

Noriko's Good Heart and the Matter of Filial Piety in Ozu's 'Tokyo Story'

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In common with many foreigners, not to mention Japanese, I find the 1953 film 'Tokyo Story' directed by Ozu Yasujiro, the centenary of whose birth was celebrated just last year, very moving. For this reason and also because it provides a view of post-war life in Japan, just prior to the start of the years of the economic miracle, I have chosen to use it in a course on Modern Japanese Society for exchange students. One of the many aspects which captivates a viewer, I think, is the radiant good heart of Noriko, which shines through the entire film. In Shakespeare's King Henry V, the King woos Katherine, Princess of France with the following words:

A good leg will fall, a straight back will stoop, a black beard will turn white, a curl'd pate will grow bald, a fair face will wither, a full eye will wax hollow; but a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon, or rather the sun and not the moon; for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps his course truly. (V. ii. 159-164)

Whilst King Henry wishes his description of a good heart to refer to the constancy of his love, I think that it is more suited to the character of a person, like Noriko, who has a disposition to perform good actions for their own sake than it is to the emotion of love which, I believe, inevitably changes considerably over time into something which is almost unrecognizable as the initial emotion. In what follows, I intend first of all to look at both Noriko's and Shige's characters, in order to find out what this good heart consists of, as Ozu and Noda, the scriptwriters, clearly wish us to see

the words and actions of the one in the light of those of the other. After this, I wish to examine one of the central themes of the film, filial piety, and consider what the scriptwriters are telling us about their views on this matter through the words and actions of the utterly sympathetic Noriko in contrast with those of Shige, Koichi and Keizo whose deficient sense of filial piety is compensated for by their sister-in-law.

As I see it, then, Noriko is portrayed as a person who

(1) unfailingly considers others' feelings when speaking and acting.

(2) has a deep respect for Shukichi and Tomi as the parents of her dead husband, as people considerably older than her and also as individuals who she loves. One way in which this respect is reflected is in the very formal, polite language she uses when addressing them.

(3a) is generous with her time, uncomplaining when asked by her sister-in-law to take her parents-in-law sightseeing which will require her to take a day off work. This generosity also extends to showing hospitality to her parents-in-law when she invites them back to eat supper with her in her room, having her mother-in-law spend the night with her and giving Tomi some money as a parting gift the following day.

(3b) instead of speaking ill of others, even when those people's inconsiderate behaviour directly affects her and the people who she cares about, chooses to present those people's words and actions in the best possible light. This of course can be characterised as generosity of spirit.

(4) is uncomplaining about her lot in life, despite having been widowed at a very young age.

(5) is modest, deflecting praise from both Tomi and Shukichi.

(6) has a sense of serenity about her.

(7) is self-reflective and honest both with herself and with others about her shortcomings confessing to Shukichi at the end that Tomi has overesti-

mated her and she is not in fact a nice woman because for one thing she does not always think about her late husband.

(8) shows kindness not only to her parents-in-law but also for example to Kyoko, inviting her to Tokyo, and to Keizo, going to look for him when he leaves the funeral to find out if he's alright.

(9) is possessed of wisdom regarding both the relationship between parents and their grown-up children in particular and the human condition in general. Her wisdom about the latter lies in her acceptance of the knowledge that life is disappointing.

In contrast, Shige is presented as someone who

(1) is somewhat inconsiderate of others' feelings, which we, as the audience, feel is a function of her un-reflective nature. For example soon after her mother arrives in Tokyo, Shige remarks to her, in the presence of Noriko, that she, her mother, has got even fatter and tells Noriko, with her mother still present, that her mother once broke a chair at a school festival because of her weight. Admittedly this is said in a teasing way. Perhaps a better example of Shige's inconsiderate nature is when she announces at a family meal right after her mother's funeral that she wished her father had died first.

(2) is slow to take responsibility for her own mistakes and quick to blame others. For example she either fails to remember or does not wish to admit that it was her idea to send her parents off to Atami where her mother suffered a stroke. However when hearing about her mother's stroke for the first time from her father after her mother's death, she is quick to criticize him for not having told her elder brother, the doctor, about it at the time thus making her father feel guilty for his wife's death even though Tomi had quickly recovered and got up and Shukichi had therefore concluded that his wife had felt dizzy because of lack of sleep.

(3) is rather parsimonious by nature, reflected in her comments on what food to serve to her parents and the entertainment which they should provide.

(4) puts her business at the top of her priorities except when her mother falls dangerously ill.

(5) is rather selfish, for example requesting certain of her mother's belongings soon after Tomi has died without confirming whether Kyoko or Noriko would like them and asking Noriko to take her parents-in-law sightseeing without considering Noriko's position in her company, her relationship with her boss, her loss of pay for an unpaid holiday or forfeiture of one of her few days of annual holiday.

(6) has no sense of serenity about her whatsoever.

(7) feels some sense of duty and emotional attachment to her parents. For instance she does various things for Shukichi and Tomi in Tokyo and cries uncontrollably when told by her brother that her mother will probably die by the following morning.

(8) henpecks her husband a little and is somewhat bossy, for example telling Kyoko she wants certain of her mother's belongings, telling Keizo to buy train tickets and telling her father not to drink too much.

(9) is, on at least one occasion, presented as someone to be laughed at, in her attempt to deal with her father and his old friend, Numata, when they both come back to her home drunk.

Given, then, that Ozu and Noda have presented us with this utterly sympathetic character, Noriko, one obvious question which arises is, what are the two scriptwriters telling us about their views on filial piety through this individual with the good heart? On the one hand the writers seem to want to convey the message that if one doesn't look after one's parents while they are alive one will live to regret it. This idea is voiced directly by Keizo in

the saying "None can serve his parents beyond the grave" (Ozu & Noda 2003: 100) delivered for the first time in a light-hearted fashion to a colleague when he mistakenly believes his mother is suffering from train sickness. He returns to the same lines after arriving in Onomichi too late to see his mother for the last time while she is still alive (Ozu & Noda 2003: 115). On the second occasion the words are uttered outside his parents' house, where his mothers' funeral is taking place, while he is reflecting on his shortcomings as a son. On the other hand the regret which Keizo or his older siblings feel does not seem to last very long or translate into a greater solicitude towards the remaining parent as he, Keizo, is soon talking of a baseball game he wants to hurry back for and his brother and sister too make their excuses and depart without considering that they might be acting towards their father in just the same way that they did when he visited them in Tokyo just a matter of days before. When the three children have left after the funeral, the scriptwriters take the opportunity to tell the audience that it is not unnatural if children grow apart emotionally from their parents, particularly when they leave home and start their own families. This idea is presented to us by Noriko in response to Kyoko's disgust at her older siblings' selfishness, in one of the few highly-emotional, key scenes of the film.

But children do drift away from their parents. A woman has her own life, apart from her parents, when she is Shige's age. She meant no harm, I'm sure. It's only that everyone has to look after himself.

(Ozu & Noda 2003: 121)

The remainder of this dialogue is also revealing about Ozu's and Noda's view of parent / child relationships. Kyoko steadfastly maintains that it would be too hateful if she became like her siblings, which in one sense is an utterly natural response, but also may be seen to betray the fact that

Kyoko is still young, single, idealistic and living at home. Noriko points out that children change gradually and that she, Noriko, too, may become more selfish even though she does not wish to. From one point of view, this may be seen as another example of Noriko's good heart (a) wishing to present the behaviour of Shige et al. in the best possible light by establishing solidarity with them (the previously-mentioned generosity of spirit) (b) as a matter of modesty accepting the possibility, which we, the audience, think of as highly unlikely, that she will become selfish. Another possibility suggested at the end of this dialogue when Noriko agrees with a warm smile that life is disappointing, is that Noriko's good heart may in fact become corrupted with the passing of time which would indeed be disappointing. Although in one sense I understand that Ozu and Noda are doing no more than showing that Noriko has come to terms with the fact that life in general and human beings in particular don't live up to one's expectations, nevertheless to these western eyes there also seems to be too much fatalism and denial of humans' responsibility for their actions in Noriko's resigning herself to (a) becoming like Shige and Koichi and / or (b) a life which disappoints. What about (a) free will and (b) the power of positive thinking are possible responses which spring to mind. Perhaps after all, though, such ripostes are beside the point as maybe Ozu and Noda were simply demonstrating to us that the Japanese have a more fatalistic outlook on life than, say, Anglo-Saxons, as, for example, illustrated by the commonplace incantation *shikata ga nai*. To return though to the question of the scriptwriters' view of filial piety, perhaps it is also instructive to look at Ozu's own family circumstances. According to Sato Tadao and Noda Kogo (Richie 1974: 193), Ozu, a lifelong bachelor, was doted on by his mother and in return idolized her and spent much of his life living with her. Having said this and also accepting the fact that a trend had already

taken hold in Japanese society towards nuclear families, Ozu doesn't seem to idealize the extended family. For example when Shukichi goes out drinking with his old friends Hattori and Numata and they fall into discussing how their children have turned out, Numata remarks "Losing your children (in the war) is hard, but living with them isn't that easy either." (Ozu & Noda 2003: 81) Through the course of the film we can see examples of differences in thinking, values, expectations and character between the younger and older generations which validate Numata's remark.

The different relationships of daughter / son to parents and daughter-in-law to parents-in-law will affect the parents' / parents-in-laws' (and also the audience's) interpretation of what is acceptable / unacceptable, rude, selfish or otherwise behaviour. For example, it is not uncommon for grown-up children to wish to be indulged by their parents in the same way as when they were young (in the Japanese language there is the concept of *amae* — the desire to depend upon the love, patience and tolerance of others (Tyler 1983: 48) — to describe such tendencies). Noriko, then, as a daughter-in-law, whose relationship with her parents-in-law has in a real sense been severed with the death of her husband since they didn't have children together, will necessarily have, whether she behaves more kindly towards Shukichi and Tomi than their children or not, a far less complex relationship with her parents-in-law than Shige, Koichi, Keizo or Kyoko, their natural children. Crucial to the question of the nature of Ozu's and Noda's own thoughts on filial piety, then, is Shukichi's and Tomi's view of their children. Leaving aside the father's disappointment over his son being just a 'little neighbourhood doctor', what is more important to the mother and father, of course, is their children's behaviour towards them. When talking with other people, even their own children, the parents are, like Noriko, always considerate of others' feelings and commonly speak indirectly, not

wishing to disrupt harmony by voicing criticism. For instance, when asked by Shige about Atami, they say they enjoyed the baths and the view and then when questioned further about (a) whether it was crowded and (b) why they didn't stay longer, Shukichi replies that it was a little bit crowded but that they left because they thought that it was about time they should be heading home. Shige, of course is too dense to read between the lines and anyway just wants some evidence to salve her conscience for packing her parents off for a few days so they wouldn't interfere with her business. Even when the parents are alone, though, they talk to each other in a very indirect way, but finally when Tomi's illness forces them to stop off in Osaka, they have a chance to tell each other more directly about their feelings on how their oldest son and daughter have turned out. Whilst trying to put the best spin on the situation that it will allow by prefacing their remarks saying that, unlike other people, they prefer their children to their grandchildren and concluding that they should consider themselves lucky because their children are better than most, nevertheless each of them is still able to say what both have been feeling in their heart of hearts: Koichi and Shige are no longer nice people. The fact that these gentle, scrupulously polite people have been driven to pass such an extreme judgment against their own children, coupled with the parents' evaluating their daughter-in-law as 'so nice', 'kind', 'truly good' and 'honest' is, I feel, both damning criticism of Koichi and Shige as well as a clear moral judgement by Ozu and Noda regarding filial piety, notwithstanding the comment by Noriko that Shige meant no harm. It would have been a different matter if Noriko had been portrayed not as a believable good-hearted human being but as an unrealistic saint in which case the audience would not engage with her character sympathetically, Noriko would not have the self doubt which she displays with Shukichi at the end and her words and actions would there-

fore not put those (or the lack of those) of Shige and Koichi to shame. In the past one of my Japanese colleagues said to me that Ozu is specifically not condemning Shige's and Koichi's behaviour towards their parents citing the above-quoted speech of Noriko to Kyoko as evidence. I agree that

- (a) The scene with Noriko and Kyoko, in which the former stands up for Shige, is one of the pivotal moments in the film.
- (b) Noriko's worldview should be accorded special attention because, as previously mentioned, she is presented as an utterly sympathetic, good-hearted character.
- (c) Shige and Koichi, after all, do not act terribly badly towards their mother and father as they do, for example, organize some kind of reception for their parents in Tokyo and hurry back to Onomichi when they learn that their mother is seriously ill. As mentioned earlier, Shige also cries uncontrollably when told by her brother that her mother will probably not live until the following morning. Shige, Koichi and Keizo, then, all feel some sense of duty to their parents and Shige and Keizo, at least, also show, by their tears and words of self-recrimination respectively, that they retain an emotional attachment.
- (d) As Noriko points out by her use of the word 'children' as in 'children do drift away from their parents' and 'children get that way', Shige's and Koichi's behaviour is, after all, not uncommon.
- (e) Shige's and Koichi's behaviour is thoughtless rather than deliberately malicious.
- (f) The children's emotions towards their parents are, like other emotions, not under their control, so if the emotional bond gets weaker, that is not something they can be held accountable for.
- (g) Big cities can have a negative influence on the humanity of their occu-

pants.

- (h) If Koichi and Shige had not married and had remained at home with their parents, that would have been unnatural. By the early 1950s Japan had already moved a considerable way from being an agrarian society to an industrial society and thus it was natural for young people to seek their future in the cities. Living a long distance away from their parents and busy with their work and their own families, it is unsurprising if emotional ties weaken.
- (i) The generation gap is often associated with differences in ways of thinking, values etc., which lead to difficulties in communication.
- (j) No matter whether the children had treated their parents more kindly, the children would have been helpless to prevent one parent predeceasing the other thereby leaving the remaining parent to live out his / her life without his / her lifelong partner i.e. the children were powerless to prevent either the sadness associated with the death of one's partner or the subsequent loneliness of life without one's partner.

Notwithstanding the above, I still feel that Ozu's and Noda's condemnation of the children's behaviour is plain to see. At the risk of labouring the issue, my reasons for this are:-

- (1) The daughter-in-law Noriko, as a non-blood relative, displays more kindness and affection towards Shukichi and Tomi than their own children. Even if the children's emotional bond towards their parents becomes weaker, they would still be capable of performing kind actions from a sense of duty or gratitude.
- (2) Ozu and Noda, as screenwriters, and Ozu as director of Sugimura Haruko have given her dialogue and had her perform actions with the intention of making Shige an unsympathetic character. Recall, for

example, that when asked by a customer in her beauty salon who the people were who had just appeared, she does not wish to admit they are her parents. Shortly after this, she makes her seventy-year-old father and sixty-seven-year-old mother feel that they cannot stay with her and will have to find alternative accommodation by themselves.

- (3) The parents are themselves forced to conclude that Koichi and Shige are no longer nice people whereas in the parents' words their daughter-in-law is 'so nice', 'kind', 'truly good' and 'honest'.
- (4) Ozu was doted on by his mother and in return idolized her and spent most of his life living with her.
- (5) If we are to say that Shige and Koichi were corrupted by living in Tokyo, making them more materialistic and colder human beings then how is it that Noriko, another Tokyo-dweller remained uncorrupted?
- (6) Whilst it is true that Shige and Koichi lead busy lives, the fact that both are able to drop everything to go to see their dying mother in Onomichi shows that their busyness is their own choice and that they themselves are responsible for their decision to place a higher priority on their work than making time for their parents while the latter are in Tokyo. The expense involved in entertaining their parents as well as the fact that unlike Noriko, both Shige and Koichi seem to regard taking their parents out and about in Tokyo as a complete chore are, of course, factors related to their decision to prioritize their work.
- (7) There is a scene right at the end of the film in which the father is sitting at home alone. A little earlier there is a scene in which Shige announces that she wished her father had died first and then communicates, in an indirect way, to all concerned that she will not be asking her father to stay with her in Tokyo mitigating this refusal to extend

such an invitation with the comment that she would have taken her mother in to live with her if her father had died first. In the same scene, there is a deafening silence, on the matter of what to do about the father, from the eldest son, who traditionally should have his parents living with him in order to look after them in their old age (albeit the problem is not immediately pressing inasmuch as it is assumed that Kyoko will be staying with her father for the time being). To me, these two scenes, among many others, are telling criticisms of the two older children.

Having claimed, then, that Ozu and Noda are, to my mind, clearly condemning the children's deficient sense of filial piety, I wish to temper that remark by saying that the condemnation is nevertheless conveyed in a restrained way and hence there are various mitigating factors [contained in points (a)~(j)] which should be taken into account. Having also damned the fictional characters, Koichi and Shige, as lacking basic humanity, I should perhaps admit that my own relationship with my parents more closely resembles that of Koichi and Shige to their parents than Noriko's relationship to her parents-in-law and unlike Koichi and Shige, I do not have a family of my own to put forward as a mitigating circumstance. Furthermore despite being moved and uplifted by the beauty of 'Tokyo Story' as a whole as well as the good heart of Noriko, the film does not seem, in my case at least, to have the power to inspire me to become a better son. Just as Keizo's reflection that he wasn't a good son soon gives way to thoughts of getting back to Osaka to see a baseball game, the feelings which the film inspires in me are soon replaced with other thoughts and feelings and lose their initial power. This situation seems to me to be analogous to that of a person who thinks of himself as someone who puts an absolute value on human life and is moved to tears by human suffering but does not in fact

give up his free time and all of his assets or income, other than those needed for basic survival, to help stop human suffering. In this case I think we can say that the person has a view of himself as a certain kind of person which is not borne out by how he acts. Likewise I think that there are many people who, because they feel moved by Noriko's good heart think that this feeling means that they, like her, place a greater value on, say, being kind and considerate to others when speaking and acting and performing good actions for their own sake than for example on accumulating wealth or seeking social prestige. As in the example above I think the proof or refutation of this would lie not in people's response to an artwork nor to what they claim about their character or values but in their own actions and words in their daily lives and we should keep in mind that it is not uncommon for humans to deceive themselves about their own character. Of course, being (a) moved by a work of art because, for example, it reveals a truth about the human condition and (b) thinking, as in the above example, that this feeling of being moved means that you yourself also place a greater value on 'x' rather than on 'y' are separate matters.

Finally, I cannot finish an essay concerning Noriko's good heart without paying tribute to Hara Setsuko's talent and beauty. Of course it is the scriptwriters Ozu and Noda who created the character, Noriko, and the director Ozu who, before filming, had definite images in his mind's eye for each scene of the film, however it was Hara Setsuko who was given responsibility for bringing the character to life. No matter that it was Ozu who choreographed her, for example with Shukichi at the end of the film holding her hands to her face, sobbing, or that it was Ozu who had asked her to look pensively into the middle distance or to smile or to look downwards and had perhaps asked her to do the same thing many times, in a slightly different way on each occasion, in order to achieve and record on film as

near as possible the same image which he had in his mind's eye [see for example Richie (1974: 145) in which Yoshikawa Mitsuko recalls that Ozu spent a total of twenty four hours trying to get a single shot just as he wanted it in the film 'A Mother Should Be Loved'] nonetheless it was Hara Setsuko who convincingly portrayed the good-hearted Noriko. The beauty and serenity we feel in Noriko, then, exist at least partly because of Hara Setsuko herself and her acting craft.

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