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Five Classic Films from Japanese Director Yasujirō Ozu from 1948 to 1953

Written by Edward Matthew Gleason Pineda ([LinkedIn](#))

Introduction to Yasujirō Ozu

For Asian Pacific Heritage month, I decided to highlight who is considered to be one of the greatest Japanese directors of all time - Yasujirō Ozu. His filmography extends to over 50 films, with a fair amount of his work created during the Silent Era and the Golden Age of cinema. From family relations to crime dramas, Ozu began to explore more of these complex stories that evolved not only his style of filmmaking and storytelling, but also social commentary on Japanese life and culture.

“From 1927, the year of his debut for Shochiku studios, to 1962, when, a year before his death at age sixty, he made his final film, Ozu consistently explored the rhythms and tensions of a country trying to reconcile modern and traditional values, especially as played out in relations between the generations” (Criterion Collection).

This is important in Ozu's work because so many aspects of everyday life changed for people in Japan, and the focus on the dissolution of family and relationships is heavily important to show the major impact WWII had on Japanese families and society. His focus is referred to as the 'Gendai-Geki,' which is a genre that explores themes of Japanese family, lifestyle, and society in contemporary dramas in the modern world after World War II ([The Cinema Cartography](#)).

Donald Richie, an American author with a focus on Japanese culture, wrote a book titled [Ozu: His Life and Films](#) in 1977 that explores Ozu's life and career through his criticism, production notes, and quotes from Japanese critics and colleagues. Richie explains how Ozu's post-war filmography was rooted more in a reality that transcends itself from the dissolution.

“If anything, Ozu's later films gain a feeling of reality, and, more important to his art, transcend it. He is concerned not with quintessential family. He achieves the transcendental from a base in the mundane, in the bourgeois family--undisturbed by social upheavals, undismayed by financial misfortunes-- where a sense of the dailiness of life is perhaps most readily to be discovered” (6).

The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice (1952) explores the complicated inner workings of an arranged marriage that touch on their two different backgrounds to find life, love, and happiness within their complicated relationship. *Tokyo Story* (1953) explores the lives of an elderly couple that travel from the countryside of Japan into the city to visit their family that don't find the time to spend with them. Ozu's storytelling reaches beyond Japanese culture to the core and importance of family, relationships, and the human experience. Here are five Ozu films and synopses from the Classic Era I decided to write and highlight from his filmmaking career for Reel to Real Classics this month.

***Kaze no naka no mendori* ([A Hen in the Wind](#)) / 1948**

From the acts of desperation to harsh life challenges, *A Hen in the Wind* (1948) is a film that explored more personal complications within post-war Japanese society. The story focuses on Tokiko (Kinuyo Tanaka) and Shuichi Amamiya (Shûji Sano) relationship in post-war Japan ([IMDb](#)).

Tokiko lives at home with a young child waiting for her husband to return home from the war. With the cost of living increased and Tokiko's child recently hospitalized, she decides to prostitute herself to pay for rent and hospital bills. This film deals with a lot of the harsh realities that some people may have faced with the aftermath of WWII, and how that had an effect on relationships, society and oneself.

***Banshun* ([Late Spring](#)) / 1949**

With what is regarded as the “Noriko Trilogy,” *Late Spring* (1949) explores the first iteration of the life of a woman named Noriko Somiya (Setsuko Hara) who is reluctant to leave her widowed father, Shukichi Somiya (Chishû Ryû), back at home ([IMDb](#)).

Everyone around Noriko encourages her to get married, but she wants to stay home and continue to care for her father. Although the three iterations of Noriko are all unrelated to one another, each version of her focuses on their status of being single women in post-war Japan society.

***Munekata kyoudai* ([Tokyo Twilight](#)) / 1950**

Tokyo Twilight (1950) follows the story of a woman named Takako (Setsuko Hara), who returns home after running away from an unwanted marriage. Her sister, Akiko (Ineko Arima) is learning English at college while their father (Chishû Ryû) works at a bank in Tokyo ([IMDb](#)).

This film deals with more complications not only with the unwanted relationships each sibling is going through, but their relationship with their single father, secrets of their mother, and how each deal with the pain of loss.

***Ochazuke no aji* ([The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice](#)) / 1952**

Ozu explores the inside world of an arranged marriage in *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*, where the husband and wife's cultures finally clash with one another. Their niece Setsuko (Kieko Tsushima) arrives in Tokyo and exclaims her disinterest in an arranged marriage because it is not love, and her aunt Taeko (Michiyo Kogure) and uncle Mokichi's (Shin Saburi) adamant nature diminishes over time as he reflects their unhappiness from their arranged marriage ([IMDb](#)).

We get to understand each perspective and how they evolve—Taeko and Mokichi's culture differences, Mokichi's past of serving as a squad leader during WWII, and Setsuko's perspective on relationships and love.

***Tôkyô monogatari* ([Tokyo Story](#)) / 1953**

Tokyo Story is regarded as one of, and if not the best, films in Ozu's career, as well as one of the best films ever made. The story follows an elderly couple, Shuchiki (Chishû Ryû) and Tomi Hiriyama (Chieko Higashiyama), that travel into the city to visit their children, while each have their own life and work to tend to ([IMDb](#)).

This film is also the last of the "Noriko Trilogy," where this final iteration of Noriko is a widow of one of the elderly couple's sons who died during WWII. Their dynamic with Noriko's character reveal more about their relationship, their connection to their family, and the great divide between the countryside and city life of post-war Japanese society.

- For more thoughts on each film, visit my Letterboxd list: [Reel to Real Classics: 5 Classic Films from Japanese Director Yasujiro Ozu from 1948 to 1953](#)

Other Ozu Classic Film Recommendations

Hogoraka ni ayume ([Walk Cheerfully](#)) / 1930

Sono yo no tsuma ([That Night's Wife](#)) / 1930

Tôkyô no kôrasu ([Tokyo Chorus](#)) / 1931

Hijôsen no onna ([Dragnet Girl](#)) / 1933

Hitori musuko ([The Only Son](#)) / 1936

Articles, Literature, and Video Essays over Yasujirô Ozu

["Late Spring: Home with Ozu"](#) by Michael Atkinson

["Late Spring \(Yasujirô Ozu 1949\) VS American Colonialism"](#) by East Asian Cinema History

["Ozu's Anti-Cinema"](#) by Yoshida Kiju

["Ozu's Color Films"](#) by The Lookout

["Ozu and Noda: Birds of a Feather"](#) by Daniel Raim

["Quiet Cinematography- Floating Weeds \(1959\)"](#) by The Royal Ocean Film Society

["Roger Ebert on Ozu's Floating Weeds"](#) by Criterion Collection

["The Cinema of Ozu Yasujiro: Histories of the Everyday"](#) by Woojeong Joo

["The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice: Acquired Tastes"](#) by Junji Yoshida

[“Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer. With a New Introduction – Rethinking Transcendental Style”](#) by Paul Schrader

["Tokyo Story: Compassionate Detachment"](#) by David Bordwell

[“Tokyo Story & The Humanistic Philosophy”](#) by The Cinematheque

[“Why Did Ozu Cut To A Vase?”](#) by Nerdwriter1

["Yasujiro Ozu - The Depth of Simplicity | The Cinema Cartography"](#) by The Cinema Cartography

References

[“A Hen in the Wind.” IMDb](#), *IMDb*. Web. 18 April 2021.

“A Hen in the Wind.” *The Criterion Channel*, www.criterionchannel.com/a-hen-in-the-wind.

[“Explore Yasujiro Ozu: Writer, Director.”](#) *The Criterion Collection*.

[“Late Spring.” IMDb](#), *IMDb*. Web. 18 April 2021.

“Late Spring.” *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/298-late-spring>.

Richie, Donald. [“Ozu: His Life and Films.”](#) *Ozu: His Life and Films*, University of California Press, 1974, p. 6.

[“The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice.” IMDb](#), *IMDb*. Web. 18 April 2021.

“The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice.” *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/28229-the-flavor-of-green-tea-over-rice>.

[“Tokyo Story.” IMDb](#), *IMDb*. Web. 18 April 2021.

“Tokyo Story.” *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/284-tokyo-story>.

[“Tokyo Twilight.” IMDb](#), *IMDb*. Web. 18 April 2021.

“Tokyo Twilight.” *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/771-tokyo-twilight>.

[Yasujiro Ozu - The Depth of Simplicity | The Cinema Cartography](#), YouTube, 5 Dec. 2015, youtu.be/2G7oeyOsfSg.