (e.g. Campbell 1978; Hill 1985), these endings suggest Ryo is the problem that must be fixed rather than society itself. Therefore, these endings complicate the status of the Abe narratives as quiet activism.

Conclusion

In both of the Abe narratives, comedy can be seen to work in favour of quiet activism as laughter is encouraged through social criticism of the unrealistic expectations adult men face in contemporary contexts. As Shaviro contends, the comedic breaking of social conventions as performed by Abe's characters can be considered a symbolic form of activism insofar as they mock the hegemonic values to which individuals (adult men, in this case) are held. However, both narratives conclude with Ryo either resuming or vowing to enter a masculine identity indicative of hegemonic discourse, which undermines their appeals for systematic change.

As to whether comedy functions for or against quiet activism in *Going my Home* and *After the Storm*, the answer is complicated. In some ways, it appears comedy *does* work towards quiet activism insofar as comedy identifies the problems inherent within social constructions of masculinity. Ryo is funny either because he fails to satisfy competing demands (*Going my Home*) or he behaves precisely as negative social discourses suggest, and it looks ridiculous (*After the Storm*). As long as comedy is present, it identifies the issues caused by developing images of masculinity vis-à-vis an unaccommodating social background; Ryo cannot become the husband and father idealised in contemporary social discourse because this figure has become too difficult to achieve. The endings, meanwhile, rely on an absence of comedy - the tensions of the narrative are resolved when Ryo ceases to be funny or embarrassing. For this to happen, he must settle on a stable masculine identity, and in the absence of a contemporary stable identity, Koreeda relies on more conservative (post-war) constructions of masculinity. Going by Zamir's claims that comedy

resolutions must be unambiguously positive, Koreeda's method of exploring masculine anxieties through generic forms of comedy may also be instrumental in their more conservative endings. Comedy does, therefore, provide a discursive function comparable to quiet activism, but this generic underpinning is perhaps also responsible for the conclusions that undermine this association.

Why these particular narratives are discursively and stylistically different from Koreeda's other family narratives is unclear, but we can surmise their distinction. For example, the television format of *Going my Home* likely had a huge impact on its narrative resolution. Valaskivi has stated that, from producers and audiences, 'there is a discourse of "traditional Japaneseness" and "nostalgic family values"' connected with home drama (1999: 35); this would explain why the ending of *Going my Home* romanticises the reestablishment of the post-war nuclear family. Moreover, the series was never sold abroad, meaning it was produced specifically for a domestic audience. This contrasts with the cinematic family narratives, which were all made after Koreeda had secured a strong following across international markets. *Going my Home* catered exclusively to domestic tastes, which is reflected by the frequent references to popular culture, themes related specifically to Japanese business hierarchies and the presence of popular local comedian Takada Junji in a significant role as himself. Appealing specifically to a national audience, *Going my Home* reveals intriguing disparities from Koreeda's family narratives and a far more conservative thesis on family relationships. That being said, *After the Storm*, which premiered at Cannes in 2016, may have more international ambitions yet contains a comparable resolution to *Going my Home*. Though *Going my Home* is the more conservative, and this may be strongly relatable to its generic connections with TV 'home drama' (see also Lukács 2010: 25-6), the

similarities between the two suggest it is not simply a matter of appealing to certain audiences.

A final issue worth considering is Koreeda's personal relationship with this character. He has mentioned in several interviews that the Abe narratives, particularly *Still Walking* and *After the Storm*, are strongly related to his family history (Adams 2009; Heskins 2017). Abe's character is apparently a fictional representative of Koreeda himself and the drama relates to certain family issues he has experienced. This thesis has overlooked autobiographical connections between the director and text in discerning their discursive meanings.

However, the distinction of the Abe narratives opens the possibility that Koreeda's subjectivities have altered his approach to their discursive function. In this case, it could show that Koreeda simply doesn't have the same confidence addressing social anxieties when they are related to himself. This could explain why comedy is used as a means to 'laugh off' Ryo's anxieties rather than confront how they may be solved. Though this would be a topic better suited for a separate study, there are certainly signs that Koreeda's personal connection has made some bearing on the outcomes of his narratives.

Conclusion

As the previous chapters have argued, Koreeda depicts the Japanese family through a positive and demonstrably optimistic discursive lens. In many cases, but not all, the representations have a discursive effect I have labelled quiet activism. The meaning and effects I have discussed concerning Koreeda's cinema have depended upon the social contexts by which they have emerged, so they are worth summarising here.

Contemporary Japan has become a ground upon which differing perceptions of the family compete. Political and media discourses alongside enduring economic, employment, welfare and other societal structuring largely continue supporting family standardisation in the present form of the nuclear family. It was under the strong ideologies of the nuclear family that the nation experienced unprecedented success during the post-war economic miracle era. However, the late 20th century saw dramatic reductions in marriage and birth-rates that undermined the social strength of the family. The continuing emphasis on the nuclear family in official discourses has seemingly been done in the hope that a return to post-war familism will revive the dwindling birth-rate and circumvent the coming financial burden of an ageing population. Meanwhile, newer generations have been forging different lifestyles that resist family standardisation. In many cases, resistance to official expectations has occurred as a result of unfavourable social circumstances rather than personal choice, while for others, alternative lifestyles are perceived as favourable replacements to the restrictions and inflexibility of the nuclear family. This has meant for many the idealised domestic conditions as promoted in family standardisation are either unobtainable or

undesirable. Therefore, the nuclear family and associated gender roles have become increasingly unaccommodating as a social model.

Just as Sarah Harwood has argued in relation to the UK and US during the 1980s, a 'gap' has opened up in Japan 'between lived experience and cultural forms' (1997: 55) of the family and social demographics. This has meant fewer and fewer Japanese lead lives according to socio-political expectations related to the nuclear family. Politicians have been unable or unwilling to accommodate the changing social climate, and this has driven many to develop alternatively structured households or abandon the prospect of family altogether. In many ways, and according to various scholars (e.g. White 2002; Ueno 2009), it has been the inability of successive governments to implement necessary infrastructural amendments to accommodate post-bubble socio-economic conditions that have resulted in the widespread anxieties and uncertainties fuelling the nation's population crisis.

Koreeda's cinema sits in this liminal space (or 'gap') between expectation and actuality about the Japanese family. The films discussed in this thesis respond directly to competing family identities and anxieties that have emerged in the post-bubble social landscape. Most narratives present scenarios whereby emerging or marginalised social constructions of the family are favourably depicted over dominant structures and ideologies connected to the nuclear family. As discussed throughout the chapters, Koreeda consciously interrogates contemporary social issues that have perturbed the 'gap', including divorce and single-parent families (*I Wish*), female labour participation (*Our Little Sister*) and paternal engagement (*Like Father, Like Son*) through narratives that attempt to answer or solve these social problems. The 'answers' Koreeda provides support the plural identities and uncertainties that now denote the reality for many demographics. By positively depicting

families of different structures, classes, values and gender identities, these are answers that call for an abolishment of family standardisation. These narratives depict a society that accommodates a borderless approach to families and gender lifestyles; they address social anxieties by treating them as normalities. Films such as Koreeda's have perceived their historical moment and mediate answers that could steer the nation away from future paths of uncertainty.

In a manner akin to the 'cinematic historians' described by Robert Rosenstone (2012), Koreeda (depicting modern contexts) uses cinema to provide a *contestatory interpretation* that reframes discursive power structures of the family to create an *alternative present*. These narratives attempt to change the way their domestic audiences perceive the apparent 'crisis' of the present moment. The gap between dominant expectations and social reality is shortened - the actuality is empowered rather than the expectation. Ergo, the non-standard households of *I Wish* are depicted as superior settings to the nuclear family that preceded them; the all-sibling, all-female household in *Our Little Sister* is a better environment for protagonist Sachi than the restrictive urban setting where she visits her would-be husband; the dual-breadwinner, economically marginalised couple in *Like Father, Like Son* are the parental role models to which the 'standard' salaryman and professional housewife protagonists are unfavourably compared. By de-emphasising the standard households and gender identities these protagonists aspire to, Koreeda reframes the post-bubble era as an opportunity to welcome a diversity of family structures and identities.

Unlike the mediated family in Western cinema as discussed by Harwood and others (e.g. Tincknell 2005; Jenkins 2015), Koreeda's narratives are not part of the 'cultural forms' that mythologise dwindling conceptions of the (nuclear) family. They are instead positioned on

the other side of the 'gap' and empower demographics who resist dominant expectations. As such, Koreeda's cinema is uniquely subversive insofar as it discursively resists and devalues dominant socio-political expectations of the family and empowers emergent and diverse social alternatives. For example, the single-parent families in *I Wish* are likened to culturally mythologised pre-war family and social structuring; for this reason, they are treated as part of a historical tradition of shifting and fluid family organisation that post-war expectations have neglected. In *Like Father, Like Son*, the post-war salaryman ideologies that have separated men from parentally engaged roles are depicted as detrimental to father and child (son) alike. Ideal fathers in this context are those who completely evade hegemonic salaryman lifestyles. Therefore, Koreeda continually undermines the ideologies associated with the nuclear family and supports marginalised social demographics who, whether through choice or necessity, have failed to meet dominant expectations.

Koreeda's family narratives are also distinct from similar 'social problem' films because of how they frame anxieties and apportion blame to institutions rather than individuals. This function, I have argued, positions these narratives as a form of 'quiet activism', discreetly challenging dominant socio-political discourses that have failed to accommodate Japan's changing demographics. In several films, this is emphasised through positive narrative outcomes whereby protagonists overcome pressures of standardised family identities and embrace more radical alternatives. For example, the young brothers Koichi and Ryu in *I Wish* eventually adjust to their new environments in single-parent families and give up the quest to reunite their divorced parents. Similarly, *Our Little Sister's* Sachi discovers her worth as a single, employed member in her all-female all-sibling household and overcomes pressures to marry. *Like Father, Like Son's* salaryman protagonist Ryo realises blood-relation

is not the sole factor that qualifies his right to call himself a father and increases his paternal interaction, despite how this may 'feminise' him according to corporate discourse. The social identities to which these characters adapt oppose dominant conceptions of family and/or gender identity that have problematically endured into post-bubble Japan. Crucially, they all suggest that the problem lies in the unaccommodating infrastructure that has made pluralised family identities problematic in the first instance. Therefore, Koreeda's narratives petition for a more systemic change to dominant attitudes, and diversity in family structures is to be encouraged.

At the same time, however, there are demographics for whom Koreeda is unable to find answers that transcend the conditioning of dominant ideologies. I discussed these inconsistencies regarding mothers (chapter four) and male protagonists played by actor Abe Hiroshi (chapter five). The demographics depicted in these narratives have faced anxieties and uncertainties regarding their social position in post-bubble contexts, and these are narratively addressed. However, the positive outcomes in these narratives rely on more conventional gender ideologies which are used either to support the more transgressive behaviour of other demographics (mothers) or to solve the 'problems' caused by competing social identities (Abe).

The suggestions I made concerning these discursive exceptions are that for mothers, who have experienced very little change regarding their roles and functions across modernity, perhaps the mythologies by which the mother has been (inter)nationally understood are simply too strong to reimagine in any other form. It could also be that these characters are not centralised to the same extent as the fathers or other demographics discussed in other narratives, which perhaps explains their comparably marginalised treatment. Moreover, this

would also explain why mothers are depicted so differently in *Like Father, Like Son* to *Our Little Sister*, where reproductive mothers are treated as useless. Since Koreeda's interest appears to be fixed to the plights of his central protagonists (and the demographics/anxieties they represent), it would seem the role of supporting demographics is to facilitate quiet activism in favour of the protagonists' demographic rather than themselves. Hence, the mothers in *Like Father, Like Son* must continue their traditional functions to enable or support their husband's performance (or acceptance) of *ikumen* masculinity; likewise, the reproductive mothers in *Our Little Sister* must be depicted as useless so that the sisters are presented as stronger maternal role models instead. Therefore, just as both these films are demonstrations of quiet activism for their central protagonists, this is not without internal contradictions when comparing the depictions of the mothers as supporting demographics side by side. The Abe narratives are slightly more complicated, and their discursive anomalies could be traced to the generic links to comedy, the format of *Going my Home* as a television 'home drama', or even Koreeda's autobiographical association with the central character. For these (and perhaps other) reasons, these depictions cannot be considered quiet activism to the same extent as the examples in the initial chapters. This means Koreeda's status as a quiet activist is not unfaltering and fluctuates depending on particular demographics and their importance within the narratives, generic formats or even individual subjectivities.

It is also important to acknowledge that these representations are coming from Koreeda's male perspective and are prone to corresponding subjectivities. The director's stated link with Abe's 'Ryo' characters is what perhaps makes these protagonists so distinct from the others, and the 'answers' for his predicaments more difficult to locate. The mothers

discussed in chapter four, particularly regarding working mother Yukari, seem to address male anxieties more comprehensively than female. Furthermore, it is important to consider that while *Our Little Sister* confidently espouses progressive feminist politics, this is an adaptation (of a manga written by a woman) whereas the other family narratives were penned by Koreeda. Other than this sole example, the family narratives have unanimously prioritised the perspective and narrative 'journey' of a male protagonist, which perhaps explains the more inconsistent treatment of women. Though my study has been concerned with the discursive effects of the films rather than with authorship, it would be foolish not to acknowledge that the films' subjective treatment has been influenced to some extent by Koreeda's age, gender and social position. Perhaps for this very reason, Koreeda's position as a quiet activist has a limit, and these limitations suggest contemporary anxieties related to the Japanese family are perhaps not so easily 'solved' by individual subjectivities.

The limitations of studying authorship as discourse

Koreeda's family narratives may not represent *all* demographics at a consistent level of quiet activism, but this does not devalue the effectiveness of the method by which I interrogated the effects of these films. One of my goals has been to rethink how we study contemporary Japanese cinema, especially regarding film directors and the family. My approach thought beyond Koreeda's cinema solely in terms of individual expression and considered how the films form part of broader cultural dialogues according to the social conditions from which they emerged. If I leaned too heavily on Koreeda as an individual, it would undermine attempts to understand the social effects of their discursive functions and risk the more common authorship practice of prioritising a consistent ideological thread

across the texts. This has never been my intention, and it is important to consider the ramifications presented by discursive inconsistency. If anything, my thesis provides evidence that problematises the act of labelling filmmakers with a consistent 'author-function'. Perhaps a consistent discursive function (such as quiet activism) cannot occur as a universal process across demographics according to gender, race, class etc. because it will always be, to some extent, shaped by the subjectivities of the author-director. This follows Staiger's (2013) concerns about using authorship purely as a discourse (as Foucault suggested), insofar as 'repetition is not assumed to be due to an insistent unconscious writing by a present entity with a particular historical body but due to the insistent unconscious writing by material discourses' (2013: 46). Here, as Staiger suggests, Koreeda's 'particular historical body' (as middle-aged, male, heterosexual, father etc.) appear to significantly affect his depictions of different demographics, particularly his own. The limits presented by this approach suggest, therefore, that individual filmmakers are perhaps not the best locus through which to expect a universal treatment of activism across demographics.

Just as Staiger argues in the context of authorship as a *technique of the self*, 'rebellious or resistant authorship would be understood as a particular kind of citation with the performative outcome of asserting agency against the normative' (2013: 51). In Koreeda's family narratives, we come across 'rebellious' or 'resistant' *citations* in films like *I Wish*, *Our Little Sister* and the fathers in *Like Father, Like Son*. Meanwhile, the mothers and Abe characters rely on more traditional discourses to facilitate their positive narrative outcomes. Though I do not wish to trivialise the ramifications of these more conventional representations (especially with regards to the mothers, who have continued to receive marginalised depictions across global cinematic contexts (e.g. Hamad 2013; Sayed 2016)), it

simply identifies the areas where Koreeda's politics are less radical than others. For this reason, the non-activist depictions, such as those represented by mothers and Abe, should not be considered as the exceptions that 'prove' Koreeda's cinema fails as quiet activism; instead, we should pay close attention to the narratives that do successfully break through discursive norms (such as *I Wish* and *Our Little Sister*) and what we can learn from them.

The function of quiet activism in connection with family can be considered as unique as a global media form. By referring to studies of Western (Hollywood) and Japanese cinema, my method has assumed that, to some extent, the representations in Koreeda's cinema are as much part of national specificity as they are relatable to global (mediated) contexts. The results I have found corroborate this assumption. Studies of the family in Japanese and Western cinema have determined, respectively, that the family is depicted through a critical lens or it relies on dominant and mythologised structures associated with the nuclear family (e.g. Mellen 1976; Chambers 2001; Iles 2008; Jenkins 2015). However, as this study has shown, depictions of the family do not always fall into these distinct categories and more radical depictions have appeared in Koreeda's family narratives. This is the first significant study of Japan, therefore, that has identified a positivistic media interpretation of the family that defies the conditioning of dominant ideologies.

Following Isolde Standish's (2000, 2011) contention that Japanese cinema is best understood through historical contexts, Koreeda's positive depiction of the family is strongly connected to the nation's development through modernity. In many cases, the depictions of alternative structures and lifestyles are derived through associations with pre-war (pre-nuclear family) social organisation and, as such, provide a national specificity to the emergence of competing demographics. As the textual links frequently made between

(pre)modern familial structures and emerging demographics shows, Koreeda's cinema relies as much on Japan's past as it does on its present. Uncovering the historical contexts of the family and the contested implementation of post-war family 'standardisation' has allowed me to pinpoint how the family is optimistically deconstructed in Koreeda's narratives. Therefore, in the process of discussing the family in specific national contexts, even in (post)industrialised and highly Westernised societies like Japan, it remains important to understand how particular national histories have shaped perceptions of the family in the public imagination.

While there are parallels in how the family is mediated in Koreeda's cinema to corresponding analysis from the West (Hamad (2013) and Harwood's (1997) studies being key indicators), there are nuances that can only be articulated by a more thorough understanding of the historical complexities that have led to the present moment. Koreeda's family narratives show that alternative representations are taking place, and these are dramatically reimagining how the family is socially constructed in Japan. It is my hope, therefore, that this thesis provides a starting point for further studies into the Japanese family in cinema and other media that could uncover other innovative treatments of the family. More broadly, this could also provide a template for separate discursive contexts in other national cinemas that have perceived and responded to social crisis.

My selection of Koreeda's output has been limited to 'optimistic' interpretations of the family, but this approach could also be applied to his other work. Films such as *Shoplifters* and *Nobody Knows* fall outside of the scope of 'quiet activism' due to their more overtly politicised narratives, but these films are engaged in social dialogues nonetheless and can be scrutinised by a similar method. For example, *Shoplifters* reframes common negative

perceptions of criminals and impoverished social demographics by depicting its characters as victims of the uncompromising socio-economic landscape of post-bubble Tokyo. *Nobody Knows* provides a similar commentary, this time targeting the social treatment of children by depicting the child protagonists as victims of social (and economic) neglect. Though not ultimately providing optimistic visions for the marginalised demographics they depict, these and other Koreeda films are still comparable to the family narratives by their activist gaze.

Another important factor raised by these results is reception. As discussed in the introduction, we already know the family narratives have been more successful in Japan than Koreeda's earlier narratives, suggesting domestic audiences will be more familiar with films like *Our Little Sister* or *Like Father, Like Son* than *Nobody Knows* or *Maborosi*. This could mean Koreeda's reputation is different in Japan to the West. Further questions regarding reception are raised by the more conservative depiction of the family in TV series *Going my Home*. Considering the divergences between this and Koreeda's films (including *After the Storm*), we can ask broader questions regarding how Koreeda 'tailors' his political engagement to particular audience demographics. Again, these enquiries are unaddressed by a textual approach, but given the uproar caused by *Shoplifters*' international success, Japanese audiences may have understood Koreeda through a more politicised lens than audiences or academics in the West.

(Quiet) cinematic activism

To end, I'd like to think more broadly about the potential effects of a cinema of positivity and activism. Although my analysis has suggested that quiet activism is not uniform or

always equally voiced throughout Koreeda's narratives, we might ponder over its effects, especially in the more radical texts. If these films operate, as I have argued, as discreetly veiled criticisms of ruling establishments, do they have more power to penetrate a public consciousness? J Greg Getz has argued 'all films transmit, explicitly or implicitly, assumptions regarding the nature of role relations in society. Role relationships are institutionalised social constructions; they are components of social structure sometimes related to, but not determined by biological characteristics' (2016: 655). But how is this changed when films deconstruct dominant role relationships and reimagine social power structures? Mas'ud Zavarzadeh has similarly contended that films 'are instances of cultural acts in terms of which the viewer negotiates his way through the realities of daily practices – all of which are organised[...] to confirm the dominant social relations' (1991: 10). However, as I have argued, Koreeda's narratives have opposed some of the 'dominant social relations' by which the family has been socially and politically constructed.

As we have seen, scholars have often taken exception to the perceived 'failure' of films and filmmakers that have neglected progressive or activist stances on social issues. This has often been the case made against social problem films (Hill 1985; Maland 1988; Freedman 2011) or Hollywood films that fail to overcome patriarchal ideologies (Harwood 1997; Hamad 2013; Jenkins 2015). Even Japanese filmmakers like Ozu (Mellen 1976: 323) and Koreeda (Lewis 2019) whose narratives critique social conditions have also been called out for failing to provide solutions or alternative perspectives on their subjects. However, maybe it is not so clear cut to define films as either criticising or passively reinforcing unjust social conditions. There has been some complacency among film scholars studying these contexts: that filmmakers either explicitly articulate social critique in pessimistic or

ambiguous narratives, else their work is devalued in terms of active socio-political engagement.²¹ Koreeda's family narratives are proof that this is not always the case and more radical discursive politics are present in unassumingly light and positive cinema. Studies from around the world have shown that the family is changing and this is reflected by media that have tried to articulate these changes. However, this is the first study that has identified a type of cinema that positively reimagines how 'newer' families overcome the failures of dominant models (the nuclear family). The potential this form of cinema may have to encourage or facilitate social change is not to be taken lightly.

Koreeda's narratives demonstrate how cinema can be positive, promote progressive politics, criticise ruling establishments and provide optimistic solutions to real social problems. These are films that have been popular yet relatively ignored through critical (academic) scrutiny due to their surface innocence. The way these films have hidden politically charged representational strategies behind light and seemingly incidental melodramatic narratives make these, for me, the most interesting of Koreeda's broad catalogue. The narratives I discussed provide evidence of how cinema or mainstream media can be used to instigate or encourage positive social change. We may ponder, therefore, if other films or filmmakers have similarly arisen in comparable times of crisis or contestation in Japan or other parts of the globe. As I have argued throughout, Koreeda's politics are penetrative precisely because they have been subtle and overlooked. This establishes how certain films and filmmakers can, against the judgement of scholars, critics and audiences alike, successfully conceal activist messages behind innocuous veneers.

²¹ I acknowledge that this is not the case for all national cinemas, particularly filmmakers working under censorship. But this has certainly been the case for Hollywood cinema, Japanese cinema and cinema from other democratic or 'Westernised' societies.

It is perhaps no longer valid to simply label films as conforming fully to the dominant status quo of social relations or pessimistically criticising them. We may instead start to think about how different and more positive discursive engagement like quiet activism offers complex relationships with social contexts. Do these films have the capacity to encourage social change and affect the construction of dominant social ideologies? Katherine Hanley believes 'quiet politics' can 'gradually, episodically, change dominant hegemonic norms and understandings, providing new opportunities for social change' (2017: 503). This being the case, it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that cinema engaged in quiet activism may have a corresponding effect. Other films might also have discreetly penetrated public imagination in the manner Hanley describes, having similar 'gradual' effects on audiences.

This provides new means by which we may approach films or filmmakers in the future, and understand how, despite appearing innocuous on the surface, they may be engaging and influencing audiences through more radically politicised subtexts than we realise. Narratives that discreetly act against the protocols of an ideological state apparatus will have a different impact on their audiences; dominant ideologies cannot be passively enforced through popular media if popular media is actively challenging dominant ideologies. This means films like *I Wish* may have more power to influence public beliefs than openly politicised films like *Shoplifters*. This thesis, I hope, provides a template by which other films and filmmakers in different national and discursive contexts can be similarly assessed by a positive call for social change. Koreeda's family narratives demonstrate how this can be achieved by reframing social anxieties related to the Japanese family and positively representing non-standard family structures and gender roles.

Filmography

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