

# The Social Context and Influence of Yamada Yoji's Films

Qin Wang<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of Human Sciences, University of East Asia, Yamaguchi, Japan, 751-8503;

<sup>2</sup>. School of Foreign Languages, Yan'an University, Yan'an, Shaanxi, 716000

Corresponding author. Email: wangqinonly@126.com

## ABSTRACT

Director Yoji Yamada began to direct films in the 1960s. He filmed the series "It's Tough Being a Man" – starring Kiyoshi Atsumi as "Tora-san", a kind-hearted vagabond who is always unlucky in love. The series itself is often referred to as "Tora-san" by its fans. Spanning 48 installments released between 1969 and 1995, which is well-known in the Japanese film industry, and is warmly sought after and loved by the audience. Yamada Yoji's films are warm and moving, presenting a harmonious and orderly Japanese society and showing good human relations. Even if the progress of the times has led to various social conflicts, they are often resolved in a peaceful way in the film. Yamada Yoji's film shows us that the little people in Japan's lower-class society live actively according to their own life patterns. Although their living conditions are sympathetic, their attitude towards life is respectable. This article mainly discusses the Japanese social context and its influence reflected in Yamada Yoji's films.

**Keywords:** Yoji Yamada; film analysis; social context; "Tora-san" series

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Japan's national treasure director Yoji Yamada is known as the film master who understands the minds of the Japanese best. He is known as "comedy Yamada" and "common director" and is also called "the spokesperson of the Japanese mind" in Japan. Among more than 70 works in his lifetime, he is best at creating comedies and films that reflect ordinary civilian life. That is, with light and humorous characters and plots, it vividly shows the joys and sorrows of ordinary people and their real life. Whether it is the series of "It's Tough Being a Man", romantic films such as "The Yellow Handkerchief of Happiness", or even the ancient Taiga dramas with the theme of Japanese samurai in recent years, the characters in Yamada's films are all from the bottom of society. Especially the "It's Tough Being a Man" series, which is the longest film in the Guinness World, is known as a "national film" in Japan. It is not only popular in Japan, but also earns people's attention in China and the Western world. Sensitivity. The popularity of the protagonist "Tora Jiro", who is a low-level figure, has attracted the attention of film critics and scholars as a cultural phenomenon and discovered the true spirit of Japanese culture. Because

film and television works are affected and restricted by the general cultural environment such as the background of the era and the social context in which they are located, therefore, in order to have an in-depth understanding of Yamada's films, it is necessary to sort out and summarize the social context and its influence reflected by Yamada's films.

## 2. THE ARTISTIC FEATURES OF YAMADA YOJI'S FILMS

As one of the famous Japanese directors, Yamada Yoji's films have his own outstanding personal style, which can be summarized as follows: First, the beginning is flat and slow. The beginning of Yamada Yoji's films is almost stylized. His movie plots always progress slowly and smoothly. Unlike other influences that attract the audience with strong conflicting titles, this kind of opening can provide the audience with a more ordinary life. perspective, and serve the subsequent portrayal of characters, the display of the living environment and the advancement of the storyline. In Yamada Yoji's masterpiece "Tora-san" series the beginning of the film is almost always when Tora-san returns to his hometown from a foreign land. There are no strong external contradictions such as flying sand,

walking stones, swords, lights, swords, etc., but presents a scene in a gentle tone, a kind of normality of life. Dramatic conflicts are often presented in a centralized manner with the development of the plot and following the laws of reality. Although Yamada Yoji's films are realistic on the surface, the calmness of the performance cannot prevent the outbreak of conflicts. The realistic appearance often highlights the meaning of life, making the whole film more intriguing. The civilian perspective is an important manifestation of Yamada Yoji's film style. This civilian component method enables the audience to maintain a perception closer to reality, find their own position from the characters in the film, experience the inner world of the little people, and give vent to own emotions. Yamada Yoji's films rarely describe grand historical narratives or social topics, and always create a well-known life based on the soil of reality. Therefore, the bland and slow beginning of the film is very consistent with the style of Yamada Yoji's entire film<sup>[1]</sup>.

Second, the evolving conflict. The storyline of the movie goes from the beginning to the climax and then to the end, mainly through the conflict to promote the development of the whole plot, which is also the foothold of the characters' actions. For example, Hollywood commercial blockbusters in the United States present the conflict in the story in a semi-open state. For example, two people are sitting at a table and talking face to face, but a time bomb is placed under the table, which is clear to the audience at a glance, but the characters in the play are not. Without knowing it, this conflict tension is very prominent at the level of audience acceptance, and a narrative conflict is also formed between character relationships, tasks and environments. The result of explosion or non-explosion leads to a deeper conflict in the plot. This inner tension spirals upward until the whole story ends with a closed or open ending. In Yamada Yoji's films, the conflict in the film is mainly presented through concern and sympathy for the fate of the characters. This approach emphasizes the role of external factors and dilutes the relationship between the conflict and the characters. The film does not criticize or evaluate the inferiority of human nature itself, but the emphasis on the impact of the environment. In "Tora-san" series, Tora-san is the illegitimate son of Kuruma Heizou and the geisha Kikuko. He was brought back and raised by his father when he was a child. Returning to his hometown, the pastry shop that has been passed down for six generations is only supported by uncles, aunts and cherry blossoms. This is the beginning of the Tora-san's story. However, although Tora-san is full of bad looks, he has a simple, honest and lovely quality, which neutralizes the role of the characters themselves in conflict<sup>[2]</sup>.

Again, closed and bright ending. There are various ways to deal with the ending of the film. There are open endings, which can leave rich imagination space for the

audience, and closed endings, which the audience can see at a glance. Some endings are pessimistic, making people feel that life is impermanent, and some endings are positive and optimistic. People are full of hope. The vast majority of Yamada Yoji's films have closed and bright endings, that is, the influence will resolve all conflicts in the end, leaving no regrets for the audience, but a hopeful vision. In Yamada Yoji's films, the director presents his worldview and values through the stories in the film, making people feel that life is full of hope, which also forms another style characteristic of Yamada Yoji. In "Tora-san" series, although Tora-san has endured the hardships of life, he is always full of hope, not discouraged, not desperate, and can use his enthusiasm to help those unfortunate women, so that they can rekindle their confidence and courage in life. The audience saw the helplessness and forbearance in his own life from Tora-Jiro. While making fun of Tora-san, he could not help but treat his life role in a self-deprecating way, and at the same time, he also learned a kind of philosophical and relieved attitude towards life. Just like the Tora-san's travel life as a businessman in the rivers and lakes, the purpose of leaving home every time is to have a better home and to truly keep his inner spiritual home<sup>[3]</sup>.

Finally, a common folk comedy that focuses on the little people. Humor is a phenomenon that only appears when human reflective consciousness gradually matures. Comedy master Chaplin once pointed out that humor reflects the reflective nature of human self-consciousness, that is, the more developed the intelligence, the more successful the comedy, and the uncivilized people have little sense of humor. In this sense, the comedy consciousness of each nation has matured after the tragic consciousness. Heianosuke Goshu's "The Wife and Wife" can be said to be the beginning of the Japanese common people comedy film. Only when the audience is completely familiar with the life problems of the middle class shown in the film will the real common people comedy appear. Yasujiro Ozu accurately expresses the comedy and absurdity of ordinary working-class life through his film narrative. The style of Yamada Yoji's films is greatly influenced by Ozu, and the perspective of his films pays more attention to the marginalized people and the bottom groups in the society, so it is closer to the joys, sorrows and sorrows of ordinary people's life. The common people's comedy "Tora-san" series is focused on the life of the people of the middle and lower classes and arouses the general sympathy of the public. The protagonist Tora Jiro is natural and simple, full of civilian characteristics. The unchanging top hat, the old suit and the Japanese-style belly wrap, this outfit also won the reputation of the Oriental Chaplin for the starring Atsumi Kiyoshi. In addition to laughing, the whole play still reveals a touch of melancholy. Although the storylines in the film are all about the three main

lines of Tora-san's hometown, love, and travel, and the film narrative is also trivial, but it is very human. The director is good at expressing a profound theme through a trivial matter in life, and has a lot of strength; the male and female protagonists in his films are often ordinary civilians, but they can easily make the audience think of the people around them, thus creating a sense of intimacy. In addition, Yamada Yoji's common people's comedy is full of rich, vivid and interesting details, which not only better shape the characters and relieve the pain of the events themselves, but also further deepen the theme of the film<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **3. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF YAMADA YOJI'S FILMS**

Movies are a product of the times, and the social environment, humanistic thoughts, and technical conditions will all have an important impact on the creation of movies. From the environmental factor of social environment alone, the creation of a movie will inevitably be limited by the social context. The films directed by Yoji Yamada are not only influenced by his own values and professionalism, but also by the social environment. Even if the social context has less influence on the director, the audience is in the social context. So, the films made by the director in a specific era must be the product of the era. The social context of Yamada's films can be summed up as follows:

#### (1) Shame culture and family concept

The so-called shame culture refers to the Japanese who can sacrifice everything for their reputation. They are always in an extremely cautious and disciplined mode of behavior, paying close attention to whether there are some unspoken hints in the behavior of others, and paying great attention to other people's behaviors. evaluation of. The influence of this culture of shame on modern Japan is mostly negative. In a sense, it is the root of Japan's social crisis and spiritual crisis. And Yamada Yoji's films take the kind-hearted Japanese people from the bottom as the first point of view, and the plots are warm and emotional, which can be said to be the solution and reconciliation of the culture of shame. The reason why Yamada Yoji's films are so popular is largely because the Japanese people I hope the warmth in the movie can change everyone's attitude towards life and resolve the spiritual crisis of the Japanese. In the national consciousness of the Japanese, "Grace" and "Giri" are deeply rooted. They are not only afraid of receiving favors, but also reluctant to give favors, because they believe that once they accept the favors of others, they will carry a heavy burden of favor, so they They are unwilling to accept help from others. If someone is enthusiastic and proactive in helping others, they will be considered to have other intentions. It is this cultural background that creates the indifferent and ruthless social environment of the Japanese<sup>[5]</sup>. Yamada

Yoji's films are a solution to this social environment. In "Tora-san" series, whether it is Tora-san, or the supporting roles Sakura, uncle, and aunt, they are all kind and enthusiastic. However, although there is a lack of warmth in Japanese traditional culture, the Japanese family concept is very strong, and this family concept is the embodiment of a certain groupism. The "Grace" and "Giri" in shame culture are precisely the core of Japanese maintaining family relations. In Yamada Yoji's film, the director tries to preserve the positive side of the culture of shame. In "Tora-san" series, Sakura is a child adopted by an uncle and aunt, although Japanese culture believes that "there is no need to enthusiastically help the trapped immediate family relatives, you only need to give basic help." However, uncles and aunts did not only give basic help to Sakura, but treated her as if they were their own.

#### (2) Spiritual comfort and healing function

Japan is a country with great learning ability. They are always good at learning from developed countries, actively expand in various fields, and build their own status as developed countries. However, this kind of learning will inevitably be accompanied by the invasion of foreign cultures, which will lead to the weakening of local culture, and even lead to the spiritual loss of the whole society due to the lack of cultural belonging. Under such circumstances, Japanese society lost its direction and lost its way in the process of searching for spiritual support. And Yamada Yoji's film creation is more about the beauty of human nature. He gives the audience the desired spiritual comfort and healing function with a humanistic concern. "Tora-san" series vividly shows the real life of the Japanese people with light and interesting characters and plots, and which runs through the beautiful natural and cultural scenery of Japan. This movie made the Japanese people who were crazy and impetuous because of that bubble era feel relaxed and happy, and moved to tears for the story of Tora-san. Although Tora-san is a frustrated little person, in the process of getting along with others, we can see more warmth and kindness of human nature, and people support and support each other in difficult situations. People consciously built a memorial for the film after the end of "Tora-san" series. Because it belongs to the memory of a generation of Japanese people. In a word, flashing humanity is a basic point of appeal in Yamada Yoji's films. Through his films, he has built an ideal spiritual world full of morality and humanity. This is not only Yamada Yoji's beautiful vision, but also Japanese society. What the people yearn for, so in a social environment with an overall mental imbalance, Yamada Yoji's films have become a spiritual benchmark for people to pursue a better life and look forward to a better human nature<sup>[6]</sup>.

#### (3) The inner needs of the middle class

Different classes have different cultural orientations,

and with different cultural orientations, audiences have different attitudes toward movies. For farmers working in the fields, movies may be far away from their lives, and they are more concerned about the actual harvest; for urban working class, movies are a relaxing pastime; for higher-class people, movies may represent a taste, so different groups have different perceptions of movies. The Second World War was an important turning point in the division of Japanese classes. The previous Japanese society included the upper class and the lower class. After World War II, a middle class, the middle class, appeared. Although this class is not well-off, it is not worried about food and clothing, and can support spiritual and cultural consumption. Therefore, Yamada Yoji's films just cater to the spiritual needs of this class of audience. Yamada Yoji is worthy of being a film master who does everything in the Japanese mind. The characters in his films are always optimistic, righteous, kind, humorous, humane and very romantic under the camera. This is his hope that the Japanese can spread and Inherited good qualities. People are willing to enjoy the leisure and warmth of Yamada Yoji's comedy films and gain a kind of relaxation and pleasure. It can be seen from this that the core of Yamada Yoji's film has become a carrier for certain classes to meet their internal needs and place their ideals<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### **4. THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF YAMADA YOJI'S FILMS**

After the end of World War II, Japanese social movements were mainly divided into two categories: the peace movement with the theme of defending the constitution, anti-war, anti-nuclear, and anti-security struggle, and the socialist movement of the working class seeking its own rights and interests. Both are reformists against conservative rulers. This kind of political struggle did achieve good results in Japan in the early postwar period, but it ended in failure. In the social context at that time, the atmosphere of the entire Japanese society was becoming more and more conservative. Not only was the politics and economy affected, but the impact on culture was also profound. The production of Japanese films was gradually developing towards a stable and conservative line. The subject matter of Yamada Yoji's films is mainly based on the line of civilians, and the production style is quite satisfactory, which is very consistent with the social atmosphere at that time. Therefore, Yamada Yoji's films have long been a box office guarantee for Shochiku films. In particular, the continuous popularity of the "Tora-san" series of films played a role in the sudden stop of the Japanese film industry, which was in a downhill stage at that time.

In addition to affecting the entire film market, Yoji Yamada's films have also played a role in educating the Japanese people. The tone of his films is positive and

optimistic. The people's hearts shown in the films have never given up the pursuit of a better life, which was extremely healing and encouraging to the Japanese people at that time. As we all know, Japan experienced the setbacks of World War II, and the people suffered from the war; even in the high-speed economic growth period of the 1970s, due to the rapid economic take-off, people generally lost their spiritual support and beliefs. Yamada Yoji's films can just give the Japanese people a firm belief, and their influence on the people's spirit is profound and far-reaching<sup>[8]</sup>. In particular, "Tora-san" series also deeply excavated the humorous nature of the Japanese people. Through the movie, people saw the optimism and positivity of ordinary little people in Japan. Therefore, although the story of Tora-san looks easy to understand, it has a strong appeal and his simple happiness. Views satisfy people's yearning for the "world of love" in an idealistic society. Therefore, it can be said that Yamada Yoji's films have opened a window for us to understand the Japanese nation and Japanese culture<sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Japan has been rapidly urbanized due to high economic growth. However, in the process of modernization, the capacity of society, the bonds of the community and families are weakening, and the strong sense of solidarity between people is being lost. Since 1969, when "It's Tough Being a Man" was produced, the lives and landscapes of Japanese people have changed dramatically at an unprecedented speed. After the period of high economic miracle and the bursting of the bubble economy, this movie has continued to portray the "original landscape" of good old Japan, as if to resist such turbulent Japanese society. In today's world of rationalism, while pursuing economic affluence, "Tora-san", who is selfless and free-spirited, heals the "mental illness" that people have.

After the war, especially in the seventies, Yamada's films have a gentle look at rural areas, vulnerable groups, lower class and the people at the bottom, in response to Japan's social propositions of "revival of humanity" and "return to nature". He looks at any human being lovingly. The "Tora-san" series is a representative work. "Tora-san" is always innocent and disturbing, but he has profaneness and sacredness, and has a wide variety of "human sex appeal", so he has become a person who is widely liked by the general public. Against the backdrop of high economic growth and the bursting of the bubble economy, the existence of the healing "Tora-san" became a boom, and what was reflected behind it was people's longing for "A world with human feelings" and the rapid social changes after the war. It will be their "origin of the heart" that has been left behind.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This Phased research results has been financed by the Horizontal Project of Shaanxi Star Vision Film Co. LTD "A research on Japanese culture in 'Tora-san' film series" (YD2019036)

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