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Tradition and Modernity: The Father Figure in Yamada Yōji's *Tokyo Family* and Shifting Masculinities in Contemporary Japan

Abstract

This study examines how Yamada Yōji constructs the father figure in the film *Tokyo Family* (*Tōkyō Kazoku* 東京家族, 2013), situating it within the context of contemporary Japan and government policies regarding fatherhood and men's roles within the family. The analysis engages with two primary perspectives: (1) Yamada's portrayal of the father character, encompassing both his self-perception and how he is viewed by his family; and (2) Yamada's broader depiction of the character in relation to other male figures in the film, alongside its resonance with the socio-cultural realities of modern Japanese society.

The analysis reveals that the father, Shūkichi, is portrayed as an ageing man reflecting on his relationship with his children and his place within a transforming family structure. Initially presented as a traditional patriarch, Shūkichi gradually contends with evolving notions of masculinity. Ultimately, he comes to recognise and accept the modern male identity embodied by his youngest son, Shōji, reaching a form of reconciliation that is mediated indirectly through his wife, Tomiko, and Shōji's partner, Noriko.

Film critics and scholars frequently note that Yamada Yōji's *Tokyo Family* distinguishes itself from his mentor Ozu Yasujiro's *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari* 東京物語, 1953) primarily through its contemporary Japanese setting and the character of Noriko. Yamada also incorporates references to the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and weaves in brief episodes inspired by traditional Japanese theatre. However, this study argues that the more significant differences lie in the development of Shūkichi's character, especially in contrast to the film's other male figures—Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. Viewed through the lens of Japan's evolving male identities, these characters represent distinct stages along a timeline of shifting masculinities, progressing from the traditional archetype embodied by Shūkichi to the more contemporary model represented by Shōji. Although this framework does not encompass the full spectrum of male identity in contemporary Japanese society, it nevertheless reflects Yamada's intention to align with that shift, deploying his characteristic narrative style—deeply resonant and emotionally attuned to his audience.

Keywords: Yamada Yōji, Japanese film, father, male identity, family, Japanese society

Introduction

Tokyo Family (*Tōkyō Kazoku* 東京家族, 2013) by Yamada Yōji¹ is often regarded as a remake, tribute or homage to the legendary film *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari* 東京物語, 1953) by the master filmmaker Ozu Yasujiro. Interestingly, both films were produced by the same company, *Shochiku*. However, creating a remake is no simple feat; it demands deep thought, insight and a delicate balance to honour the original while offering a fresh perspective. This challenge of Yamada has led to polarising opinions among film critics and a noticeable hesitance among researchers to delve deeply into this particular film.

Critics have expressed sharply divided opinions on *Tokyo Family*. Some dismiss it as a movie that ‘vexes Ozu devotees and bores mainstream auds’,² featuring ‘some of the performances verging on caricatures’³ and one that is ‘bound to disturb any self-respecting cinephile’⁴. Researchers, however, tend to avoid engaging with the film entirely, preferring the safer terrain of Yamada’s original works, such as the long-running series *It’s Hard to Be a Man* (*Otoko wa Tsurai yo* 男はつらいよ, 1969–1995) or his celebrated *Samurai Trilogy* (*The Twilight Samurai*, *Tasogare Seibei* たそがれ清兵衛 2002; *The Hidden Blade*, *Kakushi Ken Oni no Tsume* 隠し剣 鬼の爪, 2004 and *Love and Honour*, *Bushi no Ichibun* 武士の一分, 2006). Scholars would rather examine themes such as alienation, the generation gap and family relationships within the broader context of Yamada’s body of work, while deliberately refraining from placing particular focus on *Tokyo Family*.

We chose *Tokyo Family* as our case study for three reasons, which form the framework of our discussion. First, the movie was made nearly 60 years after the original, positioning it closer to modern times on the temporal axis. This proximity suggests that the film might more sharply and sensitively reflect the socio-cultural changes in contemporary Japan and their impact on the Japanese family.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the film demonstrates the opposite tendency—where Yamada distances himself from the modern portrayal of the family and, despite the passage of time, remains committed to the concept of the traditional family as depicted in the original work of his mentor, Ozu Yasujiro.

¹ In accordance with Japanese naming conventions, whereby the family name precedes the given name, this practice is maintained throughout the manuscript.

² Lee 2013.

³ Fainrau 2013.

⁴ Ibid. 2.

The third possibility is that there may be a distinctly Yamada Yōji approach of portraying people—one that focuses on being ‘interested in people, their existence, how they live’, and reflecting on ‘what it means to be human’.⁵

To investigate this, we opted to explore the figure of the father in *Tokyo Family*, a theme that has received relatively little attention. This study is not a comparative one and does not claim to be exhaustive on the aforementioned subject. It examines how Yamada has constructed the father figure in *Tokyo Family* within the context of modern Japan and the government’s policies on fatherhood and the role of men in the family. The analysis incorporates two perspectives: (1) Yamada’s approach to portraying the father character, which includes both the father’s self-perception and how his family members perceive him; and (2) Yamada’s broader perspective on the character in contrast to other male characters in the film, as well as its resonance with the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Japan. Based on this framework, we address the following research questions (RQs):

- What is Yamada Yōji’s perspective on portraying the father character (RQ1)?
- How is the father depicted within the family and within the macro-setting of a changing Japan (RQ2)?
- How is the father perceived by family members and people close to the Hirayama family (RQ3)?
- How does the character relate to other male characters in the film and to the evolving male identities in modern Japan (RQ4)?

Literature Review: The Portrayal of the Father in Japanese Films

The Father Figure in Japanese Films

The portrayal of the father as an independent subject in Japanese cinema remains overlooked. It is typically analysed within the broader contexts of family dynamics, shifts in masculinity or the *salaryman* サラリーマン (‘office worker’) stereotype, which have garnered more attention from researchers and film critics.

A substantial amount of research on fatherhood in Japanese films explores intricate themes such as the absence of parental love and care, as well as the presence of violence and resentment in family relationships.⁶ Other studies examine

⁵ Yamada 2023, quoted in [Associated Press, The] 2023.

⁶ Przybyło 2015: 95.

evolving male identities, reimagine family structures within this context,⁷ or highlight the destructive role of the father.⁸

To shed light on the post-bubble transformations of father and husband figures, Dasgupta⁹ examines two Japanese films—*Tokyo Sonata* (*Tōkyō Sonata* 東京ソナタ, 2008) by Kurosawa Kiyoshi and the comedy *Hush!* (*Hasshu* ハッシュュ! 2002) by Hashiguchi Ryōsuke. Both films explore the complexity and diversity of contemporary reality. *Tokyo Sonata* poignantly and mercifully portrays the painful process of its protagonist, Ryūhei, coming to terms with change and embracing a new identity. His journey unfolds as he transitions from the traditional role of the *daikokubashira* 大黒柱 patriarch (lit. ‘central pillar’) to a father and husband with a diminished status within the family and society. Meanwhile, *Hush!* reconsiders the role of the stepfather in same-sex relationships.

Iles¹⁰ examines the evolution of the Japanese family, particularly the role of the father, by comparing two films—*The Family Game* (*Kazoku Gēmu* 家族ゲーム, 1983) by Morita Yoshimitsu and *Visitor Q* (*Bijitā Q* ビジターQ, 2001) by Miike Takashi. His analysis places these films within the broader context of post-war Japanese cinema, particularly the works of Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji and Ozu Yasujirō, where fathers were traditionally depicted as moral guides and pillars of family stability. In contrast, contemporary films portray the father as absent, ineffectual or even destructive.

Park’s¹¹ perspective on the family and ageism is particularly compelling. The researcher compares Ozu Yasujirō’s *Tokyo Story* with Yamada Yōji’s remake, *Tokyo Family*. While the primary focus is on ageism, the researcher’s analysis also reveals aspects of the father figure, suggesting that his role in *Tokyo Family* is somewhat neglected by his children. Though he remains a strong and stable presence, social changes have reshaped the dynamics between him and his family, creating a different model of relationships.

Yamada Yōji’s Character Portrayal

Yamada Yōji is one of Japan’s most prolific and still-active film directors often being referred to as ‘Japan’s national treasure’.¹² A highly skilled filmmaker, he had the rare opportunity to learn directly from Ozu Yasujirō. He is also a

⁷ Dasgupta 2015: 14–20.

⁸ Iles 2008: 189–206.

⁹ Dasgupta 2015: 14–16.

¹⁰ Iles 2008: 189–206.

¹¹ Park 朴蕙彬 2018: 21.

¹² Wang 2022: 223.

talented screenwriter, known for his delicate sense of humour and his intricate portrayals of the human soul. However, as many researchers and film critics point out, Yamada remains underappreciated and relatively unknown outside Japan, with a few exceptions—most notably the renowned *Tora-san* series and the *Samurai Trilogy*.¹³ As Noletti observes, Yamada has received ‘surprisingly little critical attention in the West’.¹⁴

Susanne Schremann notes that while Yamada Yōji holds a significant place in Japanese cinema history, his work has not been thoroughly examined. She observes that even the widely popular *Tora-san* series have been largely overlooked in scholarly studies, possibly due to its comedic nature and mass appeal. To address this gap, Schremann turns her focus to one of Yamada’s early films, *The Sunshine Girl* (*Shitamachi no Taiyou* 下町の太陽, 1963), aiming to shed light on its artistic and cultural significance.¹⁵

Chan Yan Chuen also writes that Yamada is notably absent from the works of prominent film scholars, including David Bordwell, David Desser, Noël Burch, Donald Richie, Keiko McDonald, Abe Mark Nornes and Aaron Gerow. The researcher remarks:

[...] Bordwell had his book *Ozu and the Poetics of Japanese Cinema* published firstly in 1988; Richie writes several books about Kurosawa Akira (Richie, 1996) and one on Ozu (Richie, 1974); Desser has an edited book on Ozu (Desser, 1997) and another on Kurosawa (Desser, 1983); Gerow also contributes a book on Kitano Takeshi (Gerow, 2007). In *Reading a Japanese Film*, McDonald (2006) selects 16 films that were made between 1936 and 1997 to analyze which included two films of Kurosawa and Ozu’s *Floating Weeds* (1959). Yamada Yōji was found totally absent from these scholarly works.¹⁶

Regarding Yamada’s portrayal of characters, Chuen observes that the director adopts a realistic approach with a social purpose—offering hope and uplifting the audience. This explains Yamada’s tendency to infuse humour into his characters, even in moments of sadness or hardship.

[...] if one goes further to understand the hidden sadness and troubles behind the smiling face of the protagonists, it is not difficult to uncover the inner loneliness and

¹³ Chuen 2014, Leblanc 2021, Schremann 2020, Leblanc 2023, Leblanc 2024.

¹⁴ Noletti 1985: 5.

¹⁵ Schremann 2020: 47.

¹⁶ Chuen 2014: 5.

sorrow of each of them. If we try to understand the protagonists, this complexity of human nature is not difficult to be discovered on silver screen as well.¹⁷

Schermann provides further insight into Yamada's approach to character portrayal, emphasising the director's nuanced depiction of female agency and empowerment in *The Sunshine Girl*. She highlights how Yamada subtly challenges traditional norms through his storytelling. Additionally, Schermann examines his directorial techniques, particularly his use of realistic settings and meticulous attention to everyday details. She argues that these elements foster an immersive experience, enabling audiences to engage deeply with the characters' lives.¹⁸

Building characters around internal contradictions is a hallmark of Yamada's style. This is evident in *The Twilight Samurai*, where Sebei prioritises his daughters and mother over loyalty to his master. As Robin Syversen notes, Sebei's sense of honour is deeply personal, rooted in love and responsibility rather than blind adherence to tradition.¹⁹ Unlike conventional samurai, who place duty to their master above all else, Sebei devotes himself to his late wife's memory and his children's well-being. His sacrifices redefine honour as selflessness and familial devotion rather than rigid duty.

Qin Wang also explores Yamada Yōji's filmmaking style, focusing on how his stories and characters evolve. The author highlights three key aspects: first, Yamada's openings are typically slow, simple and understated, providing audiences with a perspective rooted in ordinary life and setting the stage for nuanced character portrayals. Second, while conflict runs through the narrative, it is primarily conveyed through concern and sympathy for the characters' fates. Finally, influenced by Ozu Yasujirō, Yamada skilfully integrates humour and pays particular attention to marginalized individuals and lower social groups, making his films deeply connected to the everyday joys and sorrows of ordinary people.²⁰

'Valuing feelings' is another fundamental element of Yamada Yōji's approach to explore characters' natures. In the *Samurai Trilogy*, this form of 'affection' prioritises familial and romantic bonds over the otherworldly ideals of *bushidō*. The female characters subtly express their emotions, reflecting the director's deep understanding of and special attention to the concept of a 'happy life'. Additionally, viewers may notice certain 'habitual' details that contribute to the depiction of ordinary people's resilience and perseverance. 'Without shouting,

¹⁷ Yamada, 1978: 95-8, quoted in Chuen 2014: 130.

¹⁸ Schermann 2020: 53-54.

¹⁹ Syversen 2023, *JCA*.

²⁰ Wang 2022: 223-224.

screaming or stealing the spotlight, these scenes are meticulous and moving, like still water running deep'.²¹

The reviewed scholarly works suggest that Yamada adopts a simple, modest, and realistic approach to storytelling. His emphasis on authenticity and empathy shapes his portrayals, highlighting people's emotions in everyday life. This allows the audience to intimately experience his characters' contradictions, dilemmas and quiet moments. An understated sense of humour is also central to his approach, adding depth to their inner worlds and infusing difficult situations with warmth and hope. Yamada's protagonists may seem ordinary, but as they evolve, their depth and complexity gradually unfold for the viewer.

Yamada Yōji's Approach to Depicting the Father Figure in *Tokyo Family*

Light, Silence, Framing

The audience is introduced to Shūkichi Hirayama, a retired teacher, as he stands on the arrival platform of *Shinagawa Station* alongside his wife, Tomiko. They wait for their youngest son, Shōji, to pick them up. From the outset, the couple is *framed* within the sleek, modern environment of the JR station and the bustling, overcrowded metropolis—Yamada's way of symbolising the technological progress from the 1950s to contemporary Japan. However, the viewer's attention is drawn to the couple's spatial positioning: the father stands above the mother, who is seated on the suitcases. This composition subtly suggests the traditional hierarchical structure of the family, evoking the Confucian representation of the father figure as the protector, breadwinner and holder of the highest position within the household.

There are several other scenes where the couple is *framed* on a macro level. Immediately after the JR episode, we see the couple with a taxi driver, highlighting the convenience of the car's navigation system—another symbol of progress. Through the taxi windows, the well-maintained infrastructure and neatly arranged mansions of Tokyo come into view. These two scenes are intriguing because of the father's expression, which is less radiant and warm-hearted than in Ozu's original. In both moments, despite his serious demeanour for most of the time, a delicate smile appears on his face, as if mocking on his wife's thoughtlessness and backwardness regarding innovations. In the first scene, Shūkichi takes the initiative in a Confucian manner, deciding that they should

²¹ Zhao–Ding 2017: 355–356.

not wait for Shōji and instead go alone to their eldest son's house, remarking with an elusive smile:

I can't wait that long... Let's go on our own... [そんな待てるか...、
わしらで行こう...]

In the second scene, the father uses gestures to point out to his wife that the taxi is equipped with a GPS system, emphasising with a barely noticeable smile that there is no need to meticulously provide instructions to the driver.

Macro-level framing is likewise employed during the couple's tour of Tokyo on a double-decker bus. Together with Shōji, they ride through architectural and technological marvels such as the *Tokyo Skytree* and the vibrant, electric district of *Akihabara*. The couple displays a sense of curiosity and subtle surprise at the cosmopolitan nature of Tokyo, despite the episode containing little dialogue. Instead, the director relies on the couple's expressions and their contrast with Shōji, who appears either bored or tired, napping throughout the scene. While the mother occasionally lets slip a faint, almost imperceptible smile, Shūkichi remains serious, leaving it unclear whether he genuinely enjoys the experience or merely endures it out of obligation.

Perhaps the most striking example of this approach is the couple's reluctant retreat to the highly modern hotel in *Yokohama*—a luxurious gift and a manifestation of the so-called *oyakōkō* 親孝行 ('filial piety') of the children toward their parents. The scene begins with the dizzying motion of a rollercoaster spinning wildly among towering skyscrapers. Despite being filmed in the open air, there is an absence of vitality. The stark whiteness of the high-rise buildings nearly overflows under the daylight, creating a sense of sterile emptiness. Notably, all the aforementioned scenes begin with an intense interplay of light—whether it's the harsh artificial glow of *Shinagawa Station* or the blinding whiteness of the rising buildings in *Yokohama* merging with the daylight.

And then follows a scene featuring a *micro-framing*—a confined space in which the characters are alone, either silently contemplating or exchanging few words. We see the couple sitting alone in the intrusive whiteness of the hotel room, gazing through the window at the overwhelming whiteness of the rollercoasters and Ferris wheel—a view that, according to the standards of modern Japanese society, should be enviable. Silence prevails and the faces of Shūkichi and Tomiko remain expressionless. Tomiko attempts to soften the atmosphere by suggesting that Shūkichi change into a more relaxed garment, a 'nemaki' 寝巻 ('pyjamas'), to feel more comfortable. However, he flatly refuses, his face remaining unchanged. He continues to reject other soothing suggestions from his caring wife, such as taking sleeping pills or ordering some 'osake' お酒

(lit. 'alcohol') in the hotel's restaurant to help him relax. The white set, harsh lighting, lack of conversation and their expressionless faces, along with the father's abrupt refusals—all contribute to a palpable sense of tension. It is amidst the whiteness of the surrounding high-rise buildings that Tomiko experiences a brief seizure of dizziness later in the episode. This finally brings a trace of concern to Shūkichi's otherwise stern face.

In keeping with the Japanese tradition of women caring for men, Tomiko discerns what is troubling her husband and gently proposes that they shorten their stay in Tokyo and return home. This time he accepts the proposal without hesitation, as though it were a simple solution. True to the tradition of men leading the way, he stands up among the whiteness of the modern hotel area in *Yokohama* and moves ahead—the scene suggests that the source of his distress has been resolved.

It is worth noting that, the whiteness of the setting, often merging with daylight, is a typical cinematographic method used by Yamada to imply that something unpleasant or foreboding is about to happen or that an uncomfortable conversation will take place. For instance, after the couple returns from *Yokohama* to Kōichi's house in Tokyo, and shortly before Tomiko faints, the father is shown silently sitting on the sofa, visibly exhausted from a sleepless night spent drinking with an old friend. Despite his weariness, his face retains its usual stern expression, an unyielding mask even in moments of quiet. The sunlight mercilessly floods the living room and with this harsh light pouring in, the bad news arrives as well. The youngest grandson steps in hesitantly, his words faltering as he begins to speak, trailing off before finishing his thought:

It's granny... [おばあちゃんがね...]

It is important to clarify that, unlike in many Western cultures where black symbolises mourning, in Japan, *white* is also closely associated with death and mourning. In this context, the merciful *whiteness* serves as a striking symbol of inevitability and foreboding, particularly evident in the hospital scene following Tomiko's faint. She lies motionless beneath the crisp *white* sheets, while Shūkichi sits beside her, his expression fixed and unreadable, his silence heavy. Words come slowly and with difficulty as Fumiko, Kōichi's wife, politely informs him about the arrangements his children are making to visit their mother. The final hospital scene lingers on the edge of the *white* sheet covering the lifeless body of Tomiko before Yamada transitions to the blinding *whiteness* of the ferry carrying Shūkichi, Shōji and Shōji's girlfriend, Noriko, across the Inland Sea to the old couple's home. Shūkichi, cradling Tomiko's urn wrapped in clean *white* fabric, naps quietly. Surprisingly, the *whiteness* here holds none of the tension or

sterility of the city. Instead, a calmness prevails, even as Shūkichi steps forward to meet his countryside neighbours with quiet dignity. Yet another surprise follows. Instead of turning to his neighbours, Shūkichi turns to his former student—a young girl, smiles and briefly gestures toward the urn, saying:

Yuki...look what's happened to granny/her... [ゆきちゃん、これ...おばあちゃん、こんなになってしまった...]

In this scene, the viewer might be struck by the unexpected smile of Shūkichi, who has maintained his usual mask of stern, expressionless resolve until now. This moment can be interpreted as a deliberate choice by the director, subtly suggesting that even the father, who has long worn this gloomy emotional mask, is capable of letting it slip, revealing a softer, more vulnerable side. On the other hand, for those unfamiliar with Japanese culture, it should be noted that a smile is often used to convey bad news or say something unpleasant to the listener. It is believed that this helps lessen the emotional burden and soften the atmosphere. At funerals, it is common for the relatives of the deceased to greet the attendants with a gentle smile, regardless of what they may be feeling inside at that moment.

The viewer may notice that Yamada often employs long silences as a preferred technique in scenes focusing on the old couple, adding a sense of introspection and emotional weight. Similarly, his subtle manipulation of light plays a crucial role in shaping these moments. For instance, in the scene where Shūkichi and Tomiko go upstairs at Kōichi's house to spend their first night in Tokyo, the sequence begins with the shadowy interior of the upstairs corridor, creating a subdued and contemplative atmosphere. As the light is turned on, the room where the couple is to stay is revealed, gradually drawing the viewer's attention. The focus tightens even further when the *fusuma* 襖 (the sliding door characteristic of a Japanese-style room), is closed, leaving Shūkichi and Tomiko enclosed within their intimate, private space. This careful orchestration of *silence*, *light* and *micro-framing* encapsulates Yamada's delicate storytelling approach. Similar *micro-framing* is observed in the episode where the couple stays at their daughter Shigeko's house. The scene opens with rain pouring outside, its sound accentuating the stillness, as the couple sits in silence within a dimly shadowed tatami room. The father sits with his usual serious expression; his eyes fixed on the television. Shigeko's husband attempts to start a conversation with him, but he receives only a terse one-word response. The father then turns off the TV and opens a newspaper, subtly signalling that he does not wish to be disturbed. This interaction heightens the sombre atmosphere and adds an

emotional weight to the father's character, further emphasising his reserved and distant demeanour.

Whenever Shūkichi and Tomiko are depicted on their own within the *micro-framing* of the family setting, the lighting is softened, often leaning toward darker tones, reflecting a sense of intimacy and quiet introspection. In contrast, when they are shown outside the family, set against the backdrop of the modern world and its marvels, the lighting becomes intensified and sometimes distinctly artificial, mirroring the stark and impersonal nature of this new environment.

Yamada Yōji masterfully portrays the father figure with a nuanced and multi-layered approach, emphasising his reserved demeanour, internal struggles and the generational dissonance he experiences. Through a combination of subtle techniques, such as *silence*, *micro-* and *macro-framing* and *light*, Yamada brings depth to the father's character, making him both relatable and poignant.

The Perspectives of the Family Members Toward the Father

Yamada Yōji astutely conveys the varying perspectives of family members toward the father, highlighting a complex blend of respect, distance and quiet frustration. The father, with his reserved demeanour and stern disposition, commands a sense of authority within the family, but his emotional restraint often creates a barrier that others struggle to cross. This is exemplified in the scene where Shigeko's husband attempts to start a conversation with Shūkichi. The episode prior to the old couple's stay at Shigeko's house also features a conversation between Shigeko and her husband Kurazō about the characters of Shūkichi and Tomiko. Kurazō is candid and straightforward in his criticism of Shūkichi, openly expressing his dissatisfaction with the father's personality. He bluntly states:

Kurazō: Your mother is fine, but your father is a bit hard to get along...

[お母さんはいい人なんだけど...お父さんはちょっと苦手なんだなあ...]

Shigeko: Why? [どうして?]

Kurazō: He was a schoolteacher, wasn't he... The conversation is too intellectual... It's a pain in the neck... [学校の先生だったんだろう。理屈ばいんだよ、話が...面倒くさいんだよ...]

Shigeko: He is an old man... [もうおじいちゃんよ...]

This line of concern continues when Shigeko and Shōji speak on the phone, further discussing Shūkichi. Their conversation echoes Kurazō's sentiments,

reinforcing the negative perception of the father figure within the family. Shōji is hesitant about showing his parents around Tokyo because he senses the emotional distance from his father and fears that Shūkichi will neither understand nor be satisfied with his life choices. His words come naturally:

Mom alone would be fine, but not dad... He doesn't want me around, I think... [お袋一人なら、いいんだけど、親父がいるんだろう... 親父だと、俺の顔なんか見たくないんじゃないか...]

Later, the discontent with Shūkichi escalates into outright criticism when Shigeko talks on the phone with Fumiko—the wife of the eldest son in the Hirayama family—as she speaks disparagingly of her father's past drinking habits and contrasts them with her mother's quiet endurance and stoicism. She remarks that the tension reached its peak during a stormy confrontation with her father, ultimately leading to Shūkichi's abrupt departure from her house.

The older son is probably the only one of the Hirayama children who doesn't openly express a negative opinion toward his father. He tends to agree, sometimes silently and other times with just a few words, with what his sister and brother-in-law think about Shūkichi. However, as a doctor, he is genuinely concerned about his father's health issues related to alcohol, reflecting a more subtle but still significant worry for Shūkichi's well-being. We may also infer that the older son feels some discomfort, as, being the eldest, he has deviated from the traditional role of staying with his parents and caring for them. Instead, he left the family home and found fulfilment in Tokyo as a doctor. This shift could contribute to a sense of guilt or unease, as he navigates the expectations of his role within the family while pursuing his own path.

And finally, through the conversations with Shōji and his girlfriend the viewer is introduced to Tomiko's perspective on Shūkichi. One might expect her to be the only family member to speak positively about him. When asked by Shōji about the good aspects of his father and her decision to accept Shūkichi's proposal, Tomiko is remarkably succinct, simply stating:

Your father was a good-looking man...That's all. [お父さん...ええ男 じゃったんよ...それだけ。]

The viewer is left in dismay by her simple, brief and measured response. Even the completely darkened night room—a technique Yamada employs to highlight moments of deep reflection and hidden emotions—fails to draw out a more expressive account of her husband. And yet, despite her restraint, her words carry a profound emotional weight. Tomiko also allows herself to briefly com-

ment on Shūkichi's nature while speaking with Shōji's girlfriend. She expresses eagerness to meet her again, but this time in the presence of Shōji's 'not very nice father'.

How can we explain Tomiko's conciseness in this pivotal episode? It may reflect Yamada's distinct approach, where silence and darkness convey emotions more powerfully than words. Tomiko's restraint speaks volumes, subtly revealing her true feelings about Shūkichi. The dimly lit setting highlights that what remains unsaid, carries as much weight as what is expressed.

At the same time cultural influences shape her response. The Japanese tendency toward moderation and self-effacement, especially within the *uchi* 内 ('inside, inner circle') group of people,²² discourages overt praise or criticism of close family members. Tomiko may also embody the traditional value of *gaman* 我慢 ('endurance'), choosing to suppress her personal opinions and emotions, especially in the presence of others.

The family's perspective on Shūkichi aligns with the traditional image of the silent, strict and distant father figure in the Japanese family. His emotional detachment, coupled with a lack of open communication, reflects the role of the father as an authoritative yet somewhat aloof figure. This conforms to the cultural expectation that the father should remain reserved and commanding, leaving emotional matters and familial dynamics largely unspoken. The family's view of him, shaped by this traditional model, underscores the complexities and tensions within their relationships.

But is Shūkichi truly as detached and emotionless as he seems? And how does he view himself? What do his own remarks and jokes reveal about his personality?

Shūkichi's Self-Perception: Disclosing Hidden Emotions

As discussed in the previous subsection, Shūkichi is viewed by both family members and outsiders as a stern, distant figure devoid of emotion. However, Yamada appears to offer a different directorial perspective, showcasing his cinematic range and revealing a more complex side to the character. This is especially evident in the father's occasional offhand comments and even humorous phrases, which subtly slip from his tongue, adding depth to his seemingly rigid persona.

The scene, where the entire family gathers to welcome the elderly couple at Kōichi's house, is warm and heartfelt. The presence of three generations

²² Individuals from one's inner circle—such as family members, close friends and colleagues.

enhances the nostalgic atmosphere. This moment also marks a rare instance of Shūkichi joking with his daughter, who playfully remarks that he has consumed enough alcohol in the past to last a lifetime. His subtle sense of humour sparks shared laughter, adding to the familial warmth. But no sooner does he resume his stern expression. Even when the youngest son finally arrives to meet the Hirayama family, the father seems indifferent, remaining silent and barely acknowledging him. The only words he utters are to ask what Shōji is doing for a living now.

And yet, as if Yamada fears that the father's static and monotonous demeanour might bore the audience, another joke is woven into the family conversation. This time, it playfully touches on a gloomy theme – who among the two spouses, Shūkichi or Tomiko, will die first.

Shigeko: Dad, take care of mom. [お母さん、大事にするのよ。]

Shūkichi: Don't worry... You could keep beating her, but she wouldn't die. [大丈夫...この人、しばいても死にはせん。]

Shigeko: What are you saying...?! [そんなこと言って...]

Shūkichi: I wouldn't mind dying first. It would make me happy. [死ぬのは、わしが先、それが幸せ。]

In contrast to other moments where Shūkichi permits himself only a fleeting smile, here, he not only cracks a joke but also laughs openly, his voice distinctly heard. On the rainy day when the elderly couple stays at Shigeko's house, with little to do, the viewer is entertained by another of Shūkichi's jokes. He and Shigeko's husband decide to visit the nearby public *onsen* 温泉 ('hot spring'), which is described as *tengoku* 天国 ('paradise'). As they leave the house, Shūkichi casually remarks that he's ready to go to *tengoku*, a clever play on words that carries a metaphorical meaning of death.

An emotional episode unfolds as Shūkichi, Tomiko, and Shōji dine together in a traditional Japanese restaurant. In this scene, the father directly confronts his youngest son, expressing his dissatisfaction with Shōji's decision to pursue a career as a stage designer rather than seeking a more stable job. Through his pointed questions regarding Shōji's salary and the long-term prospects of his career, it becomes apparent that Shūkichi is not only concerned about his son's future but also frustrated by Shōji's apparent lack of foresight and commitment to a more secure path. The viewer witnesses his parental frustration grow, evident in the intensity of his words:

How can you live in such a careless and chaotic manner? [そんな行き当たりばったりの生き方か...?]

Yet, in a striking shift, when Shōji steps outside to take a phone call, Shūkichi subtly softens his approach. His suggestion to Tomiko to share half of his meal with Shōji offers a tender, almost paternal gesture that contrasts sharply with the previous tension. This brief moment speaks unequivocally to Shūkichi's character. While his words reveal frustration, his actions suggest an enduring, unconditional love for his son. It is a poignant reminder that the complexities of parental relationships are not defined by single, isolated moments but by the broader, sometimes conflicting, emotional currents that run beneath them. In this fleeting exchange, Shūkichi's warmth and care for Shōji shine through, despite the earlier criticism. It suggests that, underneath his stern exterior, the father is not only concerned for his son's well-being but is also driven by a deep sense of familial duty and affection, even if it is sometimes expressed in a more indirect or harsh manner. This duality enriches the portrayal of Shūkichi as a character who embodies both the frustrations and the love inherent in parental responsibility.

The moments in which Shūkichi reveals a softer, more caring side within the family context are limited, especially when contrasted with the way he opens up to his old friend. Within the family, Shūkichi is often stern and reserved, expressing frustration with his children's choices. However, in a more intimate setting, such as the scene in which he drinks with an old friend in a dimly lit pub, Shūkichi dares to express his vulnerabilities, sharing his doubts and concerns about his children. This shift in his demeanour shows the contrast between the traditional father figure he upholds within the family and the more open, introspective side he reveals in private conversations with a peer who seems to share similar concerns and experiences. His vulnerability is evident as he expresses dissatisfaction with his eldest son, Kōichi, for deciding to move to Tokyo. Shūkichi's discontent stems from Kōichi's decision to establish a clinic in the bustling city, a choice he perceives as a deviation from the expected path. In Shūkichi's view, the eldest son, as per traditional expectations, should have stayed closer to home and, alongside his medical practice, cared for his aging parents. This moment underscores the generational tension between Shūkichi's traditional values and the individual aspirations of his children. It also offers a rare glimpse of Shūkichi's internal conflict, as he balances his desires for his children's success with his deep-rooted sense of familial duty and responsibility.

The atmosphere of emotional intensity and the subtle revelation of the father's inner world are further enhanced through the use of *lighting* and *spatial arrangement*. The pub is softly lit, with the customers seated near one another, creating a sense of intimacy and connection. This closeness extends to the relationship with the bartender, Kayo-chan, who is also situated near the two old friends. The entire conversation between Shūkichi and his friend is observed by

a nearby group of company workers, as well as by Kayo-chan, whose expressive eyes convey a mixture of annoyance and empathy. This emotional nuance in her gaze contributes to the overall mood, enhancing the reflective and intimate tone of the scene.

A particularly striking and poignant moment occurs in the conversation between Shūkichi and Shōji on the hospital's open roof, following Tomiko's death. The moment is remarkable for its fleeting nature, capturing a raw, emotionally charged exchange between father and son. The setting, the open roof, the day light adds to the sense of loneliness and vulnerability, highlighting the transient nature of their conversation as they process their grief in their own ways. This scene serves as a powerful, yet understated, expression of their complex relationship, marked by unspoken emotions and a shared sense of loss. As if Shūkichi is attempting to come to terms with Tomiko's absence, he quietly utters:

Shōji, your mom is dead... [...母さん、死んだぞ...]

The moment underscores Shūkichi's sudden and overwhelming sense of loneliness. In the quiet declaration of Tomiko's death, he is confronted not only with the loss of his wife but also with the traditional values a wife in the family carries. He utters the words in a calm and peaceful tone, devoid of visible emotion, which paradoxically heightens the emotional intensity of the moment. The scene carries a sense of emotional distance despite their shared loss, emphasising the unspoken grief between father and son. Shūkichi's words can be interpreted as an attempt to ensure that Shōji fully grasps the gravity of the situation or as a reflection of his own internal realisation. Probably unwilling to reveal his vulnerability to Shōji, he quietly leaves the rooftop, leaving his son behind in tears.

We will focus on one final scene that offers significant insight into Shūkichi's character in Yamada's adaptation. In this closing moment, Shōji and his girlfriend, Noriko, depart from the island – the Hirayama family's ancestral home – and Noriko bids farewell to Shūkichi. Strangely, the unaccustomed viewer witnesses a rare moment in which Shūkichi initiates a conversation with Noriko, someone he has scarcely seemed to notice until now. For the first time in the film, he even offers a compliment and struggles to maintain an undetectable smile. The conversation deepens as he sincerely thanks Noriko for accepting his ill-tempered nature without complaint and for continuing to care for him with unwavering devotion. The emotional climax arrives as the two sit alone in the quiet intimacy of the tatami room, where Shūkichi presents her with Tomiko's beloved watch as a *katami* 形見 ('keepsake'). In this moment, he reveals a hidden depth of care and sensitivity, disclosing his apprehension about Shōji's future. In a profound gesture, he bows deeply as he asks Noriko to marry his son.

This act carries great significance in the context of Japanese culture, where respect for elders is deeply ingrained. Traditionally, younger individuals are expected to bow to their seniors as a sign of deference, gratitude or apology, while elders rarely bow in return, especially not deeply. Here, however, the hierarchy is reversed: Shūkichi humbles himself before Noriko, acknowledging her kindness and making a sincere plea. His bow is not just a request but a profound expression of gratitude and recognition, signalling how much he values her presence in their family. The scene's quiet setting – just the two of them in the tatami room – adds to its poignancy. Removed from the presence of others, Shūkichi feels free to disclose emotions he has long kept hidden. The stillness of the space, with its understated simplicity, amplifies the weight of his words and actions.

This moment serves as the final, masterfully executed revelation of the father's long-concealed feelings and concerns, maintaining a quiet and intimate atmosphere without unnecessary sensory details. We cannot help but note how Yamada once again skilfully employs the wide shot and lighting, *framing* Shūkichi and Noriko within the natural borders of the *shōji* 障子 (sliding doors in a Japanese house). The contrast between the soft, soothing daylight that envelops them and the surrounding darkness of the frame is striking, enhancing the emotional depth of the scene. This final scene flows with the quiet, indirect reconciliation between father and son. Rather, it signifies Shūkichi's silent acceptance of his son's life choices, gently drifting with the tide of time.

Thoughts on Shūkichi and the Shifting Notions of Fatherhood in Modern Japan

If we consider the socio-political climate in Japan at the time *Tokyo Family* was made, several key issues stand out. In 2013, when the film was released, Japan was facing a rapidly aging population and a declining birth rate. The country was also grappling with prolonged deflation and a public debt exceeding 200% of GDP. Additionally, there was a noticeable shift in gender roles and family dynamics. In 2010, the Japanese government introduced the so-called *Ikumen Project*²³ to encourage fathers to take a more active role in child-rearing, aiming to redefine traditional gender expectations. These factors contributed to a complex social environment, where enduring traditions coexisted with emerging societal shifts.

²³ ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp 2010.

Regarding family structure and the role of the father, Japan has experienced dynamic changes throughout history. Vera Mackie describes three decades of social dynamics that have influenced family composition. In the 1980s, the typical model was the 'full-time salaried husband' and a wife who primarily managed domestic work, sometimes holding a part-time job. In the 1990s, following the recession in the Japanese economy, the so-called 'lost generation' emerged, bringing shifts in attitudes toward work, marriage and family. Finally, in the 21st century, transnational family structures and their variations have become more prevalent.²⁴

In contemporary Japan, a dramatic surge in public attention, accompanied by a substantial body of research, has been sparked around the evolving identities of fathers. New terms and concepts have emerged in response. For instance, the expression *ikumen*, a blend of *ikuji* 育児 ('childcare') and *men*, refers to fathers who actively engage in child-rearing,²⁵ or *sōshoku-kei danshi* 草食系男子 (herbivore men/boys or herbivore masculinities) – a term coined by Maki Fukasawa in 2006 to define a new type of men with more gentle nature.²⁶ This neologism has also been adopted by other scholars to characterise emerging forms of masculinity.²⁷ As Japanese society changes, the role and identity of Japanese fathers are shifting dramatically from being work-oriented to more family-oriented, driven by a growing desire to spend more time with their families.²⁸ As Saladin²⁹ concludes, '...the position of men within Japan's society, which used to be strongly linked to the breadwinner role of the family, began to waver'. Research³⁰ indicates that Japanese fathers are now more engaged in their children's education, participating in school events, picking up and dropping off their children and assisting with homework. Although there is clear evidence that Japanese men are becoming more willing to help with household chores, workplace culture and social expectations continue to pose significant challenges.

As noted earlier, present-day Japanese society has also seen the emergence of sharply defined categories of masculinity, such as *sōshoku-kei danshi* (herbivore men or herbivore masculinities). This term refers to young Japanese men who reject traditional masculinity, which is typically defined by ambition, dominance and financial success. Instead, they embrace a softer, more passive

²⁴ Mackie 2015: 150–153.

²⁵ Mizukoshi et al. 2015: 2.

²⁶ Fukasawa 2007.

²⁷ Deacon 2013, Morioka 2013, Charlebois 2013.

²⁸ Farrer 2017.

²⁹ Saladin 2017.

³⁰ Ibid. 28, 29.

and emotionally expressive identity, challenging conventional gender roles in Japan.³¹

In light of the aforementioned socio-political changes and the emergence of new terms redefining masculinity in Japan, it is worth reflecting on Yamada Yōji's depiction of the father figure in *Tokyo Family* in relation to family dynamics. His portrayal of Shūkichi contrasts with contemporary expectations of paternal involvement, such as the *ikumen* ideal, highlighting the tension between traditional fatherhood and evolving societal norms. Yamada's films, particularly *It's Tough Being a Man* (*Otoko wa Tsurai yo* 男はつらいよ, 1969–1995), also known as the *Tora-san* series, along with works like *The Yellow Handkerchief* (*Koufuku no Kiiroi Hankachi* 幸福の黄色いハンカチ, 1977) and *The Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei* たそがれ清兵衛, 2002), are unified by the traditional notion of a patriarchal family structure. However, Yamada's storytelling soon introduces emotional contradictions that reveal the complex inner worlds of the characters.

The father figures are typically portrayed as hardworking yet emotionally restrained men who struggle to express their affections openly. In *Tokyo Family*, Shūkichi's past before retirement remains largely unknown, yet his reserved and emotionally restrained demeanour suggests that he was likely the same guarded, emotion-concealing figure throughout his life. From the very beginning of the film, it is evident that the setting is modern Japan and that the central subject is a seemingly traditional Japanese family. The theme of family is both essential and beloved by Yamada,³² as he frequently emphasises in interviews.³³ However, the key phrase here is *seemingly traditional*. While Yamada portrays the everyday lives of ordinary people, the families depicted in his films are not entirely conventional, as becomes clear as the story unfolds.

For instance, in the *Tora-san* series, Yamada himself acknowledges that the family is 'collapsed' – Tora-san, the supposed successor of the family, has left home and is missing, while Sakura's parents passed away at an early age.³⁴ Inuhiko Yomota describes the main character as *ijin* 異人 ('stranger').³⁵ Furthermore, Tora-san and Sakura are half-siblings with different mothers and their parents are absent. In *The Twilight Samurai* Seibei Iguchi is a nurturing, emotionally vulnerable and devoted single father – traits that defy the typical samurai ideal of stoic masculinity. Unlike the traditional, duty-bound and emotionally restrained samurai father, Seibei prioritises his children's well-being

³¹ Deacon 2013: 133–136.

³² 'The Modern-Day Family...' 2014.

³³ Schilling 2008.

³⁴ Yamada 2014.

³⁵ Yomota 2007: 109.

and emotional needs over his own professional obligations and social expectations. In *A Distant Cry from Spring* (*Harukanaru Yama no Yobigoe* 遙かなる山の呼び声, 1980), the viewer encounters two families that, at first glance, seem ‘ordinary’ but are far from it. Tamiko, fragile yet strong, is both a farmer and the breadwinner of her family, while Kōsaku, a mysterious stranger on the run from the police, no longer has a family. Similarly, *The Yellow Handkerchief* (*Kōfuku no Kiroi Hankachi* 幸福の黄色いハンカチ, 1977) weaves together three deeply human stories, each revolving around unconventional and fractured families.

In *Tokyo Family*, we are introduced to an elderly couple, led by the subdued presence of Shūkichi, whose reserved manner initially appears emotionally distant and withdrawn. This portrayal aligns closely with the Confucian ideal of the traditional father – an authoritative figure who prioritises duty over emotional expression and maintains emotional restraint. Since *Tokyo Family* was released in the same year the Japanese government introduced the *Ikumen* policy, which encourages fathers to take an active role in childcare, one might anticipate a reflection of this shift in the film’s depiction of fatherhood. However, rather than adapting to these contemporary changes, Yamada’s portrayal of Shūkichi remains firmly entrenched in traditional patriarchal norms. In fact, Shūkichi’s emotional restraint is even more pronounced than the father figure in Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*.

This stark contrast between Yamada’s depiction of fatherhood and the evolving paternal role in modern Japan highlights a palpable sense of disconnection for viewers. Instead of bridging the gap between traditional expectations of fatherhood and the contemporary ideals of emotional engagement and involvement in family life, *Tokyo Family* accentuates this divide. Yamada’s decision to present Shūkichi as more stern and emotionally distant than his predecessor in Ozu’s work suggests a deliberate choice to emphasise the generational and societal tensions between traditional paternal authority and the emerging ideals of fatherhood in postmodern Japan. This serves to reinforce the complexities surrounding male identity in contemporary Japanese society, where shifts in gender roles and family dynamics often clash with deeply ingrained cultural values. In this way, Yamada’s portrayal of Shūkichi both acknowledges and resists the changing landscape of fatherhood, capturing the struggle of a generation that finds itself at odds with the evolving expectations of masculinity in Japan.

Ultimately, Shūkichi and Tomiko embody the conventional Japanese family, with Yamada’s Shūkichi reflecting the traditional father figure. This adherence is essential to maintaining fidelity to Ozu’s original narrative. However, if *Tokyo Family* presents an overtly traditional father, making the gap between him and contemporary society feel even wider, two questions arise: Where do we find the

distinctive qualities that make the character uniquely Yamada-like? And isn't there at least a subtle trace of the shifting notions of masculinity within the film?

There must be something more – delicate complexities and nuanced shifts that distinguish Yamada's portrayal of the father figure from a mere replication of tradition. And indeed, as the story progresses, hidden qualities of Shūkichi emerge, revealing not only a deeply vulnerable side to him but also his ability to smile and his subtle sense of humour. At times, Shūkichi's character becomes more introspective, displaying a softer and less authoritative demeanour.

Yamada Yōji is known for seamlessly embedding humour, including elements of black humour, into his films. His mastery lies in delicately weaving comedy into even the most sombre narratives or melancholic characters, creating a poignant balance between laughter and sorrow. Mark Schilling admires Yamada's ability to evoke both joy and tears, drawing parallels between his storytelling and the golden age of Japanese cinema, alongside legendary directors such as Kurosawa, Ozu, Mizoguchi and Naruse. Schilling also recalls Yamada's own comparison of his filmmaking to that of 'a soba-noodle chef, continuously serving bowl after bowl' of what he hoped would be satisfying cinematic experiences.³⁶ French journalist Claude Leblanc shares a similar appreciation, recounting his first encounter with Yamada's work. Despite not understanding much of the dialogue in Japanese,³⁷ he was deeply moved by the humour and genuine emotions on screen. He highlights that Yamada's comedy is rooted in everyday life and authentic human interactions, making it both relatable and touching. Furthermore, Leblanc observes that Yamada's humour transcends cultural barriers, resonating with international audiences through its universal themes and character-driven storytelling.³⁸

Similarly, Shūkichi in *Tokyo Story* unexpectedly jokes with himself, making the character more sympathetic and engaging for viewers. His subtle humour, paired with his restrained emotions, adds depth to his character and sparks curiosity about his inner world. With great dexterity, he makes jest of life and death, his old age and his eventual departure to 'heaven', offering a nuanced perspective on the passage of time.

This traditional image is subtly refined through the character's development and the evolving notions of masculinity in modern Japanese society, which the film conveys in an indirect and veiled manner. This nuance is not immediately apparent to the viewer, much like in some of Yamada's more recent scrip works, such as *Wagaya wa Tanoshi* わが家は楽し (2025).³⁹ For instance, Shūkichi's

³⁶ Schilling 2008.

³⁷ Leblanc could not speak Japanese at the time.

³⁸ Leblanc 2023.

³⁹ TBS (<https://www.tbs.co.jp/wagayawatanoshi/>). As the film is newly released, a standardized English translation of the title has not yet been established.

demeanor contrasts with that of the other male characters, subtly highlighting this shift. As Wang observes, ‘the films directed by Yamada Yōji are not only influenced by his own values and professionalism but also by the social environment’.⁴⁰ Thus, the film not only reflects Japan’s technological advancements but also explores the transformation of male identities through characters like Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. This contrast is likely Yamada’s way of presenting a more contemporary vision of men’s roles within the family, reflecting the evolving social dynamics of modern Japan. It also serves to make the tension between tradition (the image of Shūkichi) and modernity (the other male characters) more tangible.

Kōichi, the elder son, embodies the traditional role of a father and husband, fully dedicated to his work as a doctor, leaving little time for his wife and children. The only modern aspect of his character is his decision to leave his home and establish a practice in Tokyo. In contrast, Shigeko’s husband, Kurazō, aligns more closely with the shifting male identities in modern Japan. His character is portrayed comically, emphasising his awkwardness and dependence on his wife. The viewer clearly perceives his supportive, rather than leading, role in the family business, which is dominated by his strong-willed wife. Finally, the youngest son, Shōji, represents the most contemporary male image in the ongoing evolution of male identity (see Figure 1). His character embodies self-expression and flexibility, prioritising personal life over work – a choice that draws criticism from his father.

Two additional special positionings are crucial to understanding Shūkichi’s character. These involve the triangular relationships between Shūkichi, Shōji and Tomiko, as well as Shūkichi, Shōji and Noriko (see Figure 2). The communication between father and son is strained due to their differing perspectives on family and life. Positioned at opposite ends of the timeline, this distance shapes their contrasting views. By the end of the film, viewers witness Shūkichi’s silent acceptance of his son’s perspective. The key to this shift seems to lie in the mediating role and nature of the female characters – Tomiko and Noriko. Acting as *catalysts* or the most important *piece of the puzzle*, they help unlock the stern father’s change of mind, bringing him close to accepting his son’s philosophy of living.

Conclusion

Film critics and researchers often suggest that regarding *Tokyo Family* Yamada’s primary distinction from his master Ozu and Ozus’s *Tokyo Story* lies in the contemporary Japanese setting and the character of Noriko, the youngest son’s

⁴⁰ Wang 2022: 225.

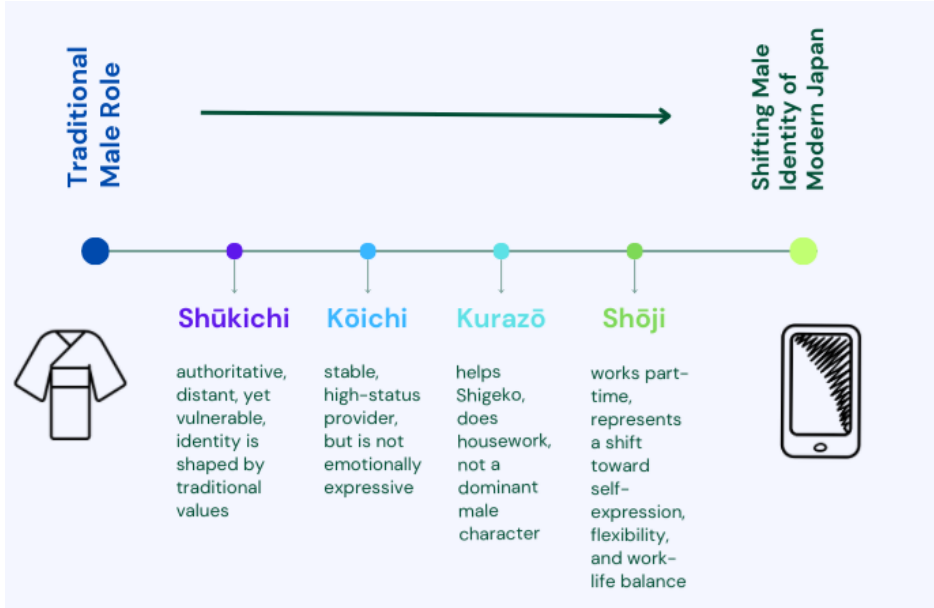


Figure 1. *Tokyo Family*: Male Identity Shift

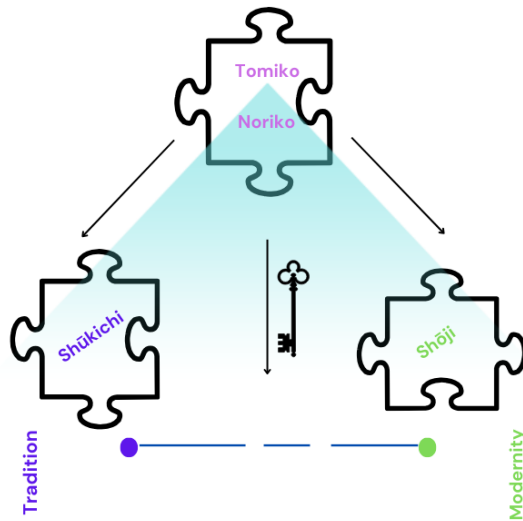


Figure 2. Father–Son Relationship

girlfriend. He also referenced the devastating aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and incorporated short episodes inspired by traditional Japanese theatre. However, we argue that there are more significant differences, particularly in the way Shūkichi's character unfolds in contrast to Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. When situating the shifting representations of masculinity in Japan along a chronological timeline, a clear distinction emerges between the male characters in the film, each embodying a different stage in the evolving constructions of male identity in modern Japan (see Figure 1). This progression moves from the traditional male image embodied by Shūkichi to the modern portrayal seen in Shōji. While this may not fully capture the entire range of contemporary male identity shifts in society, it remains unmistakably Yamada-like – a storytelling style that strikes a deep chord with the audience.

Ultimately, the father figure in *Tokyo Family* is portrayed as an aging man reflecting on his relationship with his children and his role within a changing family dynamic. Initially, viewers see him as a traditional patriarch, but as the story unfolds, Shūkichi grapples with modern concepts of masculinity. He eventually comes to recognise and accept the contemporary male image embodied by Shōji, finding a form of reconciliation with him indirectly through Noriko and Tomiko.

Through a masterful blend of humour and poignancy, Yamada takes viewers on a journey through life's complexities. His approach captivates audiences, eliciting both laughter and tears as he seamlessly navigates moments of lightness and sorrow. This rare ability to forge deep connections with his characters while evoking a rich spectrum of emotions is what truly distinguishes his works.

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Sources of illustrations

Figure 1. *Tokyo Family*: Male Identity Shift. Illustration by the author.

Figure 2. Father–Son Relationship. Illustration by the author.