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Japn 310

May 6, 2019

Salarymen and Their Families

Japanese cinema often focuses on one manner of person or variety of workforce. These films often show in depth what their daily life is like and the struggles that they face. One of the most prolific images of Japanese modern life is that of the salaryman and their families. These depictions can vary depending on what decade the salaryman's story is taking place. Stories during the time when the economic bubble in Japan came to an end often focus on different struggles than those of salarymen who stories take place during the 2000's. Though the initial cause of the struggles is different, the ways that the struggles are internalized by the men and the issues that are created in their family dynamics are often very similar. Salarymen are depicted as the ideal masculine man who is a provider for his family and works at a job that requires a certain level of formality. These men are expected to be emotionally strong and willing to work long hours with little regard to their own emotions. The views that society has for men, and what it means to be a masculine provider for their families, causes them to be unable to be truly content with their lives. In the films *Shall We ダンス?* and *Tokyo Sonata*, the two main salarymen in the films are faced with emptiness caused by their work life, as well as a disconnect between themselves and their families. This overall unhappiness and divide is because of the roles that masculinity plays in their lives. Both films look at the struggles that the men must overcome in order to reconnect with their families and feel that their life has purpose again.

The film *Shall We ダンス?* looks at the life of Mr. Sugiyama and his role as a salaryman during the 90's, the aftermath of the bubble economy in Japan. Mr. Sugiyama had accomplished everything in life that society had told him that he needs to accomplish. He had a devoted wife, a daughter, and just prior to when the film begins to tell the story of his life, bought a house. He had managed to create the ideal life for himself and his family, but in the process seemed to have lost the desire to continue. His wife comments to their daughter that he had appeared depressed recently and was no longer enjoying himself like he had previously. At work he seems to be doing what he has to in order to keep the house that he had just purchased but seems disgruntled with the idea that he will have to continue to work at this job to make his mortgage payments. His life no longer seems a happy one as the audience gets to see all the different aspects that seem wrong. He and his wife are shown not to share a bed and he rarely sees her or his daughter. His daughter even comments that her parent's relationship does not seem to be happy. It becomes clear to the audience that something will have to change for Mr. Sugiyama, or he will continue down a path of unhappiness and separation from the people closest to him.

The catalyst for change for Mr. Sugiyama is seeing a young dance instructor that he becomes infatuated with enough for him to step out of his comfort zone and start taking dance classes. His change happens almost immediately. He becomes more excited to go to work and passion returns to his life in a way that he previously had not had. He does not continuously chase after the woman who got him involved with dancing to begin with, and eventually grows to care more about the competition that he is joining than her. He, however, continuously acts as if she is the main cause of his involvement with dance, though the audience is shown him practicing and enjoying dancing outside of the environment where she is present. He lies to himself about why he enjoys dancing out of fear. Mr. Sugiyama is apprehensive that enjoying

dancing because he enjoys dancing changes his masculinity and the image of himself that he has shaped his life around.

Similarly, he does not tell his wife about the classes out of fear that she will judge him, and their relationship degrades even further. The shame that he feels about taking the classes is explained at the beginning of the film to be a cultural aspect of Japan. However, it also comes up between Mr. Sugiyama and his friends involved in the dance classes that it is also a matter of masculinity. As they are all salarymen, they understand the extra stress that being a salaryman puts on them being masculine. Takeda discusses this when he noted, “Salarymen, white-collar workers of Japanese corporations, were, and still are, the main driving force of the Japanese economy and the chief taxpayers of the state. At the same time, they were the bread-winners for each family. [...A] hybrid notion of public and private roles for Japanese men to fulfill, was not only an index of ‘mature manhood’ for individual men but also as a hegemonic ideology...” (Takeda 457-458). They all fear that dance is seen as feminine and that will negatively impact how they are perceived by those around them. The fear of no longer being a strong masculine provider is the cause of distress in his relationships with his family, as well as his coworkers. Mr. Sugiyama hides how he feels and tries to put on a strong front that focuses mostly on his ability to provide for his family. Not only does dancing appear feminine but admitting that he needed something more in his life in order to be happy also means admitting that he is not simply the strong family provider. The expectation on him to provide and not to need any help or want anything else in his life causes a division between himself and his family and within himself. His desire to hide everything from his family, as well as not truly admitting to himself why he enjoys dance, is a sign that the masculine ideals being presented to him are stifling.

Mr. Sugiyama is only able to accept that he is allowed to both dance and be a provider for his family when his daughter intervenes during an argument that her parents are having. His daughter changes his mind about hiding aspects of his life from his family by being the person that he feels he must care for the most. Children are the center for many men who are working to better their family's lives. Mr. Sugiyama sees his daughter as the focus of his efforts. She is the person who needs him to take care of her the most, and because she still sees him as a provider as well as encourages him to dance with her mother, he is able to begin bridging the gap between two identities that he saw as incompatible. This is further encouraged when his wife and the friends he made during his time there tell him to go to the farewell party for the woman who started him dancing. With all the outside forces in his life encouraging him to go, the audience sees him struggling with himself about going. He wastes time around Tokyo trying to ignore his desire to go before he finally breaks through his own internal barriers. Both the external forces that he was concerned about perceiving him differently, as well as his internal forces, had to accept that the roles of masculinity forced on him were unsuitable for him, officially merging both of his identities together.

In the film *Tokyo Sonata*, the salaryman Mr. Sasaki struggles with maintaining his masculinity and feeling like a provider after his company lays him off. He had worked for the company for a long time, and when he is laid off, he seems unsure what to do with himself. He continues to get dressed like he is going to work everyday and does not tell his family that he no longer has a job. Mr. Sasaki faces a situation that becomes problematic in Japan. Iida and Morris mention, "... found both radical downsizing and delayering driven by the economic situation in Japan..." (Iida and Morris 1074). This shift in how corporations in Japan are working affects Mr. Sasaki and the men around him who do not know what to do when the corporation that they

worked for for so long no longer need them. He searches for a job of equal standing to the one he had previously worked and is unable to find anything at the same level. He begins to take out his frustrations about being unable to find work and being laid off on his family. His wife and him appear to not have a very honest relationship as they both hide different aspects of their lives from each other. Their oldest son and him often fight regarding what the son aspires to do with his future, especially when his son says that he does not want to live like his father does. The younger son takes piano lessons behind his fathers back after his father says no and when he gets found out Mr. Sasaki ends up putting his son in the hospital with a concussion. His anger towards his family continues to amplify until an argument with his wife explodes and she tells him that he is only being the way that he is towards everyone because he lost his job and now feels insecure. After another salaryman who Mr. Sasaki knows kills himself and his wife because he too was laid off and unable to find work, Mr. Sasaki end up taking a job as a mall janitor, though he continues to hide his new employment from his family out of shame.

Mr. Sasaki struggles throughout the film to find happiness in his life and balance what he needs and wants to do for his family versus what he believes society requires him to do. He struggles continuously with what his place in his family is since he lost his job and how that changes his role as a provider. His initial desire to hide the fact that he was fired from his wife and his family shows that his identity is wrapped in the idea that he is a provider and that is what his job is as a man. His interpretation of his employment at a major corporation and being a upper level employee as his sign of importance shows that he does not see his value as anything other than a worker. He also does not play a role in his home life and so he has no place when he is fired to go. He has alienated himself from his home and family life because those are not seen as a typically masculine role. He does not feel like he matters in any way that is not based in his

ability to be financially stable. When he struggles to find a job, he becomes more irritated at home because he feels he no longer is important in their lives and no longer sees how he fits into the family dynamic.

Mr. Sasaki is portrayed as the stereotypical father figure; he is strong and does not actively participate in his children's lives. He leaves the nurturing and positive interactions to his wife as that is a stereotypical feminine role. He only interacts with his children in the film when he needs to get them in trouble and maintain a firm hand. However, he is unable to connect to his children once he is fired. When he finds out that his son was taking piano lessons behind his back, he reacts so violently out of this feeling of being inconsequential. His son did not need him to financially aid him in the lessons, and his son took the initiative instead of waiting for his father's approval. This reinforces to Mr. Sasaki that he has no role in his families lives and that they do not need him. He reacts equally angry when his eldest son decides to join the U.S. military and tells his father that he does not want his guidance or need his protection. His eldest son also is telling him that he no longer is needed in his son's life and that feeling of his masculinity being attacked is what angers him. Like Mr. Sugiyama, Mr. Sasaki is unable to balance what is expected of him as a masculine provider that society tells him that he needs to be until someone alters the ways that he has been forced to see the world.

When Mr. Sasaki's friend kills himself and his wife over his inability to find another high positioned job that fulfills what society values, Mr. Sasaki ends up taking a job that previously he would never have done. Though he continues to hide his new job from his family and is still fighting with the shame that he feels about the position, he does take the job. The ability to see that he does not want to become the same kind of man as his friend who was unable to adjust, Mr. Sasaki takes the opportunity to still take care of his family. This growth shows that he is

starting to push back against the values that society is forcing on him. When his wife ultimately sees him working at the mall as a janitor and he is forced to face the fact that she knows what he is doing, he runs away. During his long run he eventually is hit by a car and ends up laying in the gutter overnight. When he wakes up in the morning he is not injured and goes back to his home. The film shows that several months later he is working hard at his job as a janitor and taking it seriously rather than simply doing it to get by. He also has started supporting his son with pursuing learning the piano and him and his wife seem to be getting along better. Once Mr. Sasaki was able to accept that even though he was working a job that society has little value in, and even though he was unable to be a provider for his family for a while, he still had value as a man. He had to realize that working hard at his job and supporting his family was what made him a masculine person and what made him a good provider for his family.

The expectations that society puts on salarymen, and men in general, as to what they need to do and be to be masculine, can cause extreme unhappiness and stifle the men in that society. Mr. Sugiyama and Mr. Sasaki both wanted to be good providers for their families and saw their ability to be masculine and do what society expects of them as the only way to be happy. When they did what society expected and realized that it caused problems with their families, as well as made them unhappy, they took a while to change. They both needed an external force to show them that following the status quo was not going to work for them and then they both had to internally recognize what they were doing wrong. The men and their families suffered greatly because societies warped view of masculinity. Both *Shall We ダンス?* and *Tokyo Sonata* show salarymen who are forced to change and are struggling with societies heavy expectations, and the different ways that they overcame them.

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